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THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The Global Knowledge Economy is emerging from two defining forces: the rise in knowledge intensity of economic activities, and the increasing globalisation of economic affairs. In this paper, the changing role of English as the language of the powerful nations, preferred as the language of transnational corporations, communication and business is explored. It is also shown that the economic and employment trends have changed the way English is used. The need for nonnative speakers to use the language daily for presentation of complex ideas, international collaboration and negotiation as well as the location and critical interpretation of rapidly changing information is stressed. English being the language of the internet, it has been the means of international communication and globalization. It is therefore an important tool of the global knowledge economy.

1. Introduction

Britain's colonial expansion took the English Language from its birthplace to many countries around the world since the 5th century. The foundation of the American colonies in the 17th century can be taken as the beginning of the history of English as a world language. By 'the 19th century the British Empire with its distinctive mix of trade and cultural politics consolidated the world position of English' (Graddol,2000,p.6). In the new colonies and settlements national standards have developed as English tries to adapt to the new environments so as to meet new cultural and communicative needs (Udofot , 2007, p.5).

2. American English and other varieties

Around 1600 AD was the English colonization of North America and the subsequent creation of American English. Some pronunciations and usages "froze" when they reached the American shore. In certain respects, some varieties of American English are closer to the English of Shakespeare than modern Standard English ('English English' or as it

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is often incorrectly termed 'British English'). Some "Americanisms" are actually originally English **English** expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost at home (e.g., *fall* as a synonym for autumn, *trash* for rubbish, and *loan* as a verb instead of lend).

The American dialect also served as the route of introduction for many native American words into the English language. Most often, these were place names like *Mississippi*, *Roanoke*, and *Iowa*. Indian-sounding names like *Idaho* were sometimes created that had no native-American roots. But, names for other things besides places were also common. *Raccoon*, *tomato*, *canoe*, *barbecue*, *savanna*, and *hickory* have native American roots, although in many cases the original Indian words were mangled almost beyond recognition. Spanish has also been a great influence on American English. *Mustang*, *canyon*, *ranch*, *stampede*, and *vigilante* are all examples of Spanish words that made their way into English through the settlement of the American West. A lesser number of words have entered American English from French and West African languages. (F:english/The history of the English language - an introduction.htm).

Dialects of English have also developed in many of the former colonies of the British Empire. There are distinct forms of the English language spoken in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and many other parts of the world. These varieties, known as 'the New Englishes' have sprung up in territories once controlled or greatly influenced by Britain and the United States of America; for instance, Afrikaans English, Cameroon English, Caribbean English, Indian English, Nigerian English, Phillipine English, Singaporean English: some of them are actually regarded as English-based Creoles or pidgin. Crystal (2003, p.69) assesses that a total of 670 million people use English with a native or native-like command while approximately 1,200 to 1,500 million people have reasonable competence in English. Going by the above analysis, it can be safely assumed that non natives outnumber native speakers of English. Consequently, the words of Prof. Grucza from Warsaw's Institute of Linguistics quoted in Arzoba (2000) are therefore not surprising: 'natives say "this is our language not yours" I say it's not true. English is not the language of American or British natives only. This is our language too'. The view that the development of English is less and less determined not by the usage of the native speakers is supported by the compilers of *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* published in 1998; which is characterized by a large number of words (e.g. prozac, coolth, saddo, tchotchke) from different parts of the world. According to a British columnist, 'This isn't really an English dictionary. It is the first draft of a world language dictionary' (See Arzoba, 2000, p.1).

The British Council in its English 2000 Project made some impressive discoveries about the extent of the use of English:

- English is used in over 70 countries as an official or semi official language and has important status in over 20;

- One out of five of the world's population speak English to some level of competence. Demand from the other four fifths is increasing;
- English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, sports, international competitions, pop music and advertising;
- Over two-thirds of the world's scientists read in English.
- three quarters of the world's mail is written in English.
- 80% of the world's electronically stored information is in English.
- Of the estimated 40 million users of the internet, the majority communicate in English... (Arzoba, 2000, p.1)

The above data about the use of English discovered by the British Council in its 2000 English Project, shows the spread and wide use of English all over the world.

3. Global English

English has now unarguably achieved global status. Whenever we turn on the news to find out what's happening in East Asia, or the Balkans, or Africa, or South America, or practically anywhere, local people are being interviewed and telling us about it in English. To illustrate the point, when Pope John Paul II arrived in the Middle East recently to retrace Christ's footsteps and addressed Christians, Muslims and Jews, the pontiff spoke not Latin, not Arabic, not Italian, not Hebrew, not his native Polish. He spoke in English. Indeed, if one looks at some of the facts about the amazing reach of the English language many would be surprised.

English is the working language of the Asian trade group ASEAN. It is the de facto working language of 98 percent of international research physicists and research chemists. It is the official language of the European Central Bank, even though the bank is in Frankfurt and neither Britain nor any other predominantly English-speaking country is a member of the European Monetary Union. It is the language in which Indian parents and black parents in South Africa overwhelmingly wish their children to be educated.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the spread of English around the world has been the extent to which Europeans are adopting it as their internal lingua franca. English is spreading from northern Europe to the south and is now firmly entrenched as a second language in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Netherlands and Denmark. Although not an official language in any of these countries if one visits any of them it would seem that almost everyone there can communicate with ease in English. Indeed, if one switches on a television in Holland one would find as many channels in English (albeit subtitled), as there are in Dutch.

As part of the European Year of Languages, a special survey of European attitudes towards and their use of languages was published. The report confirms that at the beginning of 2001 English was the most widely known foreign or second language,

with 43% of Europeans claiming they speak it in addition to their mother tongue. Sweden now heads the league table of English speakers, with over 89% of the population saying they can speak the language well or very well. However, in contrast, only 36% of Spanish and Portuguese nationals speak English. What's more, English is the language rated as most useful to know, with over 77% of Europeans who do not speak English as their first language, rating it as useful, French rated 38%, German 23% and Spanish 6%. English has without a doubt become the global language.

4. The Global Knowledge Economy

The Global Knowledge Economy is emerging from two defining forces: the rise in knowledge intensity of economic activities, and the increasing globalisation of economic affairs. The rise in knowledge intensity is being driven by the combined forces of the information technology revolution and the increasing pace of technological change. Globalisation is being driven by national and international deregulation, and by the Information Technology related communications revolution. However, it is important to note that the term 'Global Knowledge Economy' refers to the overall economic structure that is emerging, not to any one, or combination of these phenomena (Houghton, 2002)

The last twenty years have seen an explosion in the application of computer and communications technologies in all areas of business and community life. This explosion has been driven by sharp falls in the cost of computing and communications per unit of performance, and by the rapid development of applications relevant to the needs of users. Digitalisation, open systems standards, and the development software and supporting technologies for the application of new computing and communications systems including scanning and imaging technologies, memory and storage technologies, display systems and copying technologies are now helping users realise the potential of the IT revolution.

It is in the development of the internet that these technologies come together, and it is the internet phenomenon that best exemplifies the IT revolution. Over the first decade of its development the internet remained a specialist research network. From a little over 200 in 1981, the number of internet hosts (ie. computers connected to internet) increased to a little over 300,000 in 1990. In October 2001, the number of internet hosts reached 129 million (Houghton, 2002).

In economic terms, a central feature of the IT revolution is the ability to manipulate, store and transmit large quantities of information at very low cost. An equally important feature of these technologies is their pervasiveness. While most earlier episodes of technical change have centred on particular products or industrial sectors, information technology is generic. It impacts on every element of the economy, on both goods and services; and on every element of business, from research and development to production, marketing and distribution. Because the marginal cost of manipulating, storing and

transmitting information is virtually zero the application of knowledge to all aspects of the economy is being greatly facilitated, and the knowledge intensity of economic activities greatly increased. This increasing knowledge intensity involves both the increasing knowledge intensity of individual goods and services and the growing importance of those goods and services in the economy. The place of the English language in the IT revolution, storage and retrieval of information and global business transaction is the focus of the rest of this paper. It is first shown where the economic strength of English derives.

5. Economic Strength Of Languages

A language which is spoken by rich countries is more attractive to learners than one which provides no access to prestige, personal mobility or economic advantages. In exploring the status of German as an international language, Ammon(1995) argues that

The language of an economically strong community is attractive to learn because of its business potential. Knowledge of the language potentially opens up the market for producers to penetrate a market if they know the language of the potential customer. (Ammon, 1995,p.30)

Another evidence of the attractiveness of the language of an economically strong country comes from Coulmas (1992) which was able to show that the rise in the number of students enrolling on courses worldwide in Japanese as a foreign language was closely related to the rise in the value of the Japanese yen against the US dollar during the period 1982-1989 (Coulmas, 1992,p78). A relatively straightforward way of estimating the strength of a language is simply to rank the economies of the countries where the native speakers live. An international order for the late 1980's can be seen in Table 1 below: Clearly the English language tops the list of the fifteen languages listed.

Table1: Estimated Economic Strength of Languages in \$Billion (after Ammon 1995)

English	4,271
Japanese	1,277
German	1,090
Russian	801
Spanish	738
French	669
Chinese	448
Arabic	359
Italian	302
Portuguese	234

Dutch	203
Hindi/Urdu	102
Indonesian	65
Danish	60
Greek	49

Also, there is a general rule of business transaction which is that selling must be carried out in the customer's language unless the commodity is in short supply or there is a monopoly provider (Graddol, 2000, p.29). Consequently, language popularity will tend to follow markets; 'the merchant speaks the customer's language'. In import/export terms, the language of the customer will tend to dictate the process. Since most countries aim at balancing the value of imports and exports, then the language effect should be reciprocal. It may therefore be argued that the world's status of a language, to a large extent, depends on the extent to which its native speakers trade their goods internationally.

As far as factors lying behind the global importance of English are concerned Crystal explains that:

The present day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power which peaked toward the end of the 19th century, and the emergence of the US as the leading economic power of the 20th century. The later factor continues to explain the position of English today... (Crystal, 2003, p. 26)

American English acquired international significance after World War II when the US assumed a more global role and political, economic and technological developments promoted American influence on a world wide scale.

6. English in Business

There is growing evidence in Europe that English has become the principal business lingua franca. A study conducted in 1988 for the Danish Council of Trade and Industry reported that English is used by Danish companies in over 80% of international business contacts and communications (cf Firth 1996). Hagen (1993) has, however, suggested that the use of one language is not sufficient for a company to conduct business successfully in Europe. According to this source: 'a minimum level of linguistic competence for a European company is the ability to perform in three languages: namely, English, German and French' (Hagen, 1993, p.12). The use of German and French, however, is almost exclusively limited to trade within Europe; German companies use English for trade outside the European Union. This can be seen from recommendations of the German Chambers of Commerce to members on which languages should be used for trade with

each country in the world (cf. Ammon, 1995). English is recommended as the sole language for 64 countries. Japan and the US also use English widely for international trade.

Moreover English is the language of the internet and technological development. 'For decades, English and computers have seemed to go hand in hand. Computers and the programmes which make them useful were largely the inventions of English speaking countries. Although there are Chinese and other versions of major American programmes including the windows operating system, English has and will continue to spread through software products and new consumer technologies which are used by more people following the number of English speakers in the world which Crystal (2003) puts at 1,500 million. Besides, consumer applications software such as processors and spreadsheets, there are in existence a wide range of software products such as abstracting and information retrieval, speech recognition, automatic translation tools designed for natural language manipulation. The majority of these research and development work is done in the US, Europe and Japan and the most advanced tools are based in English (Graddol, 2000, p 30).

7. English and Global Trade

It has been noted that global trade is no longer a matter of bilateral arrangements between nations but has rather become transnational. Many of the world's largest corporations can hardly be called multinational. The largest of the world's transnational corporations engaged in energy and chemical as well as communications industries are headquartered in the Big Three trading blocs (Europe, North America and Japan) and 'at the present stage of global economic development, the international activities of the transnational corporations tend to favour English' (Graddol, 2000, p 32). Although transnational companies may not have their headquarters in English speaking countries, they tend to adopt English as their lingua franca (example, Sino-Swiss and German) which creates a need for training of their non English speaking staff in English.

The establishment of joint ventures requires legal documents and memoranda of understanding. International legal agreements are written in English because an international consensus tends to exist about the meaning of terms, obligations and rights. This in turn creates a demand for specialist English Language training for lawyers. A case in point is the case of China where new courses in English have been introduced. In addition to legal personnel, back office workers, sales and marketing staff with skills in English will be required.

Moreover, the transfer of technology is closely associated with English mostly because most transfer is sourced by a transnational who may be either English speaking or who uses English for external trade. Also, technology transfer is not restricted to the enterprise itself but may extend to associated infrastructure such as airports, railways

and telecommunications, it becomes mandatory for the staff to be able to communicate in English. This explains why in Central China, engineers in local steel factories learn English so that they can install and maintain plants bought from Germany and Italy. The predominance of English in technology transfer reflects the dependence of transnational corporations on English more than the fact that much leading technology come from the United States.

The establishment of joint ventures also creates the demand for English from international visitors who may require supporting services such as hotels and tourist facilities. The staff of such secondary facilities also require training in English to be able to communicate with these international visitors who would certainly speak English in addition to other languages. And because jobs in the transnational corporations may be better paid than the public services, English qualifications may become a criterion for employment or an added requirement.

8. Conclusion

If the Global Knowledge Economy is emerging from two defining forces: the rise in knowledge intensity of economic activities, and the increasing globalisation of economic affairs, English has been shown to be the language of the powerful nations, preferred as the language of transnational corporations, communication and business. Second, economic and employment trends have changed the way English is used. Increasingly, nonnative speakers need to use the language daily for presentation of complex ideas, international collaboration and negotiation as well as the location and critical interpretation of rapidly changing information. Finally, new information technologies have transformed notions of literacy, making online navigation and research, interpretation and authoring of hypermedia, synchronous and asynchronous on-line communication critical skills for learners of English (cf Warschauer 2000). Being the language of the internet it has been the means of international communication and globalization. It is therefore an important tool of the global knowledge economy.

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