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## ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

Nowadays it is very common to hear people speak about globalization, i.e. a very complex phenomenon according to which it is possible to trace in today's world a sort of standardization which affects almost all aspects of contemporary life. As we have recently seen – suffice it to take into consideration the demonstrations we have every time the G8 is summoned –, some think of globalization as one of the most wicked evils we have to face, while others affirm that, after all, it is not so bad to live in a world which gives the same points of reference, no matter where you are or what you are doing. Taken to the extremes, there are those who fight globalization because they fear losing their identity and those who support it claiming that identities will not be lost but just merged and blurred together in a big new world identity, needless to say that behind these moral issues the real reasons are calculated in terms of economical advantages. This is not the place to stop and argue whether globalization is dangerous or beneficial: globalization is a fact and, among the various elements this process affects, language is surely one which deserves the utmost care; and, when we talk of a global language, it goes without saying that the language we are referring to is English.

Although this connection is so obvious as to appear almost self-evident, we should question about the reasons which made and make this relationship so strong. So it is

better to clear up what we do exactly mean with the adjective ‘global’ when we correlate it with the word ‘language’.

Firstly, what do we intend when we say that a language is ‘global’? Generally speaking, what is meant is that it is spread all over the globe, thereby implying that such a language does not belong anymore solely to the people of the country where it originated (where, very strictly speaking, it represents the so called mother tongue since, as we all know, English is not only Great Britain’s mother tongue) but it has surged to a role because of which it does not pertain only to the country of origin but to all those who use it, which means that each single user is entitled to use it according to his/her capacities, wishes and limits.

It is possible to argue that, in order to become global, a language has to be taken up (i.e. used) by other peoples, different from the mother tongue one(s). This can happen either when a country decides to give a ‘foreign’ language an official status (i.e. to ‘adopt’ it as the official language, as it is for English in many African countries) or to give it a special status so that, although not official, it is taught in the educational institutions of a particular country, thereby causing a situation in which the population is able to use it (as for English in China and Russia). So, we can argue that a language reaches the status of being global when it is the most spoken one, i.e. when the people using it are in a greater number than those using any other language and, in consideration of this, so to speak, numerical principle, we can understand why English is *the* global language: in fact not even very spread out languages such as

Chinese or Spanish have such a great number of speakers as English (according to a recent survey it seems that English speakers around the world are about 1.5 billion whilst Chinese – which comes next in the ranking – is spoken by 1.1 billion).

These figures lead us to another question: how has English come to be so widely spoken?

Although some still think that the reason for such a world-wide diffusion may lie in the intrinsic features of English, this thesis can hardly be considered sound. The argument advanced is that English is so widely spoken because it is easy to learn and the reason of such a supposition lies in the nature of its grammar which is perceived less difficult and bulky than the other languages'. It goes without saying that we used the verb 'perceived' on purpose: should we ask a neophyte student whether it is easier to learn English or Latin, the question is almost rhetorical. English is felt as easier to learn because, at first, its morphological features present themselves as almost 'friendly' if compared to those of other languages: no (or very little) noun and verb inflection, a very easy morphological word-building system and at first a vocabulary which presents many words with which the student is already familiar. But, of course, this is like saying that your glass is half full instead of saying that it is half empty: for easy as the initial phases of learning English might appear, if you ask any intermediate, upper intermediate or advanced level student, the answer you will receive is completely different; it is not possible to classify language learning according to the perceived difficulty, nor is it possible to say that a certain language

is easier to learn than another. And above all this cannot be assumed as a reason for a wide or little spreading of a language around the world. Were it like that, we could hardly explain how Latin came to be the language of the world in the past.

But if the intrinsic features are not meaningful for the diffusion of a language, where does the motivation which leads a language to be global lie? Although the answer may be difficult and manifold, in the main, it is possible to say that the fortune of a language depends on its speakers' power and, generally, it is the economical power which is referred to.

In fact, strictly linked with it, is the idea that the influence you have depends on how strong your financial potentialities are, which in their turns depend on how vast your market is and, therefore, the bigger your area of influence, the bigger your power. Naturally, to carry on business there is the need to communicate with the other party and, therefore, the need to share a common communication code; theoretically it would be possible to learn every time we have to deal with a new foreign customer the language he uses but what generally happens is that both parties agree to deal using a so called *lingua franca*, that is a language both parties know. Nowadays English – global English – is the unchallenged *lingua franca* used in practically every field of communication, even if this has given the start to a series of concerns about its role and the possible dangers to which this situation may lead. Firstly, the most worried scholars claim that the mere existence of a global language may, in a not too long period of time, lead to the idea that minor languages are no

longer useful with the result of increasing the already critical rate of minor language mortality. Of course, if minor languages may suffer from this and similar drawbacks, some claim that those for whom a global language is also the mother tongue might conversely have some advantages thanks to the linguistic power of the code they already possess. Really the latter part of the problem is not as perilous as some imply since, as David Crystal explained in many of his books, such possible disadvantages might be overcome by a sound early teaching plan which non-mother tongue countries might put into practice, being the babies' brain ready for bilingualism since they come into the world. As to the issue of language death, it is to be said that every time a language dies, no matter how many its speakers were, a piece of human culture is lost forever. It is difficult to say whether the rise of a global language contributes or not to this process, but what is sure is that every country should do its best to preserve as much as possible all the languages spoken within its boundaries, no matter whether they are used by many or few people. Another point of concern is given by the possibility of a linguistic complacency: it has been noted that the existence of a global language may cause a lack of motivation to learn other tongues in those who already speak it. Such a view has also been supported by a recent survey which highlighted that a lot of companies whose employees were unable to speak any languages but English missed many opportunities because of their impossibility to deal with non-English speaker parties.

So, if the main reason which allows a language to become global is given by its speakers' power, let's review why and how the English language comes to occupy the highest place in the language rank.

Basically we can say that the first steps which have led English to become a global language took place in the XVI century, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. We just need to recall some dates: in 1584 sir Walter Raleigh led the first expedition to America, which, although it turned out to be a failure, paved the way to the following ones of 1607 (which set the first permanent settlement) and to the most famous one, that of the *Mayflower*, which occurred in 1620. Since then, immigration has increased more and more (and the language also spread to Canada, where a recent survey showed that nowadays about 21 million people claim English to be their mother tongue) and although there is no federal law which ever gave English an official status, nowadays in the USA about 95% of the people speak English. Very quickly English made its way into the world: in the seventeenth century it began to spread in the Caribbean area with the famous (and much blamed) triangular commerce of the slaves, a century later captain Cook discovered the *terra australis* (Australia and New Zealand were found in 1770). Some decades later, English conquerors arrived in South Africa (1795), but we can say that, starting from the beginning of the XIX century, English began to spread in the whole continent. Since then English has given rise to different varieties in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria, Cameroon and Liberia, where it is the official language. Nowadays English has official status also in

Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe although in most cases it is flanked by a local language which has the official status as well. We have also to recall that, although not official, in Tanzania English is still a fundamental way of communication.

As to Asia, the linguistic colonization began under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and, exactly, with the institution on the East India Company in 1600 even if, as far as the south east of this continent is concerned, the English influence arrived there only when captain Cook began to travel those distant seas, that is toward the end of the XVIII century.

It is worthwhile recalling that although English in its long history of expansion arrived to be spoken in all the above mentioned countries (where it is nowadays spoken), when it first reached a new shore what happened was the creation of a new kind of language, the so called *pidgin*, that is a very essential code through which the newcomers and the inhabitants could reciprocally understand each other. A *pidgin* is therefore a very limited code, with a very restricted grammar basis, which originates from the contact of two (or more) languages generally having few or no elements in common. Anyway, as every kind of languages, if it does not die, *pidgin* generally evolves in what is technically known as *creole*, that is a new language which is better structured and stabilized than the languages from which it stemmed. Therefore, it is almost normal to expect that the different *pidgins* to which English gave rise were absolutely different from one another and consequently all of the languages which

originated from the mixture present features which are peculiarly distinctive. This also means, of course, that even when English imposed itself as a main language of communication in a new country, in one way or another it began to be affected by the substratum of the language which was already spoken and this explains, not surprisingly, why today we speak of global English being absolutely aware that the English spoken in Madras is not at all the same from the one uttered in London as it is different from the variety used in New York.

Although history can explain how English has become the most spoken language in the world, it is thanks to the economical power of the United States that it has maintained this enviable position. We have already mentioned that nowadays the number of English speakers is about 1.5 billion, but this tells little about how this number is to be understood according to the nature of the speakers and to the places in the world where they live. It is therefore useful to mention the classification proposed by Braj Kachru who suggested to summarize today's English language situation according to how the language has been acquired and how it is used. The scheme suggested presents the current situation as made up of three concentric circles: the innermost of which refers to the countries where the language is primary (i.e. United Kingdom, USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland), the second one (which is named as 'outer or extended' circle) indicates the countries where, although not primary, English has a very important role, i.e. countries in which, although not being mother tongue, it developed and flourished (as, for instance,



happened in India and Singapore), and the third one which includes countries in which, although recognized and revered as an international language, English does not have a story of linguistic colonization. According to the different ways of considering the amount of people each single circle includes (and also considering that their change is very rapid), we can assume that the people, to which the first circle refers, range between 320 and 380 million, those considered in the second one between 300 and 500 million, and the ones referred to in the expanded circle between 500 and 1000 million. Commenting on these figures, it is inevitable to note that, assuming the world population to be around 6 billion, one individual out of four is able to speak English, although it is more likely this individual speaks it as a second language.

Anyway, it is very difficult to say what its future will be. In order to make a sound attempt, it is useful to take into consideration the importance people have given to English in recent times, examining its role in the modern and contemporary ages from a socio-historical and cultural point of view. At the time of the British Empire first, and during the colonialism era afterwards, linguistic unity was a much esteemed goal: in fact, the linguistic continuum between the mother country and its colonies was not just a way of communication but also a medium to highlight the ties which linked the two (and, sometimes implicitly and more often explicitly, the supremacy of the mother country). It is also useful to recall that English took advantage – between the end of the XVIII and the beginning of the XIX century – of the importance of the

discovery and developments in the fields of science, industry and manufacturing: most of the terminology we still use today goes back to that period, which is a clear sign, that to accede to such a technology at the time, English knowledge was, if not strictly required, highly recommended; which, from a practical point of view means that the world of the industry began to speak mainly the language of the Britons. The importance of English on the international scene kept going on after the two world wars thanks to the ties England had with its colonies as well as for the technological advancements; in fact, English has always been one of the languages used by the politics after the world wars (the other being French, which is now losing ground because of the advancement of Spanish): nowadays, English is perceived as ‘the’ language and it almost goes without saying that if you want to enter whatever organization, you must have a good knowledge of it. But English is not just the language of politics: it is the language of the media (therewith referring to printed papers, broadcasting, advertising, cinema, television, music), of the international travel and safety, of communications and of many other fields. It seems that, whatever you want to do, you need to know this language. And this idea has become so popular that hardly anyone would think you can reach your goals, whatever they are, if you do not master (or at least are able to use) English, but... is it really so? And above all, is it so sure that English will be the language of the future?

Many claim, in fact, that the fortune of this language has been to be at the right place at the right time: English sailors colonized the United States, England created

an empire on which the sun never set, English speakers won the two world wars, the United States have come to be the most powerful country in the world... it really seems this language was born with a silver spoon in its mouth. But its diffusion, the so many different varieties which are nowadays spoken and which in many cases present very distant features have begun to make scholars question about the future of global English. On one hand there is the fear that its growth might come to a stop because of feared changes in political or power balances or simply because the continual mixing with different substrata might cause variants so distant from the original language that they become mutually unintelligible or also because of the rise of identity claim issues which might prevent a further spreading. Really the situation is very complicated and historical linguistics showed that it is very difficult to foretell what will happen. What is certain is that scholars have begun to refer, thanks to the different features which is possible to note among the several varieties, no longer to 'English' but to 'Englishes', i.e. to varieties which stemmed from Standard English, but have developed peculiar characteristics of their own. Such differences may be noted in different domains. As to grammar, it is useful to recall that grammar books generally refers to Standard English, which is mainly founded on written (i.e. printed speech). This implies that it is very difficult to find (detailed section in) grammars which deal with local (i.e. non-standard) variations as well as it is rare to find grammars which focus on oral speech. It is very likely, therefore, that focusing on these two aspects scholars will be able to find meaningful differences among the

various issues of ‘Englishes’ so that it would be possible to mention relevant tracts of distinctiveness. Another main area in which ‘Englishes’ began to differentiate is that of vocabulary: it is clear that each variety will be affected by the local words which rarely might be present in different realities (i.e. it is almost impossible to find a regional word which entered in the English spoken in New Zealand coming from the Maori language in the variety of English spoken, for instance, in Norway). Of course not all the words coming from a local language vocabulary enter the new variety and it is not rare that even if they do, they are given a different meaning from the one they had in the original language. Other fields in which differentiation comes to be noted are code switching, i.e. use of single words or chunks from another language which are inserted in the new English variety, as well as other domains such as pragmatics and phonetics.

Anyway, what will happen to English is not clear yet. One trend which has been traced is the use of foreign words which English as L2 speakers include in their speech; this attitude is nowadays perceived as acceptable (and, in some cases, welcome). The use of local or regional variants on the international scene, although raising only blame and contempt among old-fashioned ‘purists’ of the language, is nowadays accepted insofar as the contemporary view recognizes the importance of Standard English as well as the one of regional variants: this is possible because Standard English and local varieties are used to express different functions, the former being used in order to achieve mutual intelligibility, the latter to promote local

identities. But, if these are the facts, is it not likely that in a short period of time English language will be doomed to generate a limitless number of different varieties which in the end will turn out to be mutually unintelligible? Thanks to the new technological developments, it has been realized that the trend of new ‘Englishes’ oscillates between the necessity of being understood (which makes each one of them closer and linked to Standard English) and the desire of maintaining and showing identity. Maybe what we will have is the birth of a ‘family’ of ‘Englishes’, although also in this case it is very likely that a certain balance between the two pulls towards reciprocal intelligibility and personal identity will be maintained.

Besides, to make the situation even more complicated, if possible, we have to consider that socio-political changes, like for instance the realization of a European confederation of countries, will affect language evolution: who can tell what consequences will come from the fact that all the UE federated countries speak ‘English’, each one influencing the Standard in its own peculiar way?

Instead of ceding to fatalism, it is maybe better to share David Crystal’s view that it is maybe possible to hypothesize that we will exploit our faculty of using multiple dialects in order to fulfill the requests of the possible situations which will be created. Very likely, according to David Crystal, a new form of English – what he calls World Standard Spoken English (WSSE) – will arise.

Today speakers have two ‘registers’, i.e. they use their personal dialect when at home (or when they talk to the individuals which are part of their everyday lives),

and a more formal variety when abroad or dealing with people different from friends and relatives; besides, the most cultivated ones have also developed a form of standard written English. Probably, if a family of ‘Englishes’ develops, the situation will remain almost unvaried but for the fact that, when in contact with people talking a variety of English different from ours, we will both switch to WSSE, a new dialect which will be all we need for global purposes in the respect of regional varieties. But what are the features of this new variety? They are very difficult to define, since WSSE is still in the process of being developed. What is possible to say is that, mainly, it will avoid the use of words or expressions which are barely understood outside a local region and that it will be mostly influenced by American English (above all in terms of spelling and lexicon). Of course, none can tell exactly how things will go. It is also possible that, as English nowadays is more spoken by people as L2 than by individuals using it as a mother tongue, it will have the same fate of Latin, i.e. a minor global role and that, therefore, we will see the rise of other languages. As already hinted, it is very difficult to foretell what will happen. My personal opinion is that although English will continue to spread and be learnt and that in the course of the next few centuries it will be impossible to do without knowing it, it is difficult to hypothesize that it will turn out to be the only language used by the world population in the long run as, in fact, a language is not just a means of communication but also the vehicle of the culture which lies behind it.

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