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English as a Global Language: Problems and Possibilities

Abstract: The article addresses some crucial questions centring on the global spread of English language. It reviews the literature related to global language and English as a global language, mentions the causes of the global spread of English, points out advantages and disadvantages of the spread and shows the possibility of English to be a truly global language. It addresses the debate of choosing a language of articulation, taking into consideration the question of national and cultural identity. It examines whether English language has any scope for flexibility and adaptability by addressing issues such as the possibility of English as a Muslim language and an aboriginal language. It also examines whether a language can be adapted to a particular culture, considering the fact that a language itself carries culture.

Keywords: Varieties of English, Global English, English as a Muslim Language, English as an Aboriginal Language, Cultural Identity

There is a little debate about English being a widely used language across the globe though there are arguments on its being a global language accelerating communication and exchanges among diverse groups and nations on a basis of equality. Due to its colonial legacy and association with a long history of slavery and other dehumanising projects, English can hardly be considered a *lingua franca* or a neutral world language. Moreover, English has become a global language at the expense of many other regional or vernacular languages. Without pointing to a number of cultural, economic and political issues related to dominance, discrimination,

exploitation and exclusion any discussion on English as a global language remains problematic and incomplete. Nevertheless, there is a possibility for English to be considered a global language when these issues are duly addressed and a smooth sailing of culture, especially cultures of the peripheral regions is ensured.

Therefore, the article addresses a few questions to arrive at the assumption of how far English can play the role of a global language that can carry cultures of any community and how far it can bear the identity of a non-native speaker group. In so doing, first it outlines existing literature on the definition of a global language, and the emergence and spread of English as a global language. It then points out the problems created by the global status and spread of English and goes on to explore the possibility of English to be a global language, considering issues pertaining to the interests of the peripheral or marginalised countries.

Global Language

The process of globalisation has brought the idea of a global language that can function as a communication tool among the people across the globe. According to *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1998), “global language” is a “late 20c term for a language used everywhere on earth” (“Global Language”). No official definition of “global” or “world” language is found so far. Global language generally refers to “a language that is learned and spoken internationally, and is characterized not only by the number of its native and second language speakers, but also by its geographical distribution, and its use in international organizations and in diplomatic relations” (“The History of English”, n. d.). A global language is a common language functioning as a “lingua franca.” A diverse range of users from different backgrounds and ethnicities use it to communicate among themselves on a more or less equitable basis (“The History of English”, n. d.). To answer “What is a global language?”, Crystal (2003) states, “language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (p. 3). He (2003) explains the phrase “a special role” and comes up with some criteria that can give a language the status of a global language. A language cannot simply get the global status on the ground that it is spoken by a vast majority of people as a first language or mother tongue. He (2003) explains,

However, no language has ever been spoken by a mother tongue majority in more than a few countries (Spanish leads, in this respect, in some twenty countries, chiefly in Latin America), so mother-tongue use by itself cannot give a language global status. To achieve such a status, a language has to be taken up by other countries around the world. They must decide to give it a special place within their communities, even though they may have few (or no) mother-tongue speakers. (p. 4).

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A language can be given a global status by two main ways—by making the “language the official language of a country in which it is used as a medium of communication in such domains as government, the law courts, the media, and the educational system” and by giving the language a priority “in a country’s foreign-language teaching, even though this language has no official status” (Crystal, 2003, p. 4).

Language dominance and economic, technological, and cultural power are intertwined. The political and military power, not just the number of speakers often determines the status of a language. Historically, the essential factor for the establishment of a global language is that it is spoken by those who wield power (“The History of English”, n. d.). Crystal (2003) states, “Without a strong power-base, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication” (p. 7). Without users and speakers, a language does not have any existence. “Language exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails” (Crystal, 2003, p. 7).

Therefore, there are some criteria for a language to become a global language. A global language is an official language, a language of trade, commerce, and media and obviously it has pedagogical implications, especially on the countries where the language is not spoken as a first language, but used as a second or foreign language.

Is English a Global Language?

English is considered a world language or a global language since it is one of the most widely spoken languages today, which has over 1.1 billion first- and second-language users worldwide (*Ethnologue*, n. d.). Crystal (2003) has pointed out that English now has “some kind of special status in over seventy countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore, Vanuatu” and so on due to many pragmatic and convenient reasons regarding the global inter-communication of trade, business, technology and education as well as political causes (p. 4). He (2003) mentions the case of Rwanda which gave English official status in 1996 (p. 4).

However, some decades ago the scenario of the spread and the use of English was different. Crystal (2003) states,

In 1950, any notion of English as a true world language was but a dim, shadowy, theoretical possibility, surrounded by the political uncertainties of the Cold War, and lacking any clear definition or sense of direction. Fifty years on, and World English exists as a political and cultural reality. (p. xii).

“Global English” became a widely used term in the 1990s as English by

then would enjoy the prestige of the world’s pre-eminent language. In 1997, David Crystal wrote a book *English as a Global Language* in which the title of the closing chapter is “The Future of Global English” (Crystal, 2003). English also functions as a *lingua franca*, a “language used as a means of communication between populations speaking vernaculars that are not mutually intelligible” (“Lingua Franca”, n. d.). In non-English contexts such as in China, Japan, Indonesia, and Bangladesh, the possibility, prospect and challenges of English as a *lingua franca* and global language have been discussed in some studies such as Pitzl and Osimk-Teasdale (2016), Turnbull, B. (2018), Imam (2005), Wang (2013), Bolton and Kachru (2006), Johnson (2009), Majidi (2013), Dewi (2014), Sharifian (2016) and so on.

Causes of the Global Spread of English

British colonialism spread English to almost all corners of the world and it had continued its dominance up to the Second World War. American imperialism then started controlling politics, economy and culture of many Third World Countries. English was a minor language in sixteenth century but in less than four centuries it has maintained a status of a dominant language all over the world and gained the position of the leading language of international communication. The remarkable global spread of English is triggered by some significant reasons which are discussed below.

One significant reason of global spread of English appears to be the association of capitalism and the science and technology with English language (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996). Additionally, in Phillipson’s (1992) view, “the spread of English is a result of policies adopted by core countries to bring about the worldwide hegemony of English, for the benefit of core country institutions and individuals” (as cited in Tollefson, 2000, p. 7). Moreover, one vital reason of global spread of English is the contribution of governments of different countries like France and Germany in the form of assuring English a place in the education system (Phillipson, 1994).

Furthermore, Tollefson (2000) in “Policy and Ideology in the Spread of English” has referred to the various substantial causes of global spread of English. According to him, English became the primary language of international communication as a result of the British Empire of the nineteenth century. Troike (1977) also mentions that the reason behind the prestige of English as a language of international communication in the world is the result of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century British success in conquest, colonisation and trade (as cited in Phillipson, 1994). Besides, as a consequence of the U.S.’s rise to world economic and political dominance as a major military world power and technological leader after

the Second World War, English became the primary language of international communication (Tollefson (2000). With this connection the collapse of Soviet Union also contributed to the global spread of English.

Another major factor of the global spread of English is the language policies in individual nation states. These policies often support the use of English within those states. Additionally, the policies designed to further the spread of English across international boundaries are also an important factor. For example, in Europe, the European Economic Community (EEC) functions as a multilingual organisation. The high cost of translation places increasing economic pressure on the organisation. As a result of this economic pressure, the organisation has adopted English and French as dominant languages. Moreover, researchers have also found that governments, private agencies, educational institutions and English language teaching professionals also have significant role in the global spread of English. Furthermore, from the English favouring policies of governments and other agents worldwide, it can be said that the global spread of English is not a natural or accidental process. Rather, the global spread of English appears to be the result of a billion dollar effort by governments and other agents worldwide (Tollefson, 2000).

In most of the developing countries, proficiency in English is seen as a decisive criterion to determine socioeconomic status of their people as Nunan (2003) has pointed out. And this is one of the major reasons for incorporating English into the curriculum of those countries. From Nunan's study (2003) titled "The Impact of English as a Global Language on Educational Policies and Practices in the Asia-Pacific Region", it is observed that different governments invest as many resources as possible to make English the second language or the language of instructions in their countries since they consider English as a global language though in some cases "these resources are not achieving the instructional goals desired" (p. 610).

Moreover, the commodification of English in the globalised world is another inevitable reason for the spread of English to many non-native countries as Dewi (2017) has pointed out. Dewi's research (2017) studies the roles of English in accelerating the process of commodification in Indonesian magazine advertisements. Local products are given global flavour by the use of English in advertisements. More importantly, "economic benefits" resulting from the commodification of English cause an increase in the use of English in many countries for various kinds of purposes. (Dewi, 2017, p. 562).

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Spread of English

As the global spread of English conveys several advantages, it also brings various disadvantages with it. To mention the advantages, first of all, it can be noted that the economic success of nations and the economic well-being of individuals are the consequence of the global spread of English. In addition, as a result of global spread of English, international communication has become more efficient while the probability of political conflicts resulting from competition among languages has also reduced. Moreover, according to Kachru (1983), people worldwide has gained access to science, technology, education, employment and mass culture as a result of global spread of English (as cited in Tollefson, 2000).

However, the disadvantages of global spread of English outweigh the advantages. First of all, the spread of English contributes to significant social, political and economic inequalities (Tollefson, 2000). Moreover, the global spread of English causes the death of other languages. For example, it has resulted in the death of indigenous languages in Australia and the U.S. Likewise, the global spread of English is related to the process of economic globalisation which indirectly leads to the loss of local languages in India and Indonesia (Tollefson, 2000).

Furthermore, the benefits of the global spread of English are not distributed equally. The spread of English limits the opportunities and possibilities for those who do not have access to English language education. Therefore, they remain deprived of education, employment and other activities which require English proficiency (Tollefson, 2000). Consequently, the urgency to learn English causes serious disadvantages for these groups of people. Philippines is one of the multilingual countries where the access to wealth and power is determined by the crucial role of English. In Philippines, the access to higher education and better jobs is largely dependent on English proficiency whereas the people of this country do not have equal access to high-quality English education. In Philippines, English is the medium of instruction in both public and private schools. However, only the graduates of the elite schools obtain superior English proficiency. As a result, only those people who can afford private education can enjoy the educational and employment opportunities provided by English (Tollefson, 2000). Nunan (2003) mentions,

The Philippine government has become so concerned about the effect of English as a medium of instruction on school children that it is proposing that schools switch from using English and Filipino to using the vernacular from Grade 1 (Philippine Commission on Educational Reform, 2000), based on the assumption that "this change will make students stay in, rather than drop out of, school, learn better, quicker and more permanently" (p. 611).

Another implication of global spread of English is the educational policy of English monolingualism which consequently imports a barrier to education and employment for a group of people in Papua New Guinea and also Solomon Islands. In the Solomon Islands, because of the predominance of English in English medium schools, most of the children cannot comprehend the classes. It also implicates such an examination system which creates additional pressure on most of the students making them drop out of the school (Tollefson, 2000). Ngugi wa Thiong’O (1986) in his book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, recalls his experience in Kenya where the English Empire imposed English on the people, marginalising ethnic languages. In 1952, Kenyan schools were taken over by the colonial regime and English became the language of formal education. In the Kenyan schools, speaking Gikuyu (an ethnic language) was forbidden; those who ignored this order would receive corporal punishment. In contrast, proficiency in English was rewarded by prize, prestige and applause. Literacy was determined by people’s knowledge of the English language (as cited in Hasan & Rahaman, 2012, p. 15).

According to Phillipson (1992), the spread of English conveys advantages only to the core countries whereas it implies disadvantages to the periphery countries (cited in Tollefson, 2000). The core countries benefit by the spread of English; in contrast, for the periphery countries it implies additional burden and expense of learning English, training teachers, operating language education programs, buying texts and materials and other aspects of English education (Tollefson, 2000).

Nevertheless, the existence of English as a global or world language is a reality no matter whether one likes it or not. With regard to education, technology, business, foreign policy, global trade, travel, and what not, English has attained a status of the language of the largest number of users with a number of varieties and variations. The end of the monopoly of a British or colonial language has marked an era of language flexibility concerning the spread of English. And it seems that English is able to function as a global connection and communication among myriad types of the users. However, there might be questions such as, “Is it a weapon or a tool”, “Is it detrimental or beneficial” and so on. There is now the appearance of new Englishes that can open up future prospects and possibilities of English as a global language. Even, English can play the role of a Muslim or aboriginal language.

Prospects and Possibilities of English as a Global Language

Language dominates when its speakers dominate. All the speakers do not necessarily denote the native speakers of the language. With regard to the

users of English the number of non-native speakers is larger than that of native speakers. In this context, Crystal (2003) raises the issue of language ownership in his book. He (2003) states,

If English is your mother tongue, you may have mixed feelings about the way English is spreading around the world. You may feel pride, that your language is the one which has been so successful; but your pride may be tinged with concern, when you realize that people in other countries may not want to use the language in the same way that you do, and are changing it to suit themselves. (p. 2).

Ownership has two sided concerns— from the native speakers and from the non-native speakers. If a language is mutually shared and understood as a common language, then it is not the property of the speakers of any particular country. One can adapt it, modify it if s/he owns it. And this flexibility appears to be a key characteristic of a global language. Besides, producing culture and literature can determine the status of the language in a particular community and give birth to a variety, for example, Indian writing in English. Mulk Raj Ananda, one of the notable early Indian novelists writing in English, once asked Mahatma Gandhi “whether he should continue to write exclusively in English. . .” Gandhi replied straightforward, “The purpose of writing is to communicate, isn’t it?” “If so, say your say in any language that comes to hand.” (as cited in Hasan, 2013, p.106). Raja Rao in the “Foreword” to his English novel *Kanthapura* declared—

We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American (as cited in Hasan, 2013, p. 106).

When one writes directly in a foreign language or translates something into a foreign language, in both cases s/he translates culture. By creating and adapting itself to cultural codes consistent with the non-English culture and society, English can be a tool of cultural resistance. When Raja Rao in an Indian context says: though English is not the emotional make-up of India, it is possible to infuse the tempo of Indian life into English (Ashcroft et. al., 2006, p. 276), one cannot totally deny the necessity of English (obviously not a uniform version of English) as a global language. Rushdie (1991) states, “I’ve become convinced that English is an essential language, not only because of the technical vocabularies and the international communication which it makes possible, but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates” (p. 65).

Since English “ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago” (Rushdie 1991, p. 70), now “Englishes” have immense possibility to become a global language. Due to its linguistic flexibility it can be adapted to a particular culture and society.

Can English be a Muslim Language?

In spite of various disadvantages of the global spread of English, English is a powerful language worldwide. English plays a vital role in different sectors around the world including Muslim countries. However, there is an argument about the relationship between English language and Islam. There is an assumption that English is associated with Christianity whereas Islam is associated with Arabic. The underlying belief is that English language cannot carry the weight of Islamic experiences, cultures and ideologies. Nevertheless, we argue that as a language English can absolutely reflect Islamic values and certainly be a Muslim language.

Mahboob (2009) in his article, “English as an Islamic language: a case study of Pakistani English” explores the nature of English as it is used in Pakistan. He also represents a range of evidences proving that English language can represent Islamic values. According to Mahboob (2009), although the core varieties of English may be associated with the message of non-white people’s inferiority, the new Englishes can reflect and incorporate Islamic philosophies, idioms and cultures.

The lexical dimension of Pakistani English identifies its adaptation to Islamic features. For example, the Islamic features such as the greetings “Assalam-o-Alaikum” and words of praise and appreciation, “Maasha-Allah” and “Alhumd-o-Lillah” are used in Pakistani English. These phrases are found not only in personal exchanges, but also in public discourses, e.g. on radio and television shows (Mahboob, 2009). Therefore, Islamic values can be reflected by English language. In addition, there are a lot of Islamic borrowings in Pakistani English which can assist in reflecting Islamic values through a language. Moreover, lexical items related to Islamic concepts and terms are borrowed and semantically extended to carry unique Pakistani meanings, which proves that Pakistani English reflects a Muslim cultural identity (Mahboob, 2009). Besides, the pragmatic features of Pakistani English reflects Muslim cultural practices. For example, “In Sha Allah” (God willing) is used in Pakistani English as a means of polite refusal or a non-committing promise (Mahboob, 2009).

The discourse structure of Pakistani English writings in the text books is influenced by Islamic ideology and consequently it identifies Islamisation of English. Islamic identity is incorporated and projected into the English-language text books which are used in public and private schools. For example, the discourse structure of the biographies included in Pakistani English text books represents the features of Islamisation of English in Pakistan. Instead of starting with an introduction to the poet, the first paragraph of the biographies discusses Islamic themes (Mahboob, 2009).

Moreover, in the English-language text books, the prioritisation of Islamic references and personalities proves the foregrounding of Islamic ideologies. It also shows that the relationship between Islam and the English language is realised and normalised through English language text books (Mahboob, 2009).

According to Mahboob (2009) and Weber (2011), a number of Arabic words have been incorporated into English and hence English can be seen as an Islamic language (as cited in Mahboob & Elyas 2014). Moreover, Mahboob and Elyas (2014) have found that Saudi English also reflects local religious values and beliefs.

From the above discussion, it can be demonstrated that English language can reflect Islamic values and therefore it can certainly be a Muslim language.

Can Aboriginal English Support the Cultures of Aboriginal Languages?

The global spread of English results in the death of many aboriginal languages. Nevertheless, a new variety of English, aboriginal English (AbE) originates and is developed in the aboriginal communities. According to Arthur (1996), “aboriginal English collectively refers to the varieties of English that have been developed and spoken by aboriginal people in Australia, either as their first or second language” (as cited in Farzad, 2006 p. 13). However, the rising argument is that whether AbE can support the cultures of aboriginal languages or not. However, we argue that AbE can support the cultures of aboriginal languages. According to Walsh (1993), the loss of the traditional languages does not mean the loss of aboriginal culture as aboriginal people have made English a bearer of aboriginal culture (as cited in Malcolm, 2001).

According to Eades (1991), AbE reflects, maintains and continually creates aboriginal culture and identity (cited in Farzad, 2006). Likewise, Malcolm (2001) also discovers that AbE is a symbol of cultural maintenance. According to him, AbE is the adopted code of a surviving culture (as cited in Farzad, 2006).

Farzad (2006) in “A cultural-conceptual approach and world Englishes: the case of Aboriginal English” shows that the various features of AbE in Australia reflect cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors that incorporate cultural beliefs and experiences of Aboriginal people. In addition, Malcolm and Rochecouste (2000) have observed in their study that the majority of the analysed AbE texts are associated with schemas deriving from aboriginal experiences of travelling and hunting as well as spiritual experiences of aboriginal speakers (as cited in Farzad, 2006).

Moreover, it is explored by Farzad (2006) that certain features of AbE represent aboriginal cultural conceptualisation of kinship and the AbE speakers' use of English words can affirm the cultural conceptualisation of aboriginal people. The spiritual experiences that exist in aboriginal people's worldviews are evoked by many everyday words in aboriginal English. Furthermore, Farzard (2006) has also disclosed that AbE encodes conceptual mappings constituted in aboriginal worldviews and cultural recognition.

From the above discussion, it can be stated that aboriginal people have associated the words of English with schemas, categories and metaphors which exist in aboriginal belief systems including their world-views (Farzard, 2006). Furthermore, Aboriginal cultural conceptualisation can be demonstrated, communicated and consequently instantiated through various aspects of AbE. Thus, Aboriginal English can support the culture of Aboriginal languages.

Conclusion

With English as one of the powerful tools of colonisation, English colonies spread across the world, slaves were shipped and traded from Africa to Europe, and atrocities in brutal forms were carried out in many parts of the world. Since it is a reality that English has a history of dominance and exploitation and bears colonial inheritance and culture, in its rigid form e. g. British English or American English it cannot be considered a global language in the true sense. Besides, "language does not simply mean a set of sounds. It is completely intertwined with the lives of people. Sometimes, suppression of a language denotes subjugation of a community whereas enrichment of a language ensures the development of a nation" (as cited in Hasan & Rahaman, 2012, p. 15). Therefore, in this regard we propose an inclusive outlook on this widely used language and using it as a common or neutral language of education, business, literary and of course communication purposes. Achebe (1989) argues that "people with different nationalities can be combined by a neutral language, namely English. For instance, in Ghana, every class contains at least five language speaking students. In this context, English can be a neutral choice." (cited in Hasan & Rahaman, 2012, p.16).

Visible changes and adaptations have happened and are happening in spoken forms of English but formal written forms have remained almost unchanged for a long time. However, with the revolution of global communication online, virtual spaces have been created where writing forms of English are also going through radical changes. Besides, literature

is a productive field of language evolution where we notice significant changes, especially in South Asian and African writing in English.

English should not be considered a global language in the name of globalisation *per se* as globalisation only accelerates the process of discrimination, nor should it be a global language at the expense of other vernacular languages. At any cost the question of language imperialism and the superiority of native speakers over non-native speakers must be addressed. A single variety must be discouraged in order to consider English as a global language. However, "the present globalised world cannot go without cultural interaction and exchange," (Hasan, 2013, p. 38) and this cultural exchange is mainly accelerated through a widely used common language, that is, English. Since language can function as a tool to exercise power, there must be a dialogical equality to avoid language imperialism. Dialogical equality will confirm "an equal space for mutual dialogue," "a space where cultural sharing or exchange can take place on the basis of equality" (Hasan, 2013, p. 38, 39). And when the dialogical equality can be maintained, English will truly be a global language.

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