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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that the World War II settlements, the birth of the United Nations, the invention of the computer, and the geometric growth of science and technology, all occurring accidentally at the same time, created the conditions which made English an important language. The paper notes the financial incentives in servicing international students studying English, both in English-speaking countries and in other countries, including producing materials such as grammars, dictionaries, audio tapes, computer disk programs, etc. The paper next offers historical background about the contraction of the British Empire. It discusses the special status of English in the European Union and in science and technology, pointing out that because of the broad, global distribution of English, and because it has been taught in many places, English is no longer the sole property of English speakers; different varieties of native English now exist. According to the paper, a "standard" language constitutes a purely ideological construct. The paper states that language planning efforts, including global dissemination of English, reflect Western cultural views, known as the "plumbing" conception of language (the translation of messages into speech signals), which needs a standard optimally regular code to assure there are optimal channels along which the signals can flow. Next, the paper considers the extinction of some languages, what global English does to other countries, and how the Council of Europe is quietly moving toward multilingualism, concluding that the reasons for the global teaching of English should be carefully examined. (Contains 24 references.) (NKA)

Why Teach the World English?*

CCCC Conference, Chicago

3 April 1998

b y

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Emeritus Professor, Applied Linguistics

And who in time knows wither we may vent
The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores
This gain of our best glory shall be sent.
To enrich unknowing nations without store?
Which worlds in the yet unformed Occident
May come refined with the accents that are ours.

Introduction:

In 1996, the U. S. Agricultural Sector was a key contributor to international trade; it contributed something on the order of $60 billion in exports, largely in the form of red meat, poultry, fruits, vegetables, snack foods, and bulk grains (Klintberg 1997). In the current budget year, the federal government is spending about $1 billion on international education. In the same year, nearly half a million international students studying largely in the tertiary sector in the United States contributed something like $7.5 billion to the U. S. economy and supported something like 100,000 jobs (Levinson and McCarthy 1998); in other words, international students account for about one tenth of the value of agricultural exports. That's a lot of money.

EFL and the Balance of Trade:

Unfortunately, no calculation has ever been attempted to estimate the additional contribution to the U.S. balance of trade that derives from teaching English abroad. There are literally thousands of U. S. citizens--mostly young--teaching English to speakers of most of the world's other languages. Some of these teachers are college-age youngsters, equipped with back packs and a yen for foreign travel, who constitute a cadre of itinerant teachers in virtually every large city around the world. They really shouldn't be out there because they often don't know what they're on about, but they have the virtues of being native-speakers of English and of being available on site, thus inexpensive. They serve to answer part of the world-wide demand for English;

for example, in such places as Eastern Europe and Asia. Their incompetence is supplemented and modified by the Peace Corps and by a very large number of teachers in programs developed and maintained by the U. S. Agency for International Development [**AID**] and the U. S. Information Agency [**USIA**, in other countries **USIS**], by a smaller consort of Fulbright scholars, and by the hundreds of additional teachers in programs mounted overseas by U. S. academic institutions and other organizations.

The English-language teaching market is not the exclusive preserve of the U. S. All the other members of the English-speaking world--Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom--are out there too. All of these English speaking nations have competed through their agencies for international development--e. g., Britain's Overseas Development Administration [**ODA**], the British Council, the Australian Overseas Service Bureau [**OSB**], the Australian Agency for International Development [**AusAID**], the Canadian International Development Agency [**CIDA**]) and even some agencies of nations where English is not the first language (e. g., the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency [**SIDA**])--by investing to varying degrees in development projects in less developed nations around the world; such development initiatives almost always carrying a component in teaching English as a foreign language. (See, e. g., Ablin, D. 1991, Crooks & Crewes 1995, Kaplan In Press; 1997, Kenny & Savage 1997). Finally, the tertiary academic institutions in the English-speaking nations are also recruiting international students and mounting programs in conjunction with academic institutions and other agencies in the third world.

This cohort of teachers, of course, requires materials, and the publishing industry is happy to comply with a plethora of dictionaries, grammars, spellers, course books, readers, audio tapes, computer disk programs, and a multitude of other resources. Often, in this modern age, those other resources require electronic equipment, and again manufacturers of such equipment are happy to comply by providing tape recorders, 35mm. cameras, slide projectors, copying machines, video cameras, videotape players, overhead projectors, CD-ROM players. entire language laboratories and, in some instances, even entire computer laboratories equipped to access e-mail and the world wide web. In sum, all of this activity generates money, and the teaching of English around the world has become big business. Except for the

obvious fact that all this activity generates a lot of money, it would seem important to ask why it exists.

The quotation with which I began seems to constitute the underlying rationale for the teaching of English world-wide. This thought was expressed by Samuel Daniel in his poem, *Musophitis,* in 1599. Not much has changed in the thinking of English speakers over the past four hundred years.

An Historical Note:

Before I undertake to address the question why all this activity exists, let me first set the scene. Foreign languages have, of course been taught for as long as there are any records of human societies; Jean Auel, in her yet to be completed four-part series collectively called *Earth's children*, provides a fanciful notion of multilingualism among the earliest humans. The Greeks taught Greek to the people they conquered, and the Romans taught Latin. During the great expansion of Islam, Arabic was carried to the furthest corners of the known world. In more recent times, Europeans taught French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian throughout the European world and even further afield in their spheres of colonial activity in Africa, Asia, and South and Central America . English has now been taught to populations of speakers of other languages for quite a long time--probably since the British Empire was at its greatest expansion. While English (and other languages) have been taught in many places, they have not always been taught from the best possible motivation. It was necessary for the British to teach English throughout their wide-spread empire because they needed people in distant places to speak English so that soldiers could understand their British officers and so that a civil service could be developed to maintain civil order under the leadership of British administrators. Indeed, "...[i]t was considered self-evident that the civilizing influence of Britain was a desirable goal, anywhere in the world, and that the English language was an essential means of achieving this end..." (Crystal 1997b: 70).

An interesting point is that, as the British Empire contracted, the teaching of English did not. A set of curious accidents that occurred in the middle of this century caused English to thrive. When W.W.II ended, the United States, generally claimed to be an English-speaking country, was the only major Western power whose educational and scientific infrastructure remained completely in tact. The United States participated, with it allies, in dictating the conditions under which the post-war world would be organized.

The United Nations, created in the aftermath of the war, chose only four official languages--Chinese, English, French, and Russian--the languages of the first four members of the Security Council--the W. W. II allies.

The creation of the United Nations accidentally coincided with the birth of the computer age. The first computer programs were written in English-like languages (e. g., Basic, FORTRAN) and their output was also English, or English-like. Gradually, because so much scientific material had been written in German, the German language has been added to the list as a supplementary language. At the same time, the earliest computers could not deal with Chinese characters, and consequently very little was stored in standard written Chinese. By the mid-1970s, the languages of the United Nations were Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish--and German is also widely used. But the advent of the cold war resulted in heavy political restrictions on the use of Russian--imposed by both sides; i. e., the reluctance of the Soviet Union to share scientific information and the equal reluctance (and inability) of the western states to access material written in Russian.

The Special Status of English in Europe:

More recently, when Britain and Ireland were admitted (1973) into the European Union [EU] (so called since 1993, formerly the European Community [EC--1967 - 1993], and before that the European Economic Community [EEC--1957 - 1967]), English became one of the nine official languages of the EU (Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish). Against the complex linguistic, cultural, and political background, English has developed a special status within the EU. According to Ammon (1996):

- English is the most widely taught language in the member countries of the EU;
- There has been a clear shift toward using more English in business-oriented communication among the political bodies of the EU and in the economic domain within EU countries;
- English has constantly made gains as a language of science over the past fifty years;
- English is the sole working language of the European Science Foundation (which coordinates research projects not only in EU countries);
- The leading European scientific journals now tend to prefer English as their language of publication;

•English and French are the sole "official" languages of the European Council, while the other languages are designated "working" languages.

The Special Status of English in Science and Technology:

Another accident which occurred in this same time period was the explosion of scientific and technical research. While modern science was a child of the first industrial revolution, the heavy dependence on science and technology during the war years resulted in a great growth in scientific activity. The United States, by virtue of the fact that its scientific infrastructure was undamaged by the war, assumed leadership in science and technology. It is an established fact that progress in science depends on the accumulation of a written record of all previous science; that is, science requires great information storage and retrieval systems. The invention of the computer made those information storage and retrieval systems geometrically larger and more accessible. It is also a fact that those who do the greatest amount of research require the greatest amount of information from those information networks and, consequently, those who do the greatest amount of research also contribute the largest amount of new information to those networks. Since much of the science and technology research in the 1950s and 1960s was conducted in English, most of the information in the great information storage networks was written in English. The International Federation on Documentation (FID), a world body which keeps track of information distribution, reports that nearly 85% of all the scientific and technological information in the world today is written and/or abstracted in English. (Indeed, FID urges that articles written in other languages be accompanied by an abstract in English, German, or Russian.) Scientific and technological journals in countries like Sweden and Hungary publish more material in English than they do in their national languages (Baldauf and Jernudd 1983, 1987; Medgyes and Kaplan 1992).

Thus the W.W. II settlements and the birth of the United Nations, the invention of the computer, and the geometric growth of science and technology, all occurring accidentally at the same time, created the conditions which made English an important language. At the moment, more people in the world speak English as a first or second language than spoke any other single language in the history of the world (Crystal 1997a, b) (except written Chinese--spoken Chinese is made up of nine mutually unintelligible spoken regionolects--see Harrell 1993). As a result of all these factors, the teaching of

English to speakers of other languages has become a huge industry. However, because of the broad, global distribution of English, and because it has been, and is being, taught in so many places, English is no longer the property of English speakers. Many new varieties of English have developed--for example, Indian English, Nigerian English, Philippine English (ESL varieties), Japanese English, Hong Kong English (EFL varieties), and so on. These Englishes are not exactly like British or American English; each one is unique. The growth of other Englishes is assured because in many countries English is frequently taught to children by individuals who are not themselves native speakers of English and who may not have had extensive exposure to native English speakers. In polities like India, Nigeria, Samoa, and Singapore, there are many native speakers of their national varieties--i. e., the local variety of English is their first language. The individuals may also be able to speak an international variety of English (e. g., American or British English) as well.

The Notion of a Standard:

This dispersion and diversity kicks in the head the notion that there is a standard variety of English--or of any other language for that matter. A 'standard' language results, generally, from a complex set of historical processes intended precisely to produce standardization; indeed, a 'standard' language may be defined as a set of discursive, cultural, and historical practices--a set of widely accepted communal solutions to discourse problems. Additionally, a 'standard' language is a potent symbol of national unity. If this definition of a 'standard' language may be assumed to be viable, then the 'standard' language is really no one's 'first' language. On the contrary, the 'standard' language must be acquired through individual participation in the norms of usage, and these norms are commonly inculcated through the education sector (with the powerful assistance of canonical literatures and the electronic media). But the reality of most linguistic communities is marked by the normative use of a wide range of varieties in day to day communication--i. e., the use of slang, of jargon, of non-standard forms, of special codes, even of different languages (as in code-switching). Consequently, a 'standard' language constitutes a purely ideological construct. The existence of such a construct creates an impression that linguistic unity exists, when reality reflects linguistic diversity. The notion of the existence and dispersion of a 'standard' variety through a community suggests that linguistic unity is the

societal norm; it also suggests a level of socioeconomic and sociopolitical unity which may be contrary to the reality of linguistic diversity. The legal obligation to use a codified standard is likely to cause frustration among minority-language speakers, since the standardized language is for them a non-dominant variety (see the case of Slovakia--Kaplan and Baldauf In press); minority-language speakers probably use a contact variety, likely to be at considerable variance from the 'standard' variety. If this is true within a linguistic community, the variation must be much greater across linguistic communities.

As Mülhäusler suggests (1996: 207-208), language planning efforts, including the world-wide dissemination of English, reflect the cultural views of the West. This view, known as the "plumbing' or 'conduit' or 'telegraphic' conception of communication as the translation of messages which exist in the sender's mind into speech signals (coded in linguistic form) which are converted back into the original message by the receiver. Thus, there is a need to identify a single, 'standard' code to assure that this single code is optimally regular, simple, and modern, and to assure that there are optimal channels (postal services, road networks, telegraphs, newspapers, television, etc.) along which the signal can flow. The problem is that this metaphor is not a reliable description of how human beings communicate. Because English encompasses the metalanguage associated with this metaphor, it is it own worst enemy. (See also Mülhäusler, Tryon, Worm 1997.)

On the Death of Languages:

While there is no question that a number of new varieties of English have come into existence, a very large number of other--usually smaller--languages are threatened with extinction. Mülhäusler writes: "Of more than 6,000 languages currently spoken more than 95% are on the endangered list, and the overall rate of language extinction is far greater than that of any biological species" (1996: 206-207, see also Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991). And Crystal reinforces the point:

> No one knows how many languages have died since humans became able to speak, but it must be thousands. In many of these cases, the death has been caused by an ethnic group coming to be assimilated within a more dominant society, and adopting its language. The situation continues today, though the matter is being discussed with increasing urgency because of the unprecedented rate at which

> indigenous languages are being lost, especially in North America, Brazil, Australia, Indonesia, and parts of Africa. Some estimates suggest that perhaps 80 per cent of the world's 6,000 or so living languages will die out within the next century (1997b: 17).

Languages become extinct sometimes because of the decimation of the population of speakers (e. g., the instances of many Native American languages, Australian Aboriginal languages, etc.), sometimes as the result of a period of bilingualism during which a second language is adopted for an increasing number of purposes by a growing number of people (as in the case of Welsh, Irish, and Scottish). [For further discussion, see, e. g., Dorian 1989, Dorian in Bright, *et al.* 1992. 3: 135-136; Ingram in Bright, *et al.* 1992. 2: 303; Romaine in Bright, *et al.* 1992. 4: 21.]

Kaplan and Baldauf suggest that languages die for a number of complex reasons:

1. The introduction of a non-indigenous language that, for whatever reasons, takes over some--or all--social functions;
2. The disappearance, for whatever reasons, of the population speaking some particular language;
3. The forceful introduction of a non-indigenous language so that certain functions **must** be conducted in the imposed language (1997: 272-273).

In sum, other than in the case of the total destruction of a language community, languages die because:

1. Parents are reluctant or unable to pass on a language intergenerationally to their children;
2. The language ceases to serve key communicative functions in the community;
3. The community of speakers is not stable and/or expanding, but rather is unstable and/or contracting.

Where English has been introduced, either as a colonial language or as a commercial language, some or all of these conditions are often met (see, e. g., Phillipson 1992).

It would be unreasonable to assert that the introduction of English is exclusively responsible for wide-spread language death. A great many factors are involved, among them:

1. Population dislocation and redistribution as a result at least of war, revolution, religious persecution, economic development, or urbanization;
2. The spread of world languages other than English--e. g., Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish;
3. The development of supralinguistic functions--e. g., world-wide aviation, tourism, banking, etc.

At the same time, it would be equally unreasonable to claim that the huge English-language teaching activities of the English-speaking nations have played no role in language death. The role they have played is not well understood.

What Global English Does:

As English is introduced into communities where it has previously had no role (or only a very limited one), and as people perceive English-language ability to provide access to a better standard of living, English is replacing some registers normally reserved to indigenous languages--even some indigenous languages in total. While the register of sports is, perhaps, not particularly significant (though that point is arguable), sports register can serve as an apt illustration. Such phenomena as the introduction of baseball in Japan, of soccer and cricket in much of the former British Commonwealth, or--most recently--of American football in Europe have led to significant language and social change; other phenomena such as CNN news have pervaded the world wherever television is available and have brought with them language and social change. (Political leaders who want to make a point to a world-wide CNN audience know that it must be done in English.) Still other phenomena such as the multinational corporation, offering good jobs and high wages, have brought language with them and have resulted in significant language and culture change. As noted above, a factor in language loss is urbanization, and urbanization is frequently marked by the expanded use of English.

In these circumstances, it is not purely language which penetrates other cultures. Let us consider the case of baseball; it is not merely the game that has penetrated Japan. Rather, the whole panoply of activities connected with the game has also been adopted. The big game, the big star (and the accompanying "star" salary), the live broadcast, even the ubiquitous "beeru" and "hotu dogu" have become part of the Japanese environment.

I do not believe that there is some grand conspiracy among English-speakers to disseminate English world-wide; on the contrary, the spread of English is largely accidental, based in part of the quest for an allegedly better standard of living on the part of receiving populations, and in part on the unconscious press of English on other populations. People talk about the "dominance" of English in certain registers or in certain geographic zones, but the language does not have a will of its own to become dominant, and there is nothing in the natural characteristics of English or of English speakers which would make it inevitable that English should become THE world language. On the contrary, it is the actions of English-speakers which underlie the spread of English. Again, there is nothing insidious about the actions of English speakers; it is simply a matter of more-or-less benevolent self-interest. After all, English speakers have a distinct advantage in a world that has adopted English as its universal language.

One of the reasons for this advantage is that English is a pluricentric language, and its speakers have never (until very recently) tried to enforce a rigid single standard. Thus, there are American English, British English, Canadian English, Irish English, South African English, and West Indian English--just to name a few varieties. Each creates its own identity and ways of speaking. There are all accepted as English--unlike French, for example, whose speakers try to maintain a single world-wide standard. The fact that English varieties flourish, without being reduced to 'substandard' dialect status, with the only condition on them being that they maintain mutual intelligibility, is one of the underlying keys to the continued success of English as an international language (Baldauf 1998). For example, Iraqi Foreign Minister, Tarak Aziz, may not want to be perceived to be speaking either American or British English, but he does speak English and identifies with a number of other varieties or even with something increasingly recognized as 'international English.'

While the English speaking nations are pushing English world wide--perhaps in the direction of a uniform 'standard' language for universal communication--the Council of Europe is quietly moving toward multilingualism. As Baetens Beardsmore suggests:

> A general policy goal [of the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht] is to place the highest priority on educational mobility; the objective is to enhance the level of familiarity of as many European students as

> possible with other European cultures and languages as an element of quality in education. Language learning remains a top priority, and to this end, member states are encouraged to promote trilingualism; they are advised to make language qualifications desirable for entry into, and compulsory for exit from, higher education; and they are requested to give particular attention to the learning of minority languages (1994: 94).

Here one can see the playing out of two conflicting ideologies--on the one hand the acceptance of the fundamental value of multilingualism as an amazing world resource which allows different perspectives and insights and thus encourages reaching a more profound understanding of the nature of the human mind; on the other hand, the perceived fundamental value of a common language as an equally amazing world resource which allows unprecedented possibilities for international cooperation. Global use of English serves the latter position. But to the extent that global use of English contributes to the death of small languages, the price may be too high; it is my belief that the destruction of small languages is even more catastrophic than the destruction of biological species.

As Koch (1992: 42, cited in Norberg 1994: 156) has said about the destruction of Sorbian:

> I can only imagine the world with my ethnicity in place. Its disappearance signifies loss. Slowly but surely the impoverishment would be perceptible across the country's breadth. Perhaps even continentally and planetarily. One color less. Increase of grayness. One sound less, one language less. Increase of silence.

By the same token, being a native speaker of English, I share the false assumption that I can go anywhere in the world and get by with my English.

Conclusion:

I would not be so bold as to suggest that the global teaching of English should, as of this moment, cease. Rather, I am trying to suggest that the reasons for the global teaching of English should be carefully examined. If it turns out that the underlying purpose is to make the world more homogenous, I wonder whether the cost in time, money, and effort can be justified. If the underlying motivation for the wide dissemination of English is economic domination, the whole enterprise must be questioned. If the inadvertent effect is the destruction of languages and ethnicities in the interests of that

homogeneity, I wonder whether the effort can be justified at all. My message is NOT *Go forth and sin no more!* Rather, my message is *Sin if you must, but understand the consequences of your actions.* Remember, it is not the English language which achieves dominance; rather it is the actions of speakers of English which push English into an unfortunate dominance and it is English speakers and their culture which achieve dominance. It is that dominance which kills off other languages.

NOTES:

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