

PART ONE:
LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The consequences of global English

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What are the consequences of English becoming a global language? There have been two chief effects: other languages have changed; and English itself has changed.

1. Other languages

The arrival of unprecedented numbers of loan words into other languages has been one of the most notable trends in the past century, and one that is going to continue. Cultures vary greatly in their response to this influx, and within each culture there are mixed attitudes. Some people welcome the loan words, seeing them as a source of lexical enrichment; more puristically-minded people condemn them, seeing them as an attack on traditional language values. Organisations have been set up to fight them. In some famous cases, attempts have been made to ban them — the *loi Toubon* in France being perhaps the best-known instance. The energy and emotion generated has to be respected, but at the same time history tells us very firmly that it is misplaced. All languages have always been in contact with other languages. There is no such thing as a 'pure' language. All languages have always borrowed words from other languages. And no language community has ever succeeded in stopping this process taking place. The only way to do so would be to take one's language away from contact with other languages. But no-one would want the social and economic isolationism that such a policy would imply.

There is a fallacy underlying the anti-borrowing position. Purists believe that borrowing words from other languages will lead to their own language changing its character and that this is a disaster. Change there certainly will be. Disaster there certainly won't be. The evidence, of course, comes from English itself. English over the centuries has borrowed words from hundreds of

other languages. This has changed the character of English dramatically. English today is not like the English of Anglo-Saxon times. In fact, four-fifths of English vocabulary is not Germanic at all, but Romance, Latin, or Greek. English is actually a Romance language, from a lexical point of view. (I always find it ironic that when the Spanish, for example, complain about some of the English words currently entering their language, in many cases these are words which have a Latin origin, such as *computador*). As a result of all this, English has changed its character, undoubtedly. But has this been a bad thing? Much of the impact of Chaucer and Shakespeare, to take just two of many authors, is due to their ability to work with all that multilingual vocabulary. And everyone benefits, in a lexically enriched language. In English we have many 'doublets' and 'triplets', such as *kingly*, *royal*, and *regal*, which stem from the borrowing history of the language — one Germanic, one French, one Latin. Three words for the same basic concept allows a whole range of stylistic nuances to be expressed which would not otherwise have been possible. Shakespeare, for example, was always exploiting such nuances. Loan words always add semantic value to a language, providing people with the opportunity to express their thoughts in a more nuanced way. This is exactly what is happening with English in other languages at the moment: young people, for example, find many English loan words 'cool', in a way that the older generation does not, and their expressiveness is empowered as a consequence. Many social domains now actively and creatively make use of English words — in advertising, for example, where the use of an English lexicon can actually help to sell goods. It is, of course, the same in English, but the other way round. French words help to sell perfume in Britain, for example.

When a language adopts words, and also sounds and grammatical constructions, it

adapts them. This is the repeated history of English, as it has spread around the world, evolving 'New Englishes'. This will happen to the loan-words currently entering Spanish and other languages too. When the Spanish word *hacienda* entered English it slowly changed its pronunciation, adding the initial 'h' and replacing the medial 'th' by 's'. Similarly, English words change their pronunciation, and eventually their English character, when they are re-pronounced in other languages. The syllabification which has affected English words entering Japanese is a well-studied case: several are now unintelligible to a native-English listener — which is one reason for the emergence of labels like 'Japlish' (and of course such labels as 'Spanglish'), with the implication that these varieties are becoming new languages. Such labels are not jocular — though they are often used so: they are intuitive attempts to characterise what is happening linguistically around the world, as languages come increasingly into contact with each other. They are a prime example of the point that human language cannot be controlled. The more a language becomes a national, then an international, then a global language, the more it ceases to be in the ownership of its originators.

English itself has long since ceased to be owned by anyone, and is now open to the influence of all who choose to use it. That is why it is changing so much, as it moves around the globe, and why the scenario of an 'English family of languages' is likely to be the main development of the 21st century. And some of them will show the clear influence of Spanish.

The reason that vocabulary attracts all the attention is because the lexicon is the area where change is most rapid and noticeable. People are aware of new words, and new meanings of words. But not all borrowings attract the same amount of attention. Loan words tend to

be of two types: words for concepts which the language never expressed before (as in much Internet vocabulary); and words for concepts which were already expressed by a perfectly satisfactory local word. It is this second category which attracts the criticism, because there is a fear that the new word will replace the old one. It is a misplaced fear, as I have said, for two reasons. Firstly, as the many examples like *kingly* illustrate, the new word does not replace the old one, but supplements it. As Spanish, for example, adopts English words, and adapts them, they cease to be English, and become Spanish — though conveying a different nuance alongside the traditional Spanish word. The process of integration is facilitated by many people, such as poets, novelists, dramatists, satirists, comedians, advertisers, and journalists, who can make use of these nuances creatively. It usually takes a generation for loan-words to become integrated, though the Internet seems to be speeding up this time-frame. Looking back on previous generations' loan-words, we value them, because we see the way that authors and others have made good use of them. It is only the current generation of borrowings that attracts criticism.

And secondly, even in cases where the new word does replace the old one (as often happened in English too, with hundreds of French words replacing Anglo-Saxon ones in the early Middle Ages) there is not very much that anyone can do about it. As I have said, human language cannot be controlled. A story is told by the 12th-century historian Henry of Huntingdon, that King Canute of England rebuked his flatterers by showing that even he, as king, could not stop the incoming tide, nor, by implication, the might of God. The story has great relevance when we think of individuals, societies, academies, or even parliaments trying to stop the flow of loan-words — from any

language. They have never managed it in the past. They never will in the future. Language is just too powerful, because too many speakers are involved. Apart from a few cases where the numbers of speakers are so few that their usage can be planned by a central body (as in the case of some endangered and minority languages), usage is beyond control. This is plainly the case with a strong language like Spanish, used in so many countries today, and incorporating so many ethnic identities.

Instead of attacking loan words, accordingly, it makes much more sense to develop creative strategies to foster their integration, in literature, school, and society at large. That, in my view, would be time and energy better spent. Loan words are the invisible exports of a world where people talk to each other. As a citizen of the world, I value every loan word I have in my linguistic repertoire, and look forward to the day when others feel the same.

2. English changes

When people talk about 'global English' they are usually referring to the common features which identify the variety we call standard English. Increasingly, however, attention has been drawn to the regional features which differentiate one part of the English-speaking world from another. So today we happily talk about British, American, Australian, South African, Indian, and other 'Englishes', and studies are accumulating of the way these varieties make distinctive use of pronunciation, orthography, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. Much of the distinctiveness resides in the area of lexicology, the linguistic domain which most closely reflects cultural identity, and dictionaries have been compiled of the distinctive lexicons encountered in these regions.

It does not take long before these lexicons reach many thousands of words. When a country adopts a language as a local alternative means of communication, it immediately starts adapting it, to meet the communicative needs of the region. Words for local plants and animals, food and drink, customs and practices, politics and religion, sports and games, and many other facets of everyday life soon accumulate a local wordstock which is unknown outside the country and its environs. When someone in South Africa says, 'The bakkie had to stop at a red robot', we need to know that a *bakkie* is a truck and a *robot* is a traffic-light. There are thousands of such words in Jean and William Branford's *Dictionary of South African English*. And other parts of the English-speaking world display the same kind of creativity, as English becomes a local alternative language.

When a group of people in a country (such as students, teachers, or businessmen) switch into English, for whatever reason, the subject-matter of their conversation inevitably incorporates aspects of their local environment. They talk about the local shops, streets, suburbs, bus-routes, institutions, businesses, television programmes, newspapers, political parties, minority groups, and a great deal more. They make jokes, quote proverbs, bring up childhood linguistic memories (such as nursery rhymes), and recall lyrics of popular songs. All this local knowledge is taken for granted, and used in sentences without gloss. Visitors who hear such sentences, or read them in local newspapers, need to have them explained. Conventional dictionaries will not help, for they do not include such localisms, especially if the expressions are encyclopaedic in character (referring to local people, places, institutions, and suchlike).

Every English-speaking location in the world has similar usages which make the English used there distinctive, expressive of local identity, and

a means of creating solidarity. From this point of view, notions such as ‘Spanish English’ take on a fresh relevance, going well beyond traditional conceptions of English spoken with a Spanish accent, or English displaying interference from Spanish. Spanish English I define as the kind of English I need to know when I go to a Spanish-speaking country, otherwise I will be unable to converse efficiently with local speakers in English. It would be amazingly useful to have a glossary of the English equivalents of Spanish cultural references in Spain, Colombia, Mexico, and so on, but I know of none.

It takes a while for Spanish speakers to realise that there is a problem. People readily sense when someone’s *linguistic* knowledge is imperfect, and may go out of their way to accommodate to the foreigner by speaking more slowly or by simplifying sentences. But they are not so good at *cultural* accommodation. There is too ready an assumption that foreigners will know what they are talking about. People always tend to overestimate the cultural knowledge of their non-native listeners and readers, whatever the language and whatever the setting. Because the words and phrases are so familiar and routine, people are usually not aware that they are using something which foreigners will not understand. They take things for granted.

For the most part, this behaviour has no serious conversational consequence. If someone says in passing that they did some shopping in a certain part of town (e.g. ‘I took the bus into Islington this morning and bought this bag’), and I have no idea where that is, it would be conversationally absurd to interrupt the narrative to enquire exactly where Islington is, given that the speaker’s intention is to focus on the bag. The location is of no consequence, and the speaker might have omitted this information without conversational loss. But it would be very

different if the sentence had been, ‘People don’t go into X [part of town] in the evenings, as a rule; it can be a bit risky’. If you have no idea where X is, then it would pay you to find out.

Occasionally, writers make the effort to explain local allusions. The writer of a short story about a Colombian carnival, Marcelino Torrecilla, took the trouble to explain several of the unfamiliar words. Here is the opening few lines of his story ‘An Endless Carnival’, 2009:

“Showers of cornstarch thrown by revellers flew in a warm wind of a Barranquilla carnival night while Anibal’s music was heard in the distance. The party goers laughed at each other’s powdered faces and drank greedily in anticipation of a night of partying and joy.

Just on a night like this a year ago, despite his age and against his doctor’s and father Domingo’s advice, Mingo was wildly dancing a rasca rasca in a dim corner of a verbena on a carnival Saturday.”

Footnotes explain where Barranquilla is (a city on Colombia’s Caribbean coast) and who Anibal is (a popular carnival singer). We are also told that *Mingo* is a short form of *Domingo*, that *rasca rasca* is an onomatopoeic sound produced by a guacharaca (a scraping musical instrument played in accordion songs, to which couples dance fast and close), and a *verbena* is a popular carnival location where people dance and drink.

But do these explanations go far enough, from a cultural point of view? Some uncertainties remain. For readers unfamiliar with U.S. English, you would also need to know that this is the name of what British English would call *cornflour*. You might wonder why it is being thrown? And is it the cause of the powdered faces, or are they separately powdered? Not all readers will know what a *carnival* is, and even if they know the dictionary definition of the word,

they may not know the cultural significance of it in a particular country, any more than Western Christians might not know the cultural significance of various Jewish or Islamic feasts. And is there any significance in the phrase *carnival Saturday*? Indeed there is, for Saturday is the beginning of the carnival period, which ends on Ash Wednesday, and is known for its outburst of musical energy, with all party-goers fresh and looking forward to the next few days.

As English spreads around the world, and achieves unprecedented levels of fluency in local situations, interpretive issues of this kind are steadily growing. The cultural background of the mother-tongue English-speaking nations is often handled by incorporating the cultural information into the practice texts in teaching books. An exercise on past tenses, shall we say, may be illustrated by a shopping visit to Oxford Street in London, and the reader will then unconsciously pick up the relevant associations for that name. But this is fortuitous. It isn't a systematic guide. The cultural information has not been evaluated

in its own terms or graded in any way. The solution requires something more ambitious.

Before we can grade and evaluate we need descriptions, and that means, in the first instance, the integration of linguistic and cultural studies, and the production of regional cultural dictionaries or glossaries. It is something every region can do, and something to which everyone who learns English can contribute. When such projects are written down, in the style of a glossary, it has an interesting effect upon the participants. They feel they have somehow made the English language their own. I suspect such projects also add greatly to their linguistic confidence and self-esteem, for no-one else in the world knows their home-grown variety of English as well as they do. And they can take pride in the fact that they have added their own small piece to the global jigsaw-puzzle that comprises the English language. And everything I have said about diversity in English applies equally to any internationally used language, and especially Spanish — second only to English in its international reach.