The notion of an international language and the case of English

A broad perspective on the rise and fall of lingua francas.

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Over the course of recorded history, languages have gone in and out of fashion as a preferred tool of international communication. At the dawn of civilisation in the ancient Middle East, Egyptian rose to preeminence among nations; by the end of the Middle Ages it was extinct. In the Hellenistic period, Greek was spoken all the way from Athens to the banks of the Amu Darya in Central Asia; now it is confined to the southern extremity of the Balkan peninsula. Latin once reigned supreme over European territory south of the Danube and west of the Rhine, not to mention North Africa; it even survived the fall of Rome by well over a millennium, and was actively used by scholars as a pan-European language as late as the eighteenth century. Today Latin is no longer used for communication (except in the Vatican), and appears to be rapidly disappearing from school curricula.

To begin with: a dose of relativity

These examples serve to demonstrate that there is nothing new about the concept of an international language, and equally that no one language has secured this status permanently, though the life span of a successful international language is a long one, amounting to a thousand years or more. None of the languages mentioned extended their sway beyond a certain region of the globe; other regions have seen the development of their own international languages (like Arabic in the countries of Maghreb and Mashreq, Mandarin Chinese in South-East Asia or Swahili in Eastern Africa). What is different about today’s situation is not so much essence as scale: for the first time in history, due to the political developments and technological progress, it is possible to speculate about the emergence of a global language.

Language and political power

The status of a language is less a function of how many people speak it, than of who those people are and what power they possess. Past international languages have achieved their position purely through the military and economic expansion of the nations which spoke them. It was the hoplites of Alexander the Great who took Greek from its classical homeland to the depths of Asia, the legionaries of Rome who spread Latin beyond its obscure origins in a provincial town of central Italy, and the warriors of the Prophet who carried Arabic from Medina to Damascus and Tunis. In this process, the motivation for conquest had nothing to do with language, nor did conscious administrative steps usually have to be taken by the conquerors to impose the use of their tongue.
Rather, the control which the conquerors exerted over the economic life of their territories led, as a practical matter of survival, to the wider use of their language by subject peoples.

In some cases, the imperial language, without any special effort, managed to eliminate native languages altogether. The case of Latin is best known; over a period of five hundred years or more, it totally supplanted the Celtic and other languages spoken in large areas of the Empire. No language, however, achieves such feats without serious cost to its own integrity. As long as an international language is spoken by a well-educated elite using some kind of central standard, it retains a degree of homogeneity; but if it is to be adopted by a broad mass of people who learn by word of mouth and care little for grammar or pronunciation, then it is going to be seriously distorted. This is a process which linguists call creolisation and it has been responsible for the Romance languages of today’s Europe, each of which is, in its own way, a thoroughly debased and mangled version of the language of Cicero.

The political facts of life behind international languages are occasionally forgotten by those who approach language in a romantic spirit. To linguists, language is a matter of fascination. It is easy to be carried away by contemplation of the intricate structures and originality of a given language. It is thus that many have recommended the virtues of this or that language for international status purely on the grounds of the number of nominal cases or the absence of grammatical gender. These matters play no role in the practical choices of non-linguists. Language is a tool of communication and that is its sole reason for being. Its fate is decided by the great mass of non-linguists, who are in turn affected by politics. By most standards, for example, Russian is not an easy language; it has six cases and three genders, and obeys very complex phonetic rules. This did not impede it in any way from being the common language of ordinary citizens everywhere within the vast Soviet Union, and has not stopped it from being adopted as an official language in Central Asian countries even after the breakup of the Union.

The current world situation

At the dawn of the third millennium, the United States holds supreme global power. The existence of a single global superpower is a novelty in historical terms. The USA has seen off its only real rival, the USSR, and potential future challengers, like China, have a long way to go before making good their threat. Today, the US accounts by itself for 22% of world GDP and no less than 36% of world spending on armaments.

By a quirk of history the people of today’s superpower speak the same language as those of the country that dominated much of the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the height of its power the British Empire embraced one fifth of the earth’s land area. Many of the countries formerly ruled by the British have continued to give special status to the English language. Those at the core of the English-speaking world (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US itself) all derived their language from British settlers and with it supplanted the indigenous languages formerly spoken on their territories. In other countries of Africa and Asia, where there is sometimes a large number of local languages, English has been found useful as a national lingua franca and enjoys either official or quasi-official status. Taken together, the countries in which English has maintained a special place in the wake of past British imperialism account for more than of a third of the world’s population.

The situation in which the Americans acceded to global power was thus one in which their language had already acquired global status.

The situation in Europe
After the civil strife of 1939-45, the European powers found their resources too depleted to aspire to world leadership. Their continent became divided between the two remaining powers, the USA and Russia. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was set up to bind the Western half of Europe to the US. Britain did not hesitate to throw in its lot with the Americans. Germany, deprived of its eastern half, also became heavily dependent on the US. France alone had qualms about the extent of American power, and sought to create a European counterweight through which it might regain some of its lost influence. The European Community was born.

In the decades immediately following the Second World War, the western half of Europe had two languages which might have aspired to international status in the region. In the south (Italy, Spain, Portugal), French tended to be treated as the most natural foreign language; whilst in the north (Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia), English tended to be favoured. German, itself a budding international language before the War, underwent a serious setback with the defeat of Germany and the amputation of a certain German-speaking hinterland to the east and south-east. In the eastern part of Europe, the international language was Russian, though fewer people had the option of international contacts.

By the late nineteen-seventies French was already showing signs of giving way to English in western Europe. A symbolic watershed was the use of English by French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and German chancellor Helmut Schmidt to cultivate their notably close relationship. Both Giscard and Schmidt began their political careers in the post-war period, in a world in which American power was already a fact. Both also began with a specialisation in economics, a branch of science in which English dominates as in no other.

Less than fifty years after the end of the Second World War, the sole remaining European power with global ambitions, Russia, was also found to have overextended itself. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism, the Americans emerged as the ultimate victors of the Cold War. As a result, a whole generation of Eastern Europeans has plunged headlong into the study of English.

According to an influential survey carried out by Eurobarometer in 2001 (officially declared the ‘European Year of Languages’ by the authorities of the EU) 32.6% of EU citizens consulted claimed that English was their first foreign language (compared with 9.5% for French and 4.2% for German). An even greater number of Europeans (75.2%) considered that English was ‘a useful language to know’ (19.2% for French, 10.3% for German). There is every chance, moreover, that the rise of English has not yet peaked. Young people today generally have better English than their parents and are keener to practise their knowledge.

**Language rivalry**

At this stage, however, a very important qualification is necessary. Although the Eurobarometer findings seem to give overwhelming support to the case for English as a global language, we must recall that they represent the private views of European citizens. The language area is one in which there is a considerable dichotomy between private views and publicly stated positions (in the mouths, for example, of politicians). Because language serves as a tool of communication within a given ethnic group, it is often perceived as a symbol of group identity. This attitude sows the seeds for rivalry between languages, during which practical or utilitarian considerations are set aside.

Europe is a continent of nations with deep-going historical roots. States have generally been formed on the principle of national identity, in which the linguistic factor is all-important. The spread of mass education and improvements in communication have helped to promote linguistic uniformity on the territory of states. The teaching of history instils pride in the domestic culture, and very often
suspicion towards foreign ones.

Within this Europe of nations, the spread of English as a common language is liable to arouse fear and hostility in some quarters. Rational arguments, stressing the role of English as a second language only and dwelling on its practical value, make little impact on such fears. The English language is perceived as an insidious agent of ‘globalisation’, hollowing out national cultures and loyalties. Such fears are sharpened by the importation of English loanwords into the national language.

Inevitably, then, European states frequently organise rearguard actions against the spread of English. On the domestic front, they may pass legislation to curb the use of English, as in the case of the 1994 ‘loi Toubon’ in France, or very recent measures adopted by the Hungarian Parliament. On the foreign front, governments representing ‘major’ European languages may step up efforts to ensure their languages are taught abroad. There are signs, for example, that official bodies in both France and Germany are taking special action to promote their respective languages in the countries which are candidates for EU enlargement.

The effectiveness of state intervention in the linguistic area has always been doubtful. This is particularly the case in today’s society, in which the private sphere has expanded considerably at the expense of the public, and in which individual freedoms are taken for granted and facilitated by technology. What powers can the state exercise over radio and television in the age of satellite broadcasting? What is the impact of screening dubbed films in cinemas when modern television sets and DVDs often allow a choice of language channels? Nonetheless, governments will still strike a brave pose in this *Kulturkampf*, if only for electoral reasons.

An extra complication in the arena of language politics derives from the fact that the English language is not perceived as a ‘neutral’ influence. First, it is the language of the United States and European politicians are often keen to dwell upon the distinctness of Europe in relation to the US. Second, it is the language of the United Kingdom, which is itself a member of the European Union and might be seen to derive unfair advantage from the spread of English.

**An all-purpose tool?**

Leaving politics aside, we may also enquire about the technical reliability of international English as a means of communication when it is confined to the role of a foreign language. David Crystal, in his ‘English as a global language’ (CUP, 1997), points out that the two traditionally separate notions of ‘second official language’ and ‘foreign language’ are losing some of their distinctiveness today, and certainly examples might be found to support this argument (like the provision of English-only courses at universities in Belgium, where English has no official status). Nonetheless, the vast majority of continental Europeans who lay claim to knowledge of English will have learnt it as a foreign language at school, in another linguistic environment. The question which interests us in this context is: does the average level of competence acquired in this way allow us to consider English as a genuine pan-European language?

If by such a term we understand a means of general communication simultaneously embracing most people and most spheres of activity, then I fear the answer must be ‘no’. The adult non-linguist population uses English either at work or for travel. The English used for purposes of work tends to be confined to a narrow area of speciality. Thus the physicist will understand ‘toroidal confinement’, the doctor will know ‘myeloid tissue’ and the telephone engineer will recognise the ‘local loop’; but none of these is thereby necessarily in a better position to understand the others in English, and none is thereby more likely to grasp colloquial expressions like ‘double whammy’ or ‘googly’. The English required for travel purposes is similarly restricted. Europeans who successfully employ English to communicate in a specialised domain are quite right to claim knowledge of the language;
but that does not make English a pan-European language in the sense in which it serves everybody across the entire spectrum of human needs. English is far from being an all-purpose tool for communication in Europe.

**Multiple flavours**

Furthermore, we must recognise that there are as many different brands of English as there languages in Europe. Each speaker of English as a foreign language, even the most expert, is influenced in some way by the substratum of her own language. The substratum is armed and ready to strike at every level of linguistic competence. Phonetics is the first bastion to fall. Let me quote from an article by René Pinhas in issue 13 Communicate! *(Bref plaidoyer en faveur d'un pessimisme bien tempéré sur l'actuelle suprématie de la langue anglais)*, who noted that:

“...au cours de congrès médicaux internationaux, l'anglais parlé par des orateurs français était souvent totalement inintelligible pour les participants australiens, néo-zélandais ou pakistanais, parce qu'il n'y avait pas un seul, je dis bien un seul, accent tonique qui fût correctement placé. Alors, que dire des malheureux Japonais, Suédois et autres Mexicains dont la langue maternelle n'est pas l'anglais! Les seuls membres de l'auditoire qui le comprenaient étaient les autres Français dans la salle.”

Then come the many ‘false friends’ in the area of vocabulary. Often these are disguised Gallicisms, due to the fact that continental languages previously underwent heavy French influence. When that speaker refers to a ‘chief’ in the office, do he really mean a red Indian? When this politician talks about ‘actual developments’, doesn’t he really mean ‘current’? Does that official really mean we should harmonise our policy towards ‘strangers’, rather than ‘foreigners’?

One of the special features of English is that its original proprietors, the British, and following them the Americans, have had a very *laissez-faire* policy towards individual forms of usage. In contradistinction to the practice in continental Europe, there are no committees of wise academicians whose mission in life is to regulate the English language. English is basically a free-for-all, and maybe this relaxed attitude has been one factor in its success. Nonetheless, the price of this tolerance is a reduction in the value of the language as a tool of communication. With each European nation developing its own flavour of English, the amount of extraneous noise in discourse will increase and the percentage of genuine communication will inevitably fall off.

**A single language for the European institutions?**

Let us also consider specifically the role of English in the institutions of the European Union. In discussing the matter of a single language for European governance we need to distinguish between internal communication (among officials) and external communication (between institutions and citizens). For the purpose of internal communication, the institutions have long used a single language. This used to be French and is now to an increasing extent English. The recruitment of officials from Eastern Europe will lend further impetus to English. However, what passes as ‘English’ in the European institutions bears about as much resemblance to the language of the Anglo-Saxon world as a soufflé to a steak-and-kidney pie. This is the world of ‘subsidiarity’, ‘horizontal propositions’, ‘vertical actions’, ‘social agents’, ‘responsible services’, ‘benchmarking’, ‘mainstreaming’... and a host of like terms which would confound the understanding of the average British or American citizen. In fact, it is less a language than a sort of professional code. To the outsider it will sometimes seem that the words in documents of this kind have been arranged at will by a wayward word-processor with a mind of its own, but the battles which are fought between departments over commas and full stops make clear that for those concerned there is meaning in this
cabbala. Those interested in the phenomenon of ‘Commissionese’ should consult the web-site of the ‘Fight the fog’ campaign, sponsored by the Commission translation service, which advocates the use of more comprehensible English.

Once agreed internally, the output of the European institutions still has to be translated into something meaningful for the benefit of European citizens. Here an effort must be made to achieve clarity; moreover the same effort must simultaneously be made in all official European languages, for the ordinary EU citizen is still not legally obliged to understand more than one. For this essential purpose of communication with the outside world, multilingualism is therefore inevitable, and specialised language staff are needed.

A special case is that of the European Parliament, where there are several grounds for maintaining multilingualism, even internally. Firstly, Members of the Parliament are elected to represent the people of Europe, and a language qualification would clearly represent a barrier to democracy. Secondly, the temporary nature of their mandate and the uncertainty of its renewal (not to mention the average age of MEPs) are strong arguments against expensive investment in language learning on their part. Thirdly, there is a widespread view that the use of all official languages in the European Parliament is itself a means by which the diversity of Europe may be democratically represented.

Should we be worried?

Given that this essay is written for a readership of professional linguists, it seems fitting to end with a consideration of the likely impact of global English upon the market for language services. Some of the points I have made previously, particularly those regarding the underlying political situation, would seem to indicate that in Europe at least English is unlikely to replace all other languages as a tool for international communication.

However, there is no room for complacency. The more widespread English becomes, and the greater the competence of the average speaker, the more professional interpreters and translators will have to rely upon technical excellence to market their service. I recall that a colleague once described us as ‘linguistic cleaners’. Our role must not be simply to ‘get across the message’, in situations in which the client might henceforth be able to perform that basic function himself. We must also ‘clean up afterwards’, providing a fluent and cogent version in the target language. A high degree of skill in the target language should form the ‘value added’ which the client will purchase for his money. This remark is especially valid for all those who work into English.

The time-hallowed role of the International Association of Conference Interpreters, which is to ensure that quality standards are respected, can only grow in importance as English becomes more widespread.

Recommended citation format: