

English as a Universal Language

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Abstract:

In his novel "The World Set Free," H.G. Wells imagined a society based on universal English. English, spoken by over 850 million people worldwide, is one of today's most important languages. English's relevance is measured not only by the number of speakers, but also by the functions it plays in international affairs. English is the mother tongue of nations, and its combined political power, economic strength, commercial activity, and scientific and artistic contributions to civilization lend impressive support to its numerical dominance. Furthermore, English remains the lingua franca in many former colonies, with a variety of regional languages. This article examines about English as a universal language.

Key Words: *English Language*

I. INTRODUCTION

From Shakespeare's time of six million speakers to the present 850 million speakers, English has come a long way. The English language of today reflects many centuries of development. The political and social history of England has showed a considerable impact on the language. The Christianizing of Britain in 597 A.D., brought England into contact with Latin civilization and many Latin words were added to the English vocabulary. Then the Scandinavian invasion resulted in a considerable mixture of the two people and their languages. For two centuries after the Norman Conquest, 1056 A.D., English remained the language of the lower classes. When English once more gained importance, it had been considerably changed from what it was in 1056 A.D. In a similar way the Hundred years War, the rise of middle class, the Renaissance, the development of England as a maritime power, the expansion of the British empire, the growth of commerce and industry, science and literature have all contributed to make the English language what it is today. In short, the English language reflects in its entire development the political, social and cultural history of the English people. From the Renaissance through the colonial expansion, English has witnessed the rise fall of the entire human civilization.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES:

In the earlier periods of its history, English encountered competition from other languages like Latin and French, even in its original homeland. For most of its history English was not the normal language for serious writing. At the end of the 16th century scholars questioned the suitability of English for learned Writing. The vocabulary and syntax of English were considered deficient. By the end of the 17th century, after a period of augmentation and refinement, English was acceptable for intellectual discourse. By this time the spelling syntax and vocabulary of English had also been standardized. In the 18th century scholars agreed that English had reached a near perfect stage in its progress, having been purified of its inconsistencies. It was feared that further changes should be prevented as otherwise the language would deteriorate. Writers were also worried that further changes in the language would make their works unintelligible to future generations. The questions of linguistic propriety were the theme of public debates.

By the 19th century social propriety was the main issue. Good language was claimed to be derived from the usage of the best speakers and writers. An authoritarian approach to language was adopted. Some writers went so far to claim that good language reflected good character. The prescriptive tradition of the 19th century has continued into the 20th century. Popular writers of this century have protested against the abuses of the language.

English, like all other languages is subject to constant growth and decay which characterize all forms of life. When a language ceases to change, it becomes a dead language. The change that is constantly going on in a living language can easily be seen in the vocabulary. Old Words die out, new Words are added and existing words change their meaning. Similar changes occur in pronunciation and grammar as well. There are influences constantly at Work tending to alter a language from age to age. There has been such an extensive change in English in the course of its history that English of 1000 A.D. is quite unintelligible to the people of 2000 A.D.

ENGLISH IN THE WORLD TODAY:

Transplanted mainly through British Colonizers, English has survived the political independence of the colonies. In the USA, the former colony of Britain, English has remained the mother tongue of most of the immigrants. In other colonies where English speakers are always in a minority, English continues to function as an attractive second language and is generally accepted for its neutrality. In 53 countries, it is designated as the official language; where as in India it is an associate language along with Hindi. It is used for a variety of functions like law, education and administration. It is also being increasingly used for literature. Commonwealth literature in English has emerged as an interesting area of study.

Countries like China and Japan which were not colonies of Britain have also started promoting serious study of the English language in the context of globalization. In countries like Germany and Russia where English is the primary foreign language, it is eagerly studied for access to advancements in Science and Technology, for international Commerce and Tourism.

Reasons for the Popularity of English: Several reasons may be adduced for the current popularity of English. Historically the colonial expansion was responsible for the imposition of English on natives. Even after achieving independence many countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Singapore and India, continue to use English for various reasons.

On the economic front the phenomenal growth of the USA has made it an important language. The Advancement in science and the consequent dissemination of scientific knowledge through English has made it necessary for scientists from any part of the world to acquire a working knowledge of English. English is also becoming popular as a language of Entertainment. Writers who are ambitious to reach wider audience choose to write in English.

In addition to the above reasons the nature of the English language and its tolerance to change has made it very popular. One of the major assets of the English language is the mixed character of its vocabulary. English being of Germanic descent has many words from the Germanic languages, viz., German, Dutch, Flemish, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. It also shares a large number of words with the European languages derived from Latin, viz., French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. Hence English seems very familiar to anyone who speaks Germanic languages.

The second asset which English possesses is its inflexional simplicity. Old English was highly inflexional but in the course of its evolution, English underwent progressive simplification. In addition to these assets, there are a few liabilities as well. Idiomatic expressions are difficult to master. Similarly the distinction between some expressions seems illogical to a foreigner. There is no one to one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation.

VARIETIES OF ENGLISH:

The history of English around the world, its various functions and its means of dissemination has given rise to innumerable forms of the language. It no longer seems to make sense to assume that there is no one English language. There are differences, for example, between American and British English. Indian and Nigerian varieties of English are beginning to gain recognition as independent national varieties, rather than deviant versions of British English. An English native may not understand words like "co-brother" or "prepone". He may be puzzled when asked "What is your good name please?" or amused when some one begins a letter with the expression, "Well and wish to hear the same from you." But these have become an integral part of Indian English. Kamala Das, a popular poet, has beautifully expressed the controversies regarding the use of English in India.

"...I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one... the language I speak becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness all mine, mine alone. It is half English, half Indian funny perhaps, but it is honest. It is as human as I am human, don't you see?"

The development of new varieties of English is closely related to social and historical factors. In the history of West Africa, these factors include slave trade, economic exploitation, military activities, repatriation of freed slaves and independent, self-government with a residue of European customs and languages. The settlers in the Cape Colony in Africa and Botany Bay in Australia had similar identical origins; the very different histories of the two countries have produced local standards.

The history of the evolution of American English can be divided into three periods. The language taken by John Smith to Virginia in 1607 and by the Plymouth Fathers to Massachusetts in 1620 was the English of Spencer and Shakespeare. During the period from 1787 when the 13 colonies in the Atlantic sea coast ratified the federal constitution to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, fresh immigrants came in large numbers from Ireland and Germany. The third period from the end of the Civil War to the present day has been marked by the arrival of Scandinavians, Slavs and Italians. Later the Chinese and Japanese landed on the Pacific coast. In addition there were 12 million Blacks from Africa. English in America was able to assimilate all the immigrant

tongues. The children of the French in Louisiana, the Germans in Pennsylvania, the Scandinavians in Minnesota and the Slavs and Italians in Michigan were able to understand, speak, read and Write English.

Is English Disintegrating?

Many linguists are worried that the English language is disintegrating as a result of international dispersion. Accentuating their claims, there are problems of comprehension between national varieties of English. Even within Britain, the pronunciation of a Scotsman is often unintelligible to an Englishman. English Pidgins and Creoles are often completely unintelligible to outsiders.

The written language however is neutral. Even in spoken language, mutual intelligibility is emerging as a result of mass media in the globalized conglomeration of cultures. Hence the possibility of English disintegrating into mutually unintelligible dialects is rather remote. Further, there are other forces of international cohesion which help in preserving the unity and identity of English. Movies from Hollywood, News Channels like BBC and international magazines like National Geographic, Time, etc. are read by people all over the world.

ENGLISH AS A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE:

Considering the immense popularity enjoyed by English in the world today many people wonder whether it will someday become the language of the world. Life would be much simpler if man could go back to the earlier days and use only one language. People have tried to invent artificial languages like Esperanto, Basic English, and Special English.(Voice of America),English Reform, Sea Speak, Air Speak, Euro-English, etc.

II. CONCLUSION

Language issues are always emotional. There is bound to be opposition to the establishment of a single foreign language for international communication. A century ago French was the language of culture, polite Society and diplomacy. Later the prominence of Germany in all fields of scientific and scholarly activity made German a superior competitor. Today English is the most widely used language for commerce and communication. One cannot predict with absolute certainty whether this state of affairs will continue into the next millennium. The changes of the last few decades suggest what forces are at work in the languages today and the likely shape of things in the next decades to come. The whole of nature is in a flux and so is the life of man and His language as in the past so in the future, English will adapt itself to meet new needs.

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