

Envisioning a Democratic Linguistic Order

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Introduction

Sociolinguist' Joshua A. Fishman, has recently argued that there has been a growing resurgence of regional and local languages around the world against the global spread of English and gives an optimistic view that the dominance of English is not going to be a big problem as there will be a balance of power between English and other languages, forming a "new linguistic order" (Fishman, 1998).

However, I feel that there should be more discussion about the global spread of English and its influence upon culture and communication in the world today, especially from non-Western, non-English-speaking perspectives.

English is no doubt a lingua franca, a global language of today, but the hegemony of English is also very threatening to those who are not speakers of English. While it may be convenient to have a common international language, we have to ask ourselves whether it will really contribute to a democratic global communication to use a language which is historically and culturally connected with particular nations, namely the English-speaking nations. We have to realize that the superimposition of English is ironically creating an "anti-democratic linguistic order" in which English maintains a prestigious status while dominating other languages. We need to envision a "democratic linguistic order" which ensures equality among languages and democracy in international communication. To do this, exploring the problems caused by the hegemony of English is due.

The Structure of the Hegemony of English

The existing hegemony of English is first of all anti-democratic because it is creating a structure of linguistic hierarchy as well as social inequality and discrimination, while reinforcing the existing unequal power structures of international relations (Tsuda, 1986, 1990, & 1994; Phillipson, 1992).

The global use of English no doubt benefits the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other English-speaking countries, and allows them to strengthen their political and economic powers. Politically speaking, English-speaking countries have a better chance to express their ideas in international politics and conferences. The United Nations, for example, allows for the use of only six major languages in its conferences

and only English and French for documentation. Thus, the linguistic environment of the United Nations is designed so that only the representatives of a few major languages can enjoy a comfortable communicative environment, and in that environment the representatives of the English-speaking countries seem to enjoy the greatest freedom as the use of English increases in global communication.

The hegemony of English creates an anti-democratic linguistic order and gives the English-speaking countries a greater political power than they actually deserve as more and more international conferences use English and appoint native speakers of English as the officials of conferences. Thus, they tend to have power to control the proceedings, possibly the results of the conferences, and the reporting of the results in the media. In international political conferences where the interests of each nation come into conflict, it is possible for English-speaking officials and delegates to take advantage of their linguistic advantage to dominate the non English-speaking delegates. Japanese cultural anthropologist, Junichi Takahashi, observed an international conference in which English was the only official language and concluded that some native speakers of English “intentionally try to push non-native speakers out of discussions by making full use of tactics that stem from phonetic, idiomatic, syntactic, and pragmatic characteristics unique only in English” (Takahashi, 1991, pp. 188–189). The exclusive use of English thus creates a structure of inequality in communication in which the non-English-speaking people or non-native speakers of English are often excluded from the center of communication and thus marginalized.

The hegemony of English also gives the English-speaking countries enormous economic power. Because English sells well, English is now one of the most important products of the English-speaking countries. So, English is not merely a medium, but a proprietary commodity to be marketed across the world.

A recent study on the global spread of English published by the British Council, a public relations agency for the United Kingdom, underscores this point and proposes for the global marketing of the “British English brand.” In answering the questions: “Will the British ‘brand’ of English play an important role in the world in the 21st century?” the study concludes by saying:

The future of British English in the world will depend in part on continued, careful management of its ‘brand image’. . . . The support of ‘British Studies’ courses in overseas universities, for example, has helped shift the focus from cultural heritage to a more balanced understanding of Britain’s place in the modern world. There is also a growing appreciation of the importance of British audio-visual products in projecting an image of Britain as a leader of style and popular culture (Graddol, 1995).

Both in the question and the conclusion, the report assumes Britain is the supplier of a 'brand' product called 'British English' and its culture, and by assuming so, it justifies the commoditization of English and the British governmental intention to market it globally as a 'brand' product.

The commoditization of English by the British government (and by other governments to a lesser degree) incurs at least two concerns.

First, their perception of their own English as a "brand" product shows their sense of superiority over other varieties of English and other languages. This is nothing but 'ethnocentrism', to say the least, and potentially implies a racist perception which justifies their discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward speakers of other languages and other varieties of English. It is justifiable for the British to say that their English is a 'brand', and then legitimate their feelings of ethnocentrism and discrimination? By communicating these feelings, are they justified in reproducing and reinforcing the perceptions of inequality between them and others?

Second, in their concept of the commoditization of English, the British government wants to claim English as if it were their own personal property even though it is already a global "common good" that belongs to everyone. They may argue that they claim ownership of "British English" alone and that they are thus free to sell it, much like other commodities such as British automobiles and TVs, but this is debatable.

Language as Environment, not Commodity

The British intention to promote "British English" will only exacerbate the existing unequal linguistic order of today, allowing English to dominate other languages and reinforcing the inequality of international communication. To tackle the hegemony of English and the resultant "Anti-democratic Linguistic Order", we need to abandon our definitions of language as a mere tool of communication or a product to be marketed. Instead, we need to regard language as an essential component of our informational environment in which we live. In this view, language does not exist outside of us as an objective entity. But it exists as the essential informational component which interacts with us and affects and molds us in the process of interaction. Thus, language directly relates to our ontological states and constitutes the essential environment for a person to develop an identity. So learning and using a foreign language and living in a foreign society are not the mere change of symbolic systems, but radical changes in the informational environments as well as in ontological conditions.

In addition, the use of English as a global language generates a number of more serious difficulties, especially to the speakers of languages other than English. I shall discuss only three of them here.

When people are deprived of their native language to speak in and listen to, a part of their human dignity is at risk. They become, in a sense, mute, deaf, and blind. They may be there physically, but are treated as invisible, and are easily ignored.

Having to use English can result in a kind of existential crisis as well as a loss of human dignity. I, for one, as a non-English speaking person, have experienced these crises in English-speaking environments. It is far more than just a matter of inconvenience, but a serious problem directly concerned with human dignity, because being deprived of language means the deprivation of informational environment, an essential source of our existence. The replacement of a weaker language by a stronger language such as English is equal to the replacement of one environment essential to human existence by another which is alien and possibly threatening. The new and foreign informational environment can be very threatening to human existence as it creates the loss of voice, the loss of hearing, and the loss of sight on the part of speakers of a weaker language.

Thus, the issue of a global language should not be considered only from a functional and pragmatic perspective which sees language as a mere tool of communication. Language problems should be dealt with from a broader ontological perspective that can look at language as essential to human dignity, identity, and existence.

Secondly, there is a more practical problem in the English-dominated communication. The adoption of English as a global language obliges the non-English-speaking population of the world to learn and use it. This is an enormous burden, economically and psychologically, and there is no guarantee that one will be successful.

If learning English urges you to make sacrifices, using it can cause you pain and pity! Unless you are near-native-like in English, you will continue to suffer fear and anxiety over possible mistakes in language use, and mistakes can have great consequences in an increasingly global, competitive, and English-dominated marketplace. Thus, it can be very difficult for the non-English-speaking people to develop confidence, or psychological certainty and stability as they are entirely dependent in terms of proper language behavior and thus susceptible to possible insults and punishments.

In sum, learning and using English is not merely a matter of education, but it serves in function as a way of producing and reinforcing unequal power relationships between English-speaking peoples and non-English speaking peoples by instilling anxiety, fear, shame, or insecurity in the minds of non-English-speaking people. In other words, the imperative to learn and use English operates as a form of social-psychological control or mental colonization of the non-English-speaking world.

Another problem resulting from the hegemony of English is the Englishization of other languages. Quite a few languages of the world have been influenced and trans-

formed by English to the extent that even portions of their phonetic and semantic order are disrupted.

Some may argue that the Englishization of languages is inevitable, and that criticizing it represents the position of linguistic purism, a form of ethno-nationalism which excludes any foreign influences. It is argued that language evolves through incessant contact with other languages and that having foreign influence is just a matter of natural evolution. This is true, but never has such an influence been so dominating in so many areas worldwide, so quickly. My point, simply, is that we must not do so without careful consideration.

Democracy Among All Languages

But what about the growing “New Linguistic Order”? There is indeed a resurgence of regional and local languages, as if to counter-balance the force of English, as Fishman (1998) rightly discussed. This indicates that there is a concern about the colonial languages, particularly English, being so strong and influential that they are posing a threat to most weaker languages, and therefore a great need is felt to develop a balance of linguistic power. And this perception should not be ignored but recognized from an ecological perspective which treats language as the essential informational environment for human existence. We cannot afford to let nature take its course with regard to language, but should take some intelligent action to prevent it from being transformed into something we are not sure we want.

Can we do anything about the growing hegemony of English?

The rise of regional and local languages as described by Fishman may exercise some power to check the force of English, but it may turn out to be only legitimating the dominance of English, as it serves to create global bilingualism, in which English is used together with a local (or regional) language. The power of English is sustained and even reinforced in global bilingualism.

In order to establish a more democratic order of language, we need to have a vision. A vision to realize a higher goal. A democratic linguistic order is a vision which aims for democracy among all languages, rather than democracy plus English. While democracy among all languages is an attempt to realize and respect equal opportunity for all languages to be used and learned, democracy plus English presupposes the use and learning of English, a great handicap for non-English-speaking people and a grave challenge to a democratic linguistic order.

We have quite a good theoretical foundation for developing a democratic linguistic order. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights can serve as the theoretical ground for elaborating on the idea of democracy for all languages. Article 2 asserts, “Everyone

is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.” Also, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and several other international agreements oppose discrimination on the basis of language. These declarations can be used as the theoretical base on which linguistic democracy can be elaborated.

In 1996, the draft of Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights was adopted in a UNESCO meeting held in Barcelona, Spain. Article 7, prescribes that “All languages are the expression of a collective identity and of a distinct way of perceiving and describing reality and must therefore be able to enjoy the conditions required for their development in all functions.” The Declaration is an attempt to preserve the rights of linguistic minorities based on the agreements reached in the other international declarations discussed above. This is a great step forward toward a democratic linguistic order and equality among all languages.

Conclusion

For a democratic linguistic order to be further developed, consciousness raising is necessary both among the speakers of English and among the speakers of other languages. The majority of the speakers of English are unaware of the problems caused by the hegemony of English; and even educated people take the use of English for granted and naively expect everyone in the world to speak English. Some attempts should be made in education and in the media to sensitize people about the hegemony of English and make them critically aware of the taken-for-granted knowledge about the global use of English. It might be difficult to be self-critical, but as the old saying goes, “Nobless, Oblige.”

And finally, efforts should be made on the part of non-English-speaking peoples as well. They are even more uncritical of the hegemony of English. Rather, they are becoming the major supporters of it by enthusiastically learning English and hoping to reap the profits out of it. In being content with individual success by learning English and not being concerned about the problems caused by the hegemony of English, they become accomplices to the hegemony. And, unfortunately, there is a great number of “English language elites” in the world whose status and power are dependent on a linguistic aristocracy. As we can see, there is much work to be done.

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