

The Geography of Languages: a strictly geopolitical issue? The case of “international English”

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Introduction

Every year University College Cork celebrates its “Open Day”. The Department of Geography on this occasion delivers a series of informative pamphlets attempting to catch the attention of potential new students of Geography. In one of the pamphlets there are a series of colourful key questions that (supposedly) only geographers are able to answer. One of them states: “*Will English be the only language spoken in 2050?*” Most certainly not. However, there is a series of intriguing facts motivating such a questioning. English has definitely been accepted as the world’s *lingua franca*¹. It is expanding far and wide and this is not motivated by classical colonial processes anymore (i.e. the British Empire). Its use on the Internet and, generally, in every aspect related to new technologies, science and – to some extent – business is overwhelming. Nevertheless, many see in this process

¹ *Lingua franca*: A lingua franca is a standard, a language of reference that does not really exist since it is a convenient construction, but which is used by different peoples as a common communicational code. It is usually based on a simplified version of another widely used and recognised language, that is to say, the dominant language in each historical period. Lingua franca “*is typically a language with a broad base of native speakers, likely to be used and learned by persons whose native language is in the same language family ... [if the cultures are] too widely separated ... the two (or possible more) groups use their native languages as a basis for a rudimentary language of few lexical items and less complex grammatical rules. Such a ‘marginal language’ is called a ‘pidgin’*” (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993: 295). “*One distinguishing characteristic of pidgin languages is that no one learns them as native speakers*” (p. 298).

new forms of veiled cultural colonialism, a new sort of imperialism based on political and economic impositions, namely originated from the role of the United States of America in the international arena. In this way, the language of the dominant power is perceived as extremely useful, prestigious, desirable and indeed, the American *metropolis* will do nothing else than ease the expansion of its ways of communication. In spite of everything, this process is not something new in human history. Throughout different periods a number of languages emerged as *linguas francas*, internationally adopted by different peoples. These may vary from the classical example of Latin, to the ‘*en-vogue*’ case of French. But some important questions remain: is English durable? Until when will modern English be the international – “fashionable” - language? Could Spanish be the new international language as many argue? And most importantly, is the expansion of each historical *lingua franca* only due to political and/or military reasons? In brief, is it solely a geopolitical issue or are Geographers and Sociologists missing the contribution of Linguists and Sociolinguists? What happens to the language itself - involuntary object of love and rejection?

In this paper we attempt to combine both Geographical and Linguistic knowledge, trying to solve some of the above mentioned questions, and proving that socio and geolinguistic processes cannot be understood without a wide multidisciplinary approach.

Diffusion and adoption

The most geographically widespread languages in the world have European origin (figure 4). Many of the most widely spoken languages (figure 1), with a non European origin, are more or less confined to their respective native territories. These facts illustrate the importance that imperialism and colonisation had in the diffusion of languages. “Colonisation implies linguistic colonialism, minorisation of the language of the colonised people and linguistic substitution” (Gómez Guinovart, 2002: 1). Language in itself is a tool of communication, but as all human creation language is susceptible to be transformed into a crucial cultural reference and symbol. Indeed, language – or even a dialect or accent – is the most perceptible element of a specific community or people. Language may easily become the main element of expression and identity for a specific people, such as in the Galician case. Castelao in his classical *Sempre en Galiza* (1944) stated: “do not forget that if we are Galician is [because] of the language ... language is not just a work of art in itself, but a never-ending source of works of art”. Whereas Portuguese poet Pessoa wrote: “My country is the Portuguese language”². For Ngugi (1993) and Gómez Guinovart (2002) the language and culture of a community are inseparable. From this perspective, the loss of a language entails the loss of a specific culture, the disappearance of its history and ways of interacting with the world (Couto, 2001; see note to figure 2). For these authors the superimposition of a new language over a people constitutes the control of the mental universe of the individuals. The reactions to these processes are basically three: adoption, hybridisation and rejection.

² Quoted by M.A. Vasconcelos on BBC (1987) *Discovering Portuguese* TV Series. Episode 1.

There can be an almost complete adoption of the new language, since it may be perceived as useful, (falsely) more educated or fashionable. To that regard Gómez Guinovart (2002: 2) quotes Achebe (1975): “*The real question is not whether Africans 'could' write in English but whether they 'ought' to ... I have been given this language and I intend to use it ... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience.*” However, Achebe also points out: “... it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings”. This model of appropriation can be related to the hybridisation. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin [eds.] (1989) and Crystal (1990) elucidate how a colonised people can adapt the imposed language in many different ways, creating hybrid – creole³ – languages. That is to say, new languages derived from the colonial language highly interfered with native linguistic codes. McCrum et al. (1986) applaud the increase in English speakers, especially thanks to the adoption of English language as a national language in many Third World countries. Nevertheless, do McCrum et al. really consider that this is a genuine transformation? That is to say, do these new speakers really consider English as their new mother tongue⁴ or just as a powerful tool or *lingua franca* in order to interact with the rest of the world? Is

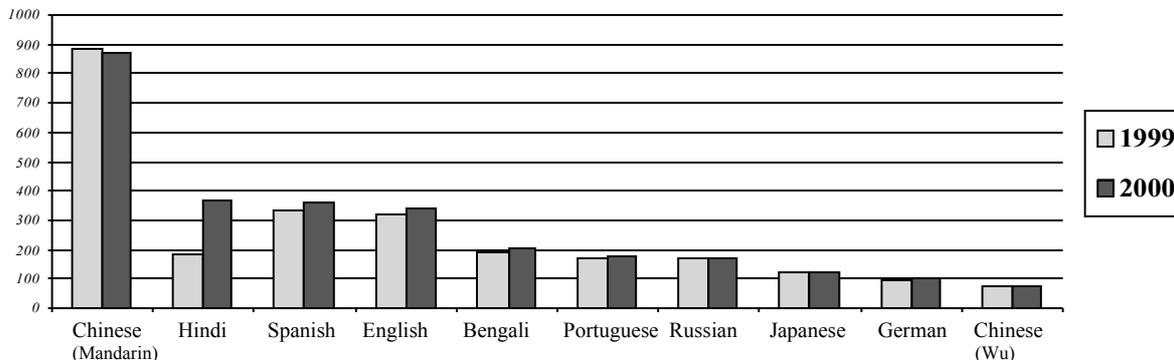
³ Creole: “When a pidgin [see note 1] comes to be adopted by a community as its native tongue, and children learn it as a first language, that language is called a Creole ... Creoles become fully developed languages, having more lexical items and a broader array of grammatical distinctions than pidgins ... they become languages as complete in every ways as other languages” (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993: 298-299).

⁴ Mother tongue: It commonly is the first language to be acquired, and used habitually, by a person. It is intuitively defined as the “language one thinks in”.

English really taught to the children in the intimacy of the home? Most surely many of these new Asian and African speakers continue to express their most fond feelings in the vernacular tongue, and this is the fact that really marks the intimate acceptance - or not – of a new language. Nobel Prize Portuguese José Saramago comments on the Portuguese language for BBC (1987) that Portuguese people could make business in English, surf the net in English, watch movies in English... but that “*we cry in Portuguese*”. From this perspective we could consider that the current figures of English speakers in the world are severely overestimated, especially in relation to Africa. Finally, the attempt to impose a new language can originate a frontal rejection. As a matter of fact, this imposition may eventually reinforce the sense of community and self-identification of the

recipients. This is especially clear in stateless nations of Europe, such as Wales or Catalonia. In some cases, such as the Irish or Breton, the *expected* extinction of the vernacular language is a constantly present menace, even though it actually never occurs in spite of all adversities. This is often due to the existence of reduced pockets of active speakers of the minority language, who usually are quite belligerent in reference to linguistic rights and language use. This is known as ‘linguistic loyalty’ or ‘linguistic resistance’. Unquestionably, all processes of linguistic change, that is to say, changing a vernacular language for another one, are always originated from a (forced) external intrusion. It is very rarely a voluntary process, even though it could be imperceptible to many since it can occur in a very gradual and slow manner.

Figure 1 The ten principal mother tongues in the World (*in millions*)



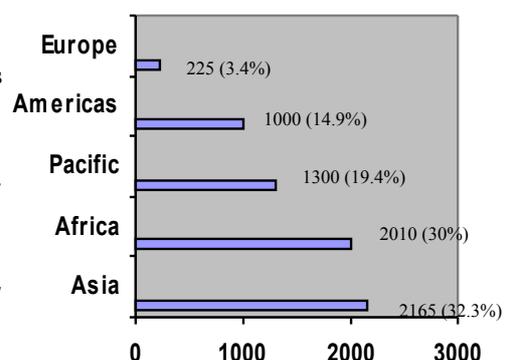
Source: Couto (2001); Instituto Camões (www.instituto-camoes.pt); Ethnologue (www.ethnologue.com).

Figure 2

Note to the figure: There is an overall of over 6500 languages in the world. “... Europe has the lowest number ... paradoxically it is the continent where concerns over their preservation have arisen with greater emphasis ... [There exists] an enormous disparity ... [languages range] from those with over 900 million speakers to others that are limited to fewer than 20 individuals ... 600 languages have more than 100,000 speakers, while 500 others are confined to less than 100 speakers. Many ... languages are in risk of extinction ... 25 ... disappear annually ... With the disappearance of a language it is not only a human creation that dies, but also a form of expressing a conception of the world, a means of expressing relationships with nature, an oral tradition, a poetry, and ultimately a culture, thereby contributing to the global impoverishment of humanity” (Couto, 2001: 1).

Source: UNESCO (2000); Couto (2001).

Living languages of the World



International English

All languages are equally important and hold the same degree of dignity and relevance. Every language expresses the intimate nature of a culture and fits the needs of expression and way of living of a specific People. On the other hand, it is clear that there are dominant and minorised languages in the global arena. As mentioned, dominant languages are not always the most widely spoken. Among them English takes the lead. English had an international diffusion through the British Empire, yet the fact that corroborated English as the present *lingua franca* among other wide-spread world languages was the political, economic and military role of the United States. It was only after World War II (1939-1945) when English arises as a truly dominant prestige language in front of others, namely French. French was the language of refinement since the 19th century, popularised by the Romantic movement. On the other hand Spanish is now perceived as a vibrant, energetic and somewhat sensual language. English was associated from 1950s with the concept of *coolness*, 'rock'n'roll' and, definitely, youth culture. The beginning of the emergence of English coincides with the gradual intensification of the USA's influence over international matters, firmly supported in the economic dependency of Europe in the post-war period and in the growing military presence of the USA around the globe, arguably defending strategic economic interests. Nonetheless, this is not a guarantee of the eternal consecration of English language as the most popular, prestigious or fashionable language at the international arena. This reality could easily be altered if the United States lose their current significance in global affairs or if new languages – namely Spanish – aim to supplant the

language of the *metropolis* within the very *metropolis*. From this point of view geopolitical issues are not as important as the linguistic ones. The main political power will always radiate its cultural influence in any historical period, but what could alter the order inside the existing *metropolis*? Is it just a question of the number of speakers and/or linguistic loyalty? If so, why did other large population contingents within the US not imposed or promoted their own languages in the past? In the case of English adopted as a new language, what is it that ensures that an adopted language, which is merely assumed as just one more cultural feature by third parties⁵, cannot be changed for a more fashionable one? In brief, what dictates the linguistic changes within society beyond the overall number of speakers?

Languages are associated with the stereotypes of the peoples who speak them, and therefore these momentary preferences for one or other language are anything but linguistic. To some extent they are the social result of generational changes in taste. Languages are cultural constructs, mutable and predisposed to develop. In consequence, a series of purely linguistic issues are involved in these questions. McCrum et al. (1986: 11) support: "*The emergence of English as a global phenomenon ... has recently*

⁵ What does English really represent to someone who learns it as a foreign language? It can be learnt just for pleasure, but often English is learnt for a practical reason (business and trade, studies and education, political relations, etc.) With the English language a series of collateral cultural issues are also transmitted, whether from the American or British perspective mostly. The acquisition of a second language represents nothing but yet another product of a particular culture to the individual student. Therefore, it is something that can be adopted or not, that can be changed by any other language if necessary without any sentimental involvement. Such an emotional relation is normally only reserved for the mother tongue.

inspired the idea that we should talk not of English, but of Englishes". Languages invariably exchange vocabulary and syntactic structures through a perfectly normal process called 'linguistic exchange'. The only trouble dwells in the fact that this exchange should be carried out on even terms, with no dominant/dominated languages (what is called a situation of *diglossy*).

Linguistic characteristics

The materialisation of English as *the* international language was a gradual process in history, in spite of the meteoric growth of the USA. Still, English had to overcome the previous international language of prestige (French) in the 1950s - 1970s period. Such a change had patent geopolitical significance, but it also was greatly helped by linguistic issues. McCrum et al. (1986: 41) state: "*It is the non-linguistic forces ... that have made English the first world language in human history ... Language is neutral, passive*". Language is not neutral whatsoever, it very much carries a critical symbolic relevance. Yet it is true that non-linguistic factors situated English where it is now, but linguistic factors significantly maintain English in its position. Indeed, English is an 'easy' language to learn, in spite of the objections of McCrum et al. (1986). English is a Germanic language greatly influenced by Romance (Latin-based) languages (figure 3). This factor allows speakers of both Germanic and Romance languages to find many similarities in English, that to a great extent enormously facilitate its reading. English uses the common Latin writing encoding, which also is the most widely used writing system in the world. Besides, and according to personal teaching experience, it is a fact that native English-speakers who are fluent

in any Romance language hold a greater command and accuracy in the use of the English language than the average speaker. This is due to the fact that the cultivated register of English is directly influenced by Latin forms. In addition, English is enormously synthetic, with a simple and clear grammar easy to approach from any other language. The only real biases are the pronunciation (very diverse, mainly because it is not a syllabic language), and the great number of idioms and specific expressions. However, the grammatical simplicity and synthetic character of English is reinforced through its extensive use in new technologies. English is *de facto* the – almost – exclusive language of non-social sciences and technology, and definitely the dominant language on the Internet (Gómez Guinovart, 2002). Owing to this, English maintains its privileged position as the language of the communication and international media. Other languages competing with English (for example Spanish), have to equal English functionality. This extent is not that simple since the grammatical and syntactical characteristics of other languages require more elaborate formulations. It has to be pointed out, however, that these languages are blinkered by the situation that they cannot adapt to the new requirements of modernity if English does not permit any opportunity to it. For example, it is complex for any Romance language to meet the functionality and synthetic character of English if they do not count with the practical resources where to construct such registers. It is a question of "getting used to". Actually, non-English speakers have accustomed themselves to a number of common English words to be found everywhere: from "Play", "Rec[ording]", or "F[ast]-F[or]w[a]rd" (in any domestic appliance), to the traffic sign of "Stop". If these other languages cannot conquer

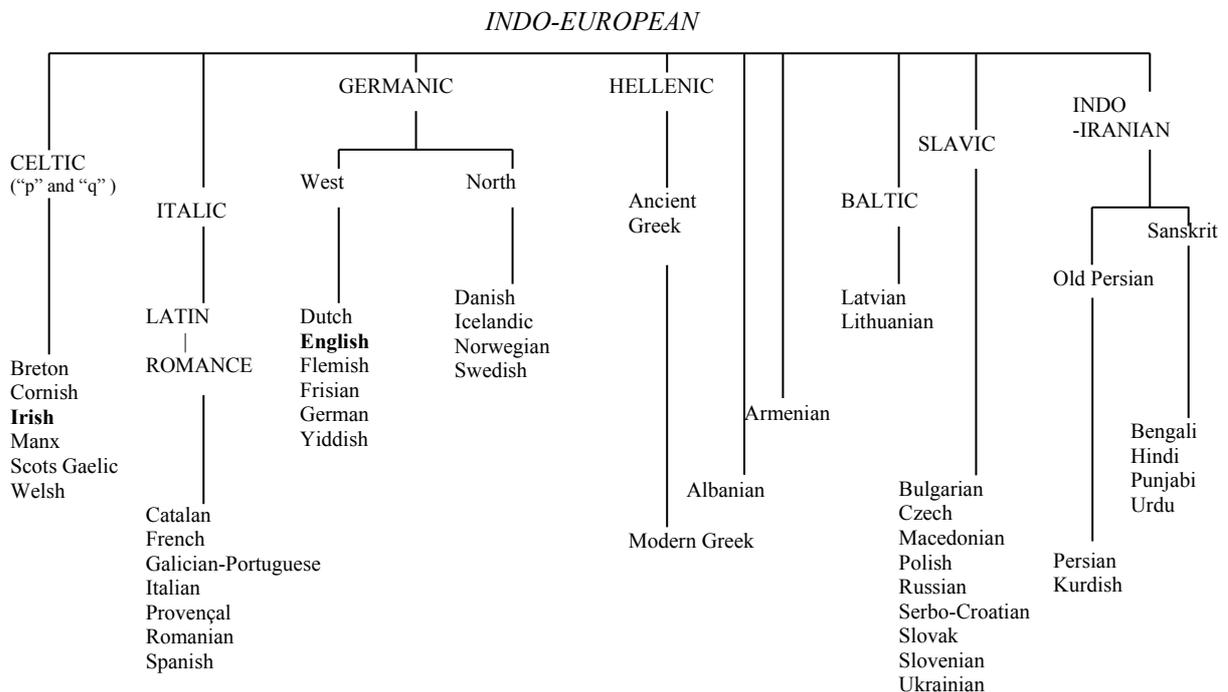
those little spaces of communication it will be difficult for their speakers to “get use to” a more synthetic and iconic character of their own languages, a character that English retains in exclusivity.

More to the point, Spanish language is in the middle of a process of unstoppable expansion in the USA. This signifies more resources in Spanish language, more social presence of that language and, at the end, more international diffusion. Spanish is beginning to become the new fashionable language and the preferred second language among English speakers, even though no Spanish-speaking country has any special political, economic or social relevance in the international arena. Many predict that Spanish will occupy the position

that French had as the second prestige international language (a position largely disputed) and, eventually, the first one. In addition, other Romance languages are following Spanish in its process of expansion, such as Portuguese. Already in the European Union English does not play the role it used to have. This is due to the constant expansion of other European languages, namely German. German is arising as a new linguistic superpower within the Union in both administrative/political and social terms. The absolute overall number of English speakers grows by the day, but is it happening the same in relative terms? Likewise, does the prestige of English continue to grow or has it reached its top, now being – slowly but gradually – replaced by other languages?

Figure 3

Indo-European linguistic family tree



Note to the figure: for an exhaustive list of the languages of the world and their respective linguistic ascription (linguistic families and subfamilies) visit <http://home.ccil.org/~cowan/langtree.txt>. This website offers the complete tree of the world’s languages in a text document.

Source: Fromkin and Rodman, 1993; Instituto Camões (www.instituto-camoes.pt); authors’ completion.

Figure 4

Geographical distribution of languages

Language	Official/Dominant Language in	Also spoken in
1) Chinese (Mandarin)	China, Singapore, Taiwan	Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand
2) Hindi	India	Nepal, Singapore, S. Africa, Uganda, UK
3) Spanish	Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Rep. Ecuador, Eq. Guinea, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spanish State, Uruguay, Venezuela	Andorra, Belize, Philippines, Western Sahara, USA
4) English	Australia, Botswana, Brunei, Cameroon, Canada, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Fiji, The Gambia, Guyana, India, Ireland, Israel, Lesotho, Liberia, Malaysia, Micronesia, Namibia, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Somalia, S. Africa, Suriname, Swaziland, Tonga, UK, USA, Vanuatu, Zimbabwe, and many Caribbean states (Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, etc.)	Andorra, Puerto Rico
5) Bengali	Bangladesh, India	Singapore
6) Portuguese	Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé e Príncipe	Andorra, Canada, France, Goa (India), Macau (China), Switzerland
7) Russian	Russia	China, Israel, Mongolia, US, and a number of former Soviet republics.
8) Japanese	Japan	Singapore, Taiwan
9) German (standard)	Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Switzerland	Belgium, Bolivia, Czech Rep., Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Paraguay, Poland, Romania, Slovakia
10) Chinese (Wu)	China	
11) Javanese	Indonesia	Malaysia, Singapore
12) Korean	Korea (North and South)	China, Japan, Singapore, Thailand
13) French	Belgium, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada (Quebec), Comoros, Congo, Congo (Dem. Rep. of), Djibouti, France, Gabon, Guinea, Haiti, Luxembourg, Mauritania, Micronesia, Monaco, Morocco, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Switzerland, Vanuatu	Andorra
14) Vietnamese	Vietnam	China
27) Italian	Italy, San Marino, Switzerland, Vatican City	Croatia, Eritrea, France, Slovenia
48) Dutch	Belgium, Netherlands, Surinam	France

Note to the figure: this table evidences the great geographical diffusion of a number of European languages at the global scale. Other widely spoken languages expand only to neighbouring areas or areas of cultural affinity. In the event of spreading further this is usually motivated by migration. Sharp contrasts are revealed if we pay attention to specific examples: for instance, it is interesting to notice the scarce global reach and international relevance of the 5th language of the world (Bengali) in comparison to the 13th, French; 27th, Italian; or 48th, Dutch. Other comparisons are equally eloquent...

Source: Ethnologue (www.ethnologue.com); <http://www.infoplease.com>

Conclusion

The diffusion of languages and the establishment of a *lingua franca* in each historical moment are eminently motivated by geopolitical issues. However, the maintenance of a language in a position of privilege is not solely motivated by social, economic, political or military factors, but also by linguistic ones. No *metropolis* can avoid the process of hybridisation of the original language, since languages are mutable and naturally evolve. English language is our current example, where after a classical imperialist expansion with the British it became *the* international language after World War

II thanks to the hegemonic power – now challenged - by the United States of America. But the expansion of English also implied intrinsic changes in the language itself: English has suffered dramatic transformations in the last century since it was adopted by and had to suit the expressive needs of the most diverse peoples. Also, this reality does not disguise the fact that English is often accepted as the most preferred foreign language - or even accepted as a new national language - but still English is a second language to many, only used as a *lingua franca*, as many others were in the past (i.e. Latin, written Chinese or

Arabic). The main difference however is that no language had the impact, diffusion and acceptance of modern English. This fact is clearly linked to the present processes of globalisation and, most importantly, to the span of modern media and communications. In this reality, English language reveals itself as a more than suitable language in terms of grammar, syntax and precision, with a synthetic and iconic character which is difficult to match. Therefore, it can be argued that pure linguistic issues contribute to the maintenance of English as the preferred international language. Nevertheless, “*the future ... is unpredictable*” (McCrum et al., 1986: 11), and if it is wise to consider that English as *the* international language is here to stay, it would be naive to believe that this situation will be perpetual. So far, globalisation standardises culture, but it also originates attitudes of resistance that allow many minorised cultures and languages to survive and even revive (i.e. Welsh or Basque). In addition, the very tools of globalisation, symbolically embodied on the Internet, make possible the paradox of the preservation and international diffusion of local cultures and languages, previously confined to their physical geographical limits (Mensching, 2000). It is probable that very soon the majority of the Earth’s population will be able to speak English, but that does not imply that they will actually speak English, and this will only be the English-speakers loss. In an interview conducted by Nally and Costello (2000: 20), Professor Buttmer criticises the “*mono culturalism apparent in geographical discourse internationally*”. She also states: “... *the language worlds are becoming more and more closed on themselves ... language provides an invaluable key into the lived situations of people in environment. There are so many instances of ‘untranslatable taken-for-*

granted’s in people’s everyday worlds. For the geographer of twenty-first century, language competence may be among the most important requirements”.

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