Global English in the Wake of the Collapse of Globalism

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on recent empirical findings, this article argues that the advent of global English is fundamentally related to the massive presence of English as a mandatory subject in national public school-systems throughout the world. It shows how this analysis runs counter to common explanations and assumptions about the spread of English in the latter half of the 20th century. In contrast to the common superficial approaches to the politics of English, this article contends that language politics should be central to current debates of global capitalism which becomes increasingly crucial in the wake of the resurgence of nationalism and shifting terrain of neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS: Language Politics; Global English; Global Capitalism; Globalization; Global Education

Introduction

> "Every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass[es], in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony."
> - Antonio Gramsci[2]

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[2] Antonio Gramsci, Notebook 29, Note 3 (Gramsci 1985, 183-4). I have pluralized "masses" to acknowledge that Gramsci was focused on the Italian nation-state and its domestic nation-building process, whereas this essay is focused at the global level although also paying close attention to nation-building of individual nation-states (see Ives and Short 2013).

Of the many deceptions or mystifications of neoliberal globalization, one of the least explored is the spread of the use of English globally since the 1950s.[3] The massive increase in English has had major effects on the daily lives and actions of people across the globe and it is also a key site of the interactions between global economic dynamics and governments' resources and policies. However, we are told by everyone from journalists to academic "experts" that this immense turn toward the learning and usage of English is primarily driven by individual choice, the inevitable result of globalization (usually only vaguely defined), cosmopolitan progress or some combination of the three.[4]

The world is getting smaller, travel cheaper and more frequent, and technology is connecting the world as never before. This type of tripe underpins the many non-explanations or naturalization of what may be one of the most profound changes of the late 20th early 21st century. In a symptomatic logic of late capitalism, this story is presented as at once inescapable, quasi-natural and logical, as well as the result of people around the world wanting (and sometimes needing) to use English. Arguments that the rise of 'global English' is part of a political project (Phillipson 1992) are written off as "conspiracy theory."[5] While Marxist historical materialist and other critical approaches provide thorough critiques of such mainstream approaches to 'globalization,' such analyses have been surprisingly silent on language politics, including global English (Ives, 2010; 2015).[6]

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[3] Language use is notoriously difficult to quantify, but by most estimates in the middle of the 20th century, about 250 million people used English on a daily basis, whereas by 2000, that number was over 1 billion and many estimate that now almost half the world's population have significant command of English (see Crystal 2003, Graddol 2006).

[4] For analysis of journalist and mass media depictions of 'global English' see Christian Demont-Heinrich 2009. For an overview and critique of three different approaches in scholarly research from sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and language education, see Ives (2006).

[5] While I will critique Robert Phillipson's "linguistic imperialism" approach below, that it is so often read as "conspiracy theory" despite Phillipson's explicit and persuasive rejection of such a reading tells us a lot of the underlying assumptions about 'global English' (see Ives 2019).

[6] Of the import exceptions to this are Holborow (2015) and Block (2018) who provide important analyses of neoliberalism and current language politics and policies. Both touch

Moreover, the terrain on which global English arose amidst global capitalism and cosmopolitan ideologies has shifted radically since the election of Donald Trump in the US, the passing of Brexit in the UK, and the worldwide resurgence of populist nationalism. There are at the very least severe cracks in – if not a wholesale collapse of – the edifice of globalism. My argument here is that these shifting dynamics reveal the need to more thoroughly understand the complexities of the spread of global English at the nexus of economic forces and political projects where nationhood, identity and language are inextricable.

This is not the place to make any bold analytic conjectures about the fate of global capitalism in the face of this resurgence of nationalism with the anti-globalist trade wars, protectionism, and the faltering belief that 'free-markets' are a benefit to all. Nevertheless, this shifting terrain further throws into question both standard accounts of why English has ballooned in world usage since the middle of the 20th century and the sense that global English is here to stay. Even more important politically are the larger questions that this essay can raise but not answer concerning how the important relations between language(s) and political communities are shifting and what this means to potential transformations of global capitalism.

This article begins from some basic empirical findings from a recently completed research project that I conducted with my colleagues, Jeff Bale (University of Toronto) and Eve Haque (York University), and a large team of linguistically talented research assistants. The project maps out the extent to which national education policies across the world include English as a subject in the national public-school curricula.[7] We have documented that over 70 percent of the countries in the world mandate English as a required subject of study. Over 80 percent of the world's population live in these countries where English is a mandatory subject in their schools. This includes 142 countries not counting the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, excluded because the role of their education systems in the spread of English is more complex. The research project includes data on the grades in which English is taught, where available, the hours per week devoted to English, the trends of using English as a medium of

on global English but view is significantly as a symptom or example of neoliberalism. Holborow's earlier work (1999) provides a more specific Marxist analysis of global English.

[7] For more details see the website, https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/global-english-education/index.html.

instruction, as well as how English is represented (if it is described as a global or international language, a foreign language, etc.).

In addition to these countries, over 40 countries include English as an 'elective' or non-compulsory subject. But in many of these countries, like the Czech Republic, 'foreign' or 'additional' language requirements mean that students in effect must take some English before graduating from high school (Dovalil 2018). Here I am leaving aside questions of public education systems providing the resources to teach students who choose to learn English; our project just focuses on the mandatory imposition of English. The website includes various caveats, details and analysis of other data collected. Obviously, in many countries rates of school attendance are low. Our project could not cover private schooling, which is, of course, significant. Perhaps most importantly, we were looking at national level policy, which in some cases is merely aspirational and in all cases is much more complex in the implementation. But even with these caveats, this research demonstrates the extent to which state-education policy is central to the spread of global English.[8] And it has many implications, especially comparisons to the similarly central role of mandatory education in the creation of standardized national languages at the heart of nation-building processes in the 19th and 20th centuries, which I will discuss below.

While the prevalence of English is often raised in many studies of globalization, it is used merely to illustrate other dynamics, whether it be increasing communication around the world or the advances of a cosmopolitan culture stemming from so-called globalization. Even with all the discussions of the 'linguistic turn' (or turns) in the 20th century, the rise of global English is most often treated as a straightforward result of other social, technological, economic or cultural dynamics. Now these dynamics are changing fast with many heralding the death of neoliberal globalization and, along with it, cosmopolitan liberalism. This change of terrain brings into focus the political and especially state dimension that always underpinned the rise of global English.

By locating the rise of global English within the centre of the cosmopolitan dimension of neoliberalism, I want to highlight the role (and thus transformation of) nation-states in proliferating English through mandatory, national education policy. I argue that it is only this type of assessment that provides a clear formulation of key questions concerning the commodification of

[8] In 59 of these countries, English is taught in every grade, one through twelve, and in many it starts at the first year of schooling.

language, transformations and contradictions in nation-building projects and the future of global English in the face of resurgent nationalisms. By showing the shortcomings of the two dominant approaches to global English – the linguistic imperialism as a version of the cultural imperialism school and the cosmopolitan approach – I argue that the future prospects of English as a global language remain uncertain *and political.*

Global English: Standard Interpretations

David Crystal is one of the most prolific experts on the state of the English language in the world today and provides a good example of how it is most often addressed by scholars, the media and in public discourse. Crystal provides ample discussion of the role of British colonialism in the spread of English, as well as the impact of 20th century American imperialism – military, cultural, economic and political. However, at *the* pivotal moment in his analysis Crystal contends that due to 'globalisation' (which he suggests is driven primarily by technology – mass communication and cheaper transportation) the world needed a 'global language' (Crystal 2003, p.13). English fit the bill, according to Crystal. He insists that his description of English as being "in the right place at the right time" has an ironic (and Welsh) meaning (Crystal 2003, p.120) and was not meant to detract from the politics concerning British colonialism and American imperialism, as some critics had charged. He also describes the dangers of language death and the threats that English poses to linguistic diversity (Crystal 2003, pp.20-25). Thus, at one level, Crystal presents a 'balanced' view, especially in comparison to, for example, Robert Phillipson, for whom global English is 'linguistic imperialism,' a key component of cultural imperialism (Phillipson 1992; Phillipson 2009).

Phillipson's linguistic imperialism approach, while incredibly important for politicizing the English Language Teaching industry, especially in the 1990s, is analytically weak in numerous ways (see Ives 2006 and Ives 2019). The most relevant short-coming is that his focus on two specific countries – Britain and the U.S. – overshadows the role of the language policies of all the other nations and their complex interactions. It is as if the U.S. world hegemony is so powerful that each of these 142 countries that mandate English just fall in line to advance the U.S. national interest by forcing their populations to learn English. In addition to being simplistic, such an account has no place for the variations within these English teaching policies – some of which, like Colombia – are explicitly aimed at creating a modern global workforce that can compete internationally. Some of the policy documents articulate a cosmopolitan globalization rhetoric. Others offer

less overtly economic explanations invoking their British Commonwealth status, or English as some sort of compromise among competing ethnic languages. Others just infer that 'foreign languages' are important, and English is presented as the most popular choice.

As Selma Sonntag has shown in her excellent, case-study based analysis, *The Local Politics of Global English*, the political role of English depends on politics among local and national forces. At times, these forces can be aligned with xenophobia, at other times they are associated with elitism and questions of class gatekeepers; and, in other countries, they can be linked to progressive alliances against traditional elites (Sonntag 2003, see also Block 2018, p.8-13). But since Sonntag's analysis is based on a case-study methodology, she does not grapple with the systematic forces of English across the globe in the context of global capitalism.[9]

On the other extreme from Phillipson's "linguistic imperialism" is what I call linguistic cosmopolitanism. Political scientists like Abram de Swann (2001), Danielle Archibugi (2008) and Philippe van Parijs (2012) represent this position most clearly but it also captures much of the work in critical language studies by scholars such as Suresh Canagarajah (2013) and Lionel Wee (2010). Van Parjis makes most explicit an assumption underlying all this work, which is that global English is a benefit to the entire world (2012). I have critiques these positions elsewhere (Ives 2014), but here my point is that they all end up treating global English too superficially without grasping the historically changing links between language and political community that we shall see below in the influential literature on the formation of modern nationalism by scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and Etienne Balibar.

While neither as pessimistic as the linguistic imperialism school nor as optimistic as the cosmopolitans remains superficial, Crystal's more 'balanced' analysis remains superficial, seeing the rise of global English as merely a consequence of economic and technological developments. Moreover, while Crystal notes that the future of global English is open and could change significantly since, like all international languages, it relies upon the power of the people who use it (Crystal 2003, p.7), it leaves us few resources to ask about the future of global English in our current climate of capitalism with the resurgence of nationalism and populism and the coming apart of the neoliberal

[9] Sonntag's later work on call-centres goes much further in this direction but never yields a global approach to global English (Sonntag 2009).

cosmopolitan. Because Crystal, like so many others (including most Marxists, see Ives 2015) do not place language in that crucial nexus between global capitalism and the nation-state system, he cannot grasp the tensions exerted on it by the resurgence of nationalism, the return of trade wars and the abdication of leadership by the U.S., Britain and other countries in the project of cosmopolitanism (and 'global English').

I have used Crystal's work as an example of the dominant approaches to global English. Before moving on, I should note his important point that global English as a phenomenon is inextricable from the questioning of the dominance or place of first language or so-called 'mother-tongue' speakers. The vast majority of the increase in the use of English globally since the middle of the 20th century has been by 'non-native' users who now outnumber native users, and, as much of the literature in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and education has explored, this is finally shifting presumptions that the 'native' standard varieties are inherently superior than the 'new Englishes' spoken and codified by non-native users. In other words, English is no longer 'owned' by British, Americans, Canadians, New Zealanders and Australians (e.g. Kachru 2005). This is a key point to which I will return below.

Global English Education and the Nation-State

The absence of focus on mandatory public education in accounts of global English is surprising for several reasons. The most obvious of which is the widely accepted contention that language standardization in general is a key element to nation-building and, as Benedict Anderson so influentially put it, the 'imagining of national community' especially in the 19th and early 20th century. As many diverse scholars have emphasized (e.g. Albaugh 2014; Heller 2010; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Hobsbawm 1992; Anderson 1991; Balibar 1991; Weber 1976), language standardization was carried out primarily through the creation of national, mandatory, public education systems.

As Etienne Balibar argues, "the institution of state languages that were distinct both from the sacred languages of the clergy and from 'local' idioms – initially for purely administrative purposes, but subsequently as aristocratic languages – goes back in Europe to the High Middle Ages" (Balibar 1991, p.87). Balibar traces how the nation-state projects and their concomitant nationalism were intricately bound with language, education and language standardization (Balibar 1991, pp.91-105). And while in that study, originally published in 1990, he does not follow through with the implications, he notes the bourgeois and

capitalist dynamics within the development of the state form, meant that there was a "simultaneous genesis of nationalism and cosmopolitanism" (Balibar 1991, p.90).

If mandatory national language education is accepted as central to the rise of the modern nation-state system, it seems particularly problematic that it is more or less absent in the prolific debates from the 1990s onwards about globalization and whether or not it spells the demise of the power of the nation-state. This is even more the case if we note the very influential analysis provided by Benedict Anderson that modern nationalism must be understood as an 'imagined community', not in the sense of the not being 'real', but rather that we can distinguish different forms of imagining community – for him the large historical forms were religious, dynastic and nationalist – and it was precisely the different roles of languages that played a major part in Anderson's argument. He argues, similar to Balibar, that different historical epochs were largely constituted by differences of how language and community were formulated.

Religious community, for Anderson, links people through sacred languages potentially universal where conversion of all humans into the religious fold relies on languages not being linked to specific, finite, ethnic or cultural communities as they were to be constructed later with the rise of the modern nation-state. Anderson theorizes the "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism" (Anderson 2006, p.39) as including changes in Latin itself as it differentiated into the Romance vernacular dialects, but also other key material conditions like the newspaper, printing-press and especially the book. Much has been written about the details of this analysis, but you certainly do not have to accept the specifics of Anderson's analysis to appreciate his larger point, that the standardization of modern languages is part and parcel of the political and institutional projects that constitute the modern nation-state.

Scholarship on the concept of the 'mother tongue' corroborates but also deepens this analysis. Several scholars have shown how the 'mother tongue' is a particularly modern concept taking hold with the development of capitalism (Bonfiglio 2010; Yildez 2012). Paolo Gambarata pushes this analysis further showing how "the category of maternal language is the pre-eminent site of the conflation of natural speech and formal, standardized language that founds linguistic nationalism" (Gambarota 2011, p.32). Today's scholars of global English and language generally are very quick to challenge the idea of the mother tongue and the simplistic dichotomy of "native" and "non-native" speakers (Kachru

2005), but to my knowledge, they never re-connected it to changes in the economy and political community that contextualize this challenge.

One key question that Anderson's work and its influence should open concerns current inquiries into the role of digital technology for altering the terrain of 'print-capitalism,' newspapers, books as commodities, and the other material and productive elements in terms of how the 21st century heralds a distinctly new form of imagining community. While the rise of global English shares some features of the type of "vernacular linguistic unification" (Anderson 2006, p.77) that we saw in especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, even the most committed cosmopolitan accounts of globalization do not herald global English as a "world language" akin to the role Italian or German became (with considerable struggle and continued lack of success) as national languages.

Of course, the mandatory nature of English language instruction across the globe is not meant to compete with or replace the national standard languages that continue to be imposed through mandatory education. English is often advocated in the name of 'multilingualism' although there is some tension in the debates concerning non-native varieties of English that are seen to contain vernacular culture and values (see Kachru 2005). Nevertheless, on the whole, the policies that use vital national resources to teach global English represent clear examples of nation-state polices not simply giving away their power in the face of globalization, but actively creating key structures for global capitalism and an aspiration for their nation to have a more positive place in it. However, these education polices are clearly open to relatively rapid change to the extent that the cosmopolitan promise of economic globalization gives way to resurgent nationalism, international trade agreements are no longer assumed to automatically benefit all involved, and the world playing field is recast as a zero-sum game.

Conclusion

In 2018, the South Korean government banned the teaching of English prior to grade three. The policy was explained as linked to a Constitutional Court Decision from 2016 in which concerns over children's ability to learn Korean well were (questionably) connected to the trend of teaching English earlier and earlier, a trend that South Korea had been leading (Ghani 2018). Some of the countries with the most ambitious English teaching policies, such as Colombia that aspired to bilingual fluency in Spanish and English for all high school graduates by 2020, explicitly connect this policy to globalization and English as the global language.

The usefulness of English and what the cosmopolitan advocates celebrate as its communicative potential rests on the pervasiveness of English across the world. But these English language education policies and all the resources that they require could easily be deemed less than politically pragmatic in a world where the U.S. has abdicated its roll as the leader of a cosmopolitan globalism. Added to this is the secondary role that the U.K. has played in supporting global English, which now may be questioned with the ongoing Brexit quandaries and the potentially more isolationist position it seems to herald. In other words, when the conjunction of political and economic forces is unstable and changing, so too are language practices, politics and policies.

Dominant understandings of the rise of global English as a mere coinciding of diverse factors (colonial histories, economic changes fostering more linguistic interactions, cosmopolitan ideologies) are revealed as inadequate. As suggested in my opening quote from Gramsci the period in which global English was ascendant, language politics was tied to changing dynamics between governing elites and the masses around the world. This seems now to have given way to different conjuncture, still in flux. We now have the flip side of Gramsci's point, when the relations between the governing classes and the popular masses are shifting, language politics will surface. Under these new conditions the politics of global English require a deeper and more substantial understanding especially as they too will be open to transformations which should be central to our political responses to the recent upsurge of nationalism.

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