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The Lingua Franca to Rule Them All: English as the Language of Globalization

Introduction

Throughout the 11th to 19th centuries, a mixed language known as *sabir* was spoken throughout the Mediterranean Basin. Curiously, perhaps especially so for the feudal period in which it was spoken, it did not belong to any people-group, nor social class, but was rather an unguided amalgam of various local languages – Venetian, Genoese, Catalan, Turkish, Arabic, and so on – blended together into a simplified form for ease of trade. *Sabir*, much like its surrounding environment, lacked any sort of centralized governance; it serviced a wide variety of social, economic and linguistic needs, and was spoken by just about every kind of person who might have found themselves in the middle of the Mediterranean, voluntarily or not.

Crucially, *sabir* – also known as the Mediterranean Lingua Franca – evolved naturally out of an economic need to communicate. It was not planned, nor creatively designed; rather, it coalesced out of a pluralistic ecosystem of trade in which no one language or culture was predominant. In and of itself, *sabir* was a linguistic reflection of an increasingly multidirectional Mediterranean throughout the period in which it was spoken. It has since lended its *lingua franca* label to a number of languages serving similar purposes, some with far larger scopes: Sogdian (across the Silk Road, especially around the 7th century); Classical Quechua (throughout the Inca Empire, dominant in the 15th century); Classical Chinese (throughout much of East Asia, into

the 20th century); and now, on a global scale, English, the most widely spoken language on the planet.[1]

English, unlike the Mediterranean *sabir*, is not so impartial: its ascendance to become the dominant language of global trade is a story inextricably intertwined with its role in the colonial empires of the United Kingdom and the United States. Nevertheless, English, too, has divorced itself from any one nation to become a pluricentric, multidirectionally evolving driver of cultural, political, economic, and linguistic globalization. In fact, I will argue throughout the course of this essay that English is not just one among many, but *the* language of globalization, in that its use and form are both attached to the increasing liquidity of the global economic system to an as-of-yet unparalleled degree among world languages. This is reflected in the scale and scope of English – that is, the sheer number and variety of people and institutions for whom English is the primary language; as well as the malleable form of the language itself, which has become increasingly international and accessible in response to fluctuations in the concentration of economic power.

The ascendance of English

Around two billion people spoke English to some degree at the onset of the 21st century, compromising a fourth of the entire world population.[2] English is the official language of 58 sovereign states, 28 territories, and a vast array of international institutions, many of which have nothing in particular to do with the English-speaking world.[3] The next most widely spoken language in the world, Mandarin Chinese, also boasts more than a billion speakers, but its common and institutional use is far more restricted to East Asia, and the vast majority of its users

[1] "Languages - 2021 World Factbook Archive."
[2] Crystal, "Two Thousand Million?"
[3] "Languages - 2021 World Factbook Archive."

are those for whom Mandarin is their first language, much unlike English;[4] conversely, French is the official language of a not-unimpressive 29 countries, second after English, but has less than a third of its speakers.[5] The predominance of the English language on such a global scale is wholly unprecedented.

English's present status is primarily a product of the political history of the 20th century, particularly the aftermath of World War II and the subsequent rise of the United States to global hegemony. Many of the countries in which English has official status are former colonies of the United Kingdom, and it can thereby be said that British imperialism of the 18th and 19th centuries "set the stage" for the modern dominance of English; however, the language's enduring place in intergovernmental institutions is largely tied to its central role in "the West" – that is to say, the United States, Canada, and (particularly Western) Europe. The Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods system, both spearheaded by the United States, spurred a great degree of economic integration between North America and Europe, and with it followed political, cultural, and linguistic integration. These programs centered the United States as an anchor of postwar economic stability, putting the war-ravaged nations of Western Europe in a fiscally subservient position, and subsequently incentivizing the export of American culture, with Hollywood movies, Levi's denim, and rock 'n' roll all finding a substantial audience in Europe.[6]

Perhaps the most crucial export of all, however, was English. The soft power of the United States and United Kingdom secured the place of those countries' national language in the nascent United Nations and European Union post-World War II, shaping English into an "equalizer" in Europe that has persisted even after the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from

[4] "Chinese, Mandarin."
[5] "French Language | Origin, History, Grammar, & Speakers | Britannica."
[6] "The Marshall Plan" in Austria / Editors, Günter Bischof, Anton Pelinka, Dieter Stiefel. - Vanderbilt University."

the European Union in 2020.[7] Today, English is the most widely spoken second language in 19 out of 25 E.U. countries, and though working knowledge of the language varies across the continent, its administrative position and lack of centralized governance have led to the development of a "supra-dialect" particular to continental Europe, termed "Euro-English," spoken among E.U. staff and international students alike.[8] (This has occurred in tandem with the rise of English as a global lingua franca and the ascendance of a new "Lingua Franca English" (LFE), the implications of which will be discussed later in this paper.)

English is *the* language of globalization, then, in that it is, from a quantitative standpoint, the most global language. It has attached itself to the ebb and flow of British and American economic and cultural hegemony just as the imperial histories of those states have shaped the global system, to some extent, into its present form. This label can also be ascribed to English in that, just like globalization as a whole, the scale and speed with which it has been diffused is without historical precedent, yet mirrors and builds upon global hierarchies and flows of power that existed for millennia.

The language of neoliberalism

The rise of English as the dominant language of the "Western world" post-World War II, and the enduring position of the Western world as an anchor of economic and military power even (nominally) post-decolonization, have spurred the ascendance of English as a not only European, but in fact *global* lingua franca. This sociolinguistic history has paralleled the imposition of neoliberal economics on the world system, and particularly *upon* "developing"

[7] Modiano, "English in a Post-Brexit European Union."
[8] "Europeans and Their Languages - Publications Office of the EU."

countries, by the countries of the West – a connection which makes the English language and the ongoing process of economic globalization inseparable.

To contextualize my assessment of English in this sense, I will be working with the definition of globalization posed by George Ritzer and Paul Dean in their book, *Globalization: The Essentials*:

> Globalization is a planetary process or set of processes involving increasing *liquidity* and the growing multidirectional *flows* of people, objects, places and information as well as the structures they encounter and create that are *barriers* to, or *expedite*, those flows.[9]

Paramount to this understanding of globalization is its *omnipresence* (also referred to as *globality*), and the entailing imposition of the process on the entire planet. Economically, this has been propelled in part by the aforementioned Bretton Woods system as well as the "structural adjustment" measures pushed forth by international organizations like the World Bank and IMF starting from around the 1980s and into today. Both of these institutions have served to impose neoliberal economic theory, particularly in terms of deregulation and free trade, onto the nations of the "developing world," under threat of partial or total exclusion from the global economic system and towards the continued benefit of the already "developed" countries within which these processes were first put in place.

Culturally, this process of neoliberal globalization leads to what Ritzer and Dean define as *deterritorialization*: "the declining significance of the geographic location in which culture exists."[10] It is here where the parallels between the diffusion of neoliberalism and that of the English language into the global system are perhaps most evident. On a genealogical level, English is, indeed, the language of England, for that is where its disparate forms coalesced into a unified Old English and evolved into the modern product spoken across the world today. On a

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[9] Ritzer and Dean, *Globalization: The Essentials,* 2.
[10] Ritzer and Dean, *Globalization: The Essentials,* 50.

historical level, it can be said that English is the language of the United Kingdom, the United States, and, generally, the entire Anglosphere, in that it is the language spoken by the majority of the inhabitants of those countries and the scope of its use today was largely initiated by its dominant administrative role within those first two empires listed. In these terms, it could be argued that English is, in some sense, inherently "British" or "American" – or, at least, that it used to be.

Today, however, English has become increasingly deterritorialized into a language learned by billions of people not out of any particular connection or interest in the Anglosphere but rather because of the economic conditions *imposed* by those countries on the rest of the world which have incentivized the learning of English as a stepping stone into integration within the global economy – and, just as with economic integration, the stakes are high. In India, for example, hourly wages are 34% higher for men who speak fluent English and 13% higher for men who speak at least some English compared to those who speak no English.[11] In addition, the majority (55%) of websites on the Internet are in English; the next most popular language in this context is Spanish, representing only 5% of websites.[12] A person's decision to learn English is comparable on an individual level to the decision of a state to integrate into the global economy, in the sense that the decision is rarely one made entirely by one's own volition. The imposition of neoliberalism and that of English are not only comparable; they are deeply intertwined.

Lingua Franca English

Due to the unprecedented scale and diffusion of its use, English has fundamentally changed in a number of ways and to an extent that both sets it apart from other lingua francas

[11] Azam, Chin, and Prakash, "The Returns to English-Language Skills in India."
[12] Streger, "What Are the Most Used Languages on the Internet?"

and emphasizes its attachment to transnational processes of economic globalization. Over the course of the past few decades, a variety of national and subnational forms of English as well as influences from a vast array of substrate languages have coalesced into a pluricentric variety known, aptly, as Lingua Franca English (LFE). LFE is characterized by a number of phonological and grammatical innovations to increase intelligibility and better serve the linguistic needs of second-language English speakers with distinct first-language backgrounds.

For context, English is not quite as accessible as its popularity might make it seem. At a phonological level – that is to say, in terms of individual sounds – English is hardly apt for international use. The vast majority of languages distinguish 6 or less unique vowel sounds; English, however, typically distinguishes around 12, the particularities of which fluctuate greatly between dialects.[13] Similarly, English's "phonotactics" – in other words, the rules governing which sequences of consonants and vowels are allowed within a given syllable, and in what order – are unusually permissive (as in words like "*strengths*," "*sixths*," and "*twelfths*," for example), and in this sense are prohibitively difficult for many, if not most, second-language learners.[14] This is not to say that English is *uniquely* difficult – every language has its quirks – but the baseline level of effort required for first-language speakers of most languages to attain an intelligible pronunciation of English is indeed particularly high.

This has hardly stopped people from learning English, of course, and just as a river might over time erode a particularly rocky stretch of rapids, the quantity and diversity of people speaking English today has simplified the phonology of LFE towards a greater degree of accessibility. Across the globe and irrespective of the first language backgrounds of the places in which it is spoken, a number of shared phonological innovations have arisen in LFE, including

[13] Maddieson, "Vowel Quality Inventories (V2020.3)."
[14] Brinton, *The Linguistic Structure of Modern English*., 52.

the simplification of some contrasting vowels, the *epenthesis* (interconsonantal insertion) of lax vowels within problematic consonant clusters, and the erasure of distinctions between particularly tricky (i.e. cross-linguistically rare) sounds ("*tread*" and "*thread*" being simplified into homophones, for example).[15]

This same process has continued into the grammar of LFE, which maintains a greater emphasis on invariance, explicitness, imbued redundancy, and gender neutrality than "standard" English – all of which, once again, serve to maximize accessibility. Specific examples of these processes include the deletion of definite articles such as "*the*" (its use in English is, under scrutiny, prohibitively abstract and arbitrary); adding clarifying words to common expressions, such as "*how long (a) time*" rather than "*how long*;" and the regular use of singular *they* (many LFE speakers' first languages have no gendered distinction between third-person pronouns, a notable example being Mandarin Chinese).[16] These changes, and the increasing consistency of their use, suggest a broader shift towards greater "universality" in the English spoken by the majority of its speakers – that is to say, those who have learned it as a second language.

It should be noted that a language structurally simplifying in response to the broadening of its speaker community is hardly revolutionary, nor at all specific to English. What is unique about this case – and what ties these linguistic evolutions of English to the broader process of globalization – are the substantial extent to which these changes have been diffused as well as their economic consequences. To clarify, LFE, like Euro-English, is a "supra-dialect" – it refers to a set of pluricentric patterns common to the Englishes spoken by second-language speakers around the world that share a significant number of features. One among many of those pluricentric standards is Chinese English, which we might refer to as a "dialect" of LFE. The

[15] Sewell, "Pronunciation Assessment in Asia's World City."
[16] Cogo and Dewey, "Efficiency in ELF Communication."

languages of China have no genealogical relation to English, and they support rigorous linguistic communities entirely of their own; and yet, English has become so globally diffused and denationalized that the variety of it adapted by second-language speakers in China has become globally influential in its own right, especially in the world of business. Many of the phonological and grammatical innovations listed above began in China and diffused outwards into the rest of the English-learning world, speaking in equal part to China's soft power and the increasing (perceived) "universality" of English.[17] This represents one facet of China's integration into the global economy over the past few decades, and, more broadly, the role of English as a deterritorialized tool of economic globalization.

English and global society

English is certainly the global lingua franca, but it is far from *the* lingua franca, in that it coexists and often competes (and not always successfully!) with a number of regionalized and specialized facilitative languages around the world. These include Spanish in Latin America; Russian in the former Soviet Union; Swahili in East Africa; Arabic in North Africa and the Middle East; and, in some cases, English-based creole languages, such as Nigerian Pidgin, with about 5 million first-language speakers and 116 million second-language speakers in West Africa.[18] Though the acquisition of English is near-globally understood as a gateway to economic opportunity, it is rare that it is the most practical option available for mutual intelligibility among different groups of people, especially when those groups already possess some sort of shared linguistic history.

[17] Wang and Wei, "Chinese English in as Lingua Franca in Global Business Setting."
[18] "Pidgin, Nigerian."

In addition to these "second-tier" lingua francas, there exists a wide variety of smaller unifying languages, interacting with their larger counterparts (and English, their largest) at different levels of prestige. One example of particular interest is that of the Nagamese language, spoken by around two million people in the linguistically diverse northeastern Indian state of Nagaland. Like *sabir*, Nagamese is a mixed language, derived primarily from Assamese (spoken in nearby Assam) but incorporating elements from many other local languages. Curiously, though it is spoken to some extent by virtually every resident of Nagaland and is the medium of mass media and education, it has no official status within the state – that position is held by English, which, despite being spoken by a minute percentage of Nagaland's population, enjoys great social prestige, and is seen as the "key to occupational success."[19]

The primary obstacle to the diffusion of English in Nagaland is its difficulty; compared to Nagamese, which has undergone a grammatical and morphological simplification characteristic of creole languages, English is a mess of irregular verbs, unpredictable sound correspondences, and unfamiliar etymologies. Correspondingly, whereas English is regarded as the language of highest status and ultimate vehicle of economic mobility, Nagamese is the language of social identity – it is seen as familiar, quotidian, humorous, and comfortable.[20] Just as with other facets of globalization, the dispersion and diffusion of English is hardly linear or equal, and reacts with the unique environments and circumstances in which it finds itself in a variety of complex ways.

Similarly, just as there has been widespread resistance to globalization as a whole, so too has there been resistance to the spread of English and its economic and cultural implications – and as with English's connection to neoliberalism, the two often go hand in hand. The fact that English is today the dominant language across the majority of the United States, spanning what

[19] Burling, "The Lingua Franca Cycle."
[20] Burling.

was once once one of the most linguistically diverse places on Earth, parallels the broader process of "homogenization" that is inherent to, and frequently criticized about, globalization. Furthermore, the fact that residents of San Diego, Anchorage, and Boston can all communicate effortlessly is, on a surface level, convenient – but that they can do so at all is indicative of a profoundly traumatic history of linguistic erasure and sublevation that has displaced traditional systems of knowledge and communication, just as mono-crop farming and chain restaurants have, for the sake of convenience, displaced diverse, sustainable, and location-specific agricultural practices.

Indeed, the English language is thoroughly wrapped up in the history of colonization – across both the British and American empires, English has been represented by imperial administrators as a tool by which non-English-speaking "barbarians" might elevate themselves "towards civilization."[21] To this end, there has been a substantial amount of resistance within Indigenous communities in the Anglosphere towards the acquisition of English – expressed in an outright refusal to learn English, withdrawal from English-language schooling, or the coining of native-language words to express concepts typically represented with English loanwords.[22] Even within the imperial "core" within which English is dominant, it faces resistance in its adoption from those who see it as a threat to their own national identities – as is the case with many processes of globalization. For example, the *Académie française*, the governing body of the French language (English, notably, lacks an equivalent), recently officially denounced the rise of English words in public life.[23] English is *the* language of globalization in that resistance to it and what it represents is an inseparable component of a large-scale, multifaceted, defensive, and ungeneralizable resistance against globalization as a whole.

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[21] Iseke-Barnes, "Politics and Power of Languages."
[22] Iseke-Barnes.
[23] AFP, "Académie Française Denounces Rise of English Words in Public Life."

Conclusion

In the midst of the economic, political, and broader social elements of globalization, it is easy to overlook the linguistic. The English language exists at the intersection of a complicated (and ongoing) history of empire and an increasingly deterritorialized mechanism of economic mobility, and despite how it might initially seem, it is crucial to note that these descriptors are not mutually exclusive. The fact that the English language, with its prohibitive structural idiosyncrasies and political implications, has taken on the mantle of "impartial" internationality is reflective of the complex nature of globalization as a whole, and the unequal balances of power at its core.

English has been integrated into nearly every layer of the global system to some degree. It is the keystone medium of many an international institution, touted for its supposed universality; it is the language of global business, as represented by LFE; it is a cultural phenomenon, with many of its terms and quirks having been subsumed into local languages all over the world as markers of social prestige; and it has encountered a substantial amount of resistance, for all that it represents. The implications of its use are at once economic, political, social, and cultural, and far transcend its linguistic limitations in terms of phonemes and grammar. It has evolved into something that no other language in history has ever been.

It is for this reason that English is *the* language of globalization. The scale at which it has been diffused and the extent to which it has become intertwined with the increasing liquidity of the global economic system as a whole are unmatched among the world's languages. The fact that English, in particular, has achieved this position is a product of politics, but the innovations that have continued to occur within it on a global scale suggest that whatever language takes its place next may well be just as malleable, no matter how rigid it might seem.

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