

The Globalization of English: Homogenization or Cultural Revivalism?

Leah Dobihal

Abstract

Globalization has changed our world as a whole. In some ways, it has improved our world, and in some ways it has deteriorated our variety and differentiation. Our world's array of languages has been vastly diminished by economic and cultural globalization, as the English language has moved from core countries to the semi-peripheral and peripheral countries. The technology that has been spread due to globalization has given some languages a chance for revival and transcription. However, the force that has developed English as the new universal language is far stronger than the chance for language revitalization. By allowing languages to be lost, we allow the world to lose entire cultures and distinct ways of thinking and communicating.

Keywords: English, language, revival, revitalization, globalization, universalization

Introduction

As globalization has spread and its forces have become more influential, the world as a whole has changed immensely. Our cultures have mixed, our economics have become interdependent, and our politics have become more interrelated than ever before. While some aspects of globalization have been positive, such as the improvement of worldwide human rights, globalization has also acted as a diminishing force in certain areas. Cultural and economic globalization has produced a world in which a few prominent languages have overtaken the less prominent ones. It is important to realize that it is the English language, the language of the core countries of the world, which is spreading, as opposed to a language native to any peripheral countries. The English language has spread from the prominent core countries, namely the United States and England, to the poorer and less established countries. The diversity of world languages has shrunk with the growing power of cultural and economic globalization. As Jan Blommaert, a professor of language and culture, writes, "Human language has changed in the age of globalization, no longer tied to stable and resident communities; it moves across the globe" (Blommaert, 2010). As English moves into new territories, it is adapted, and we see new forms of hybrid languages. This is positive in the sense that it helps quicken commerce and makes worldwide communication simpler, but there are negatives that arise as well. As English is adapted and becomes a universal language, less prominent languages are becoming endangered and extinct. While the technology that has spread as a result of globalization has provided a method for language revival, the universalization of English has decimated the variety of

languages we have today, and we may have in future years. As we lose languages forever, we lose the history of a culture as well as their distinct ways of thinking and communicating.

Globalization as a Diminishing Force

Globalization has connected the world in ways that were previously seen as impossible. Our economies are more interdependent, our communication is more meaningful and more frequent, and our cultures have blended due to the technology globalization has made possible around the world. As we have become a more connected world, English has risen as a “universal language,” with more power than we’ve ever seen before. Miroslav Cerny explains, “While some languages are on a steep advance, a large number of other languages are facing rapid endangerment, in many instances resulting in death” (Cerny, 2010). English is now the language of commerce across the world; it is the language of social media, movies, music, and advertisements. As English has grown stronger and more influential, it has played a part in the demise of other, less prominent languages.

Causes of Language Loss

The vanishing of languages did not start with the development of globalization. Throughout history, languages have been lost due to famine, war, and natural disasters, where whole cultures and communities were destroyed, their language dying with them. However, the rise of globalization has quickened and expanded this process. It is estimated that “of the world’s remaining 6,500 languages, up to half will no longer be in regular use by the end of this century”

(Turin, 2013). Instead of natural causes instigating language loss, the growing importance of and reliance on the English language causes the downfall of others through language shifts, migration, and contemporary popular culture.

English has become the dominant language in our world today. The Industrial Revolution began this trend toward English, as America and Great Britain were the main power forces. Colonization and the British Empire continued the movement toward English, and as America overtook England as the fastest growing economy by the end of the 19th century, English was further pushed toward becoming global language. Luke Mastin, author of the website “The History of English,” states, “The American dominance in economic and military power, as well as its overwhelming influence in the media and popular culture has ensured that English has remained the single most important language in the world and the closest thing to a global language the world has ever seen” (Mastin, 2011). Because English has grown to be a global force, indigenous and traditional languages have suffered.

Globalization has contributed to the new ways in which languages are lost. Today, it is not only war and natural disasters that destroy languages, but other causes have arisen as well. One cause assisted by globalization is language shift. Anthropologist and linguist Mark Turin writes, “[S]peakers live on but abandon their language in favor of another vernacular, a widespread process that linguists refer to as “language shift” from which few languages are immune” (Turin, 2013). Because more and more people are learning English, native and indigenous

languages are disregarded. So, as the last speaker of a language dies or makes this language shift, a language is lost forever.

While migration has been a part of the entirety of human history, globalization has certainly driven a vastly bigger movement of migration, another cause of language loss. The huge amounts of migration occurring today causes groups of language speakers to be scattered, making language preservation much more difficult. Turin writes, “[T]he dispersal of speech communities across the globe has led to the demise of some languages” (Turin, 2013). It is also valuable to keep in mind that many languages that do remain are completely oral, with no written form. Turin points out, “Orality is fragile and contributes to linguistic vulnerability” (Turin, 2013). This vulnerability has led to the endangerment of minor languages, and makes the language extremely difficult to protect. As the speakers of oral language disperse, it only makes the preservation process more difficult.

Economic Globalization

As stated above, the start of the universality of the English language started with the dominance of the British and American empires, successively. This trend has grown to remarkable proportions. Seth Mydans, in his article, “Across Cultures, English is the Word,” explains, “Riding the crest of globalization and technology, English dominates the world as no language ever has, and some linguists are now saying it may never be dethroned as the king of languages” (Mydans, 2007). The majority of economics are done in English today. It is the language of business and of commerce. Not only that, but technological and scientific output are

predominantly released in English. This gives people a reason for learning English over any other language. Of this, Munat writes, “It would seem that we have little choice but to own up to the reality and bite the bullet: those who wish to navigate in international waters must have at least a basic command of English” (Munat, 2011, 146). It is clear here that English is the language of our world economics today. This encourages more and more people to learn the language, further promoting it as the universal language. There are positive aspects to this spread of English, including the simplicity of worldwide communication and the quickening of world commerce, though negative aspects arise as well.

The growth of English as the economic language has put many people across the globe at a disadvantage. As the world became more integrated economically, it seemed that fluency in English was helpful, if not necessary, for commerce. This trend has continued through the years following the empires. As Anne Johnson states, “[English] is the language of globalization—of international business, politics and diplomacy” (Johnson, 2009, 154). This is to say, in order to compete and participate internationally, one must have sufficient English skills. This has put certain regions at a disadvantage. In his article, “Can Minority Languages Be Saved,” Eric Garland writes, “[A] common tongue has become more important than ever to promote commerce, and that puts speakers of regional dialects and minority languages at a distinct disadvantage” (Garland, Eric 2006). That is, speakers who are not fluent in English, which acts practically as our universal language, cannot communicate competently with other companies, industries, and countries to promote their own economy.

English has been able to take over the global economic scene because other languages have become less economically viable as English has grown as the primary language of business. Alexandra Méndez argues that the only way to make sure languages stay alive is to make sure they are economically worthwhile. She gives this example: "Portuguese dominates in Brazil because it is the language of commerce, and indigenous languages are not economically viable" (Méndez, 2013). We have seen in the growth of English that it has become the universal economically viable language, squashing others in the global arena.

Cultural Globalization

The globalization of culture through hybridization may be the single most important factor in the decline of languages. American popular culture has been spread as the world becomes more interconnected. This spread of culture has been tremendously supportive of English as a global language. "Popular English has invaded the entire world," says Munat. Words such as "Coca-Cola" and "McDonalds" are commonplace in even the most remote areas of the world. This demonstrates the power that Western culture, and thus English, has had around the world. Importantly, English has dominated in the realm of the Internet, which is used worldwide. The Internet contains countless methods for citizens of other cultures to become engulfed in the English language and Western culture. On the Internet users can download American movies, music, and television shows. The most popular social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are entirely in English. According to David Graddol, linguist and researcher, "Eighty percent of the world's electronically stored information is in English" (Mykants, 2007). The Internet is

clearly a vehicle for the English language, and is a powerful part of American culture. This American popular culture has not only spread the values and ideals of America, but the language of America as well. While the English language becomes more dominant across the globe, the minor languages become obsolete and then extinct altogether. The contemporary effects of both economic and cultural globalization have caused English to become a universal language, which has overpowered other languages and made them obsolete.

Globalization as Preserving Force

While cultural and economic globalization has caused the inflation of the English language to continue, a language revival movement has come about due to the rapid loss of languages. As speakers of minority languages realize the impending danger that English threatens, they have been taking action to preserve and protect their language from extinction, and globalization has, at least in some part, helped this movement thrive. Technology spread by globalization, the same force that has built English as a language powerhouse, is now helping people save their native tongues. Many remote regions that used to lack any sort of technological efficiency now have access to technology such as internet forums and YouTube, which can help in the revitalization and preservation of native tongues. This movement has grown with the dispersal of technology. Turin suggests that “through the internet and mobile communications, people are reconnecting with fellow speakers using digital tools to revive languages on the endangered list.” He adds, “Many speakers of endangered, poorly documented languages have embraced new digital media with excitement” (Turin, 2013). Examples of language revitalization have been the

Cherokee language of Native Americans and indigenous languages of Paraguay. This revival of language with the use of technology is immensely important, as it has begun to reverse some of the language endangerment facing minority languages today.

The Cherokee language, which is spoken by Native American tribes, is being revitalized through technology and the help of the Cherokee Preservation Foundation. In 2005, a ten-year plan was made to revive the language, after a study revealed that “460 fluent speakers were then living in Cherokee communities, with 72 percent of them over the age of 50 and elder speakers dying far more quickly than new speakers were emerging” (Cherokee Preservation Foundation, 2014). In recent years, the foundation has invested three million dollars in the effort of revitalization. There has been substantial curriculum development and acquisition of teaching materials, language symposiums, and the creation of an academy. All of this has been made possible by, as the Cherokee Preservation Foundation website writes, “a significant amount of space [and] technical support and equipment.” Technology, most prominently the Internet, is used to bring speakers of the Cherokee tongue together and to teach Cherokee to non-speakers. It is important to point out that this is a success in a country that has the financial backing to do so. Understandably, it seems that countries with larger populations and more resources are able to more easily revive languages. Other languages from poorer countries have not had such success due to lack of funds and foundations.

Paraguay is an example of a country with a plethora of indigenous languages that simply does not have a substantial enough population or sufficient technology

to keep them all alive. The Guaraní language has had success in revival, though the number of speakers of the language was high and the language transcended borders. Twenty-three distinct languages are native to Paraguay, ten of them listed as “in trouble” and one as “dying” (Ethnologue, 2014). However, Paraguay, home to approximately six million people, does not have the population or technological resources to revive each of these many languages.

As more and more people learn English, and, through the language revival movement, learn other languages, our world becomes more connected and interdependent than ever. We can exchange the ideas and traditions of practically lost cultures, and support scholarly communities by documenting and protecting shared linguistics (Turin, 2013). This multilingualism and relearning of native language can be a political act or demonstration of self-definition. These acts will continue to encourage the language revival movement, using technology, and could potentially re-establish minority languages. Mykants proposes, “The advance of technology that helped push English into its commanding position could pull it down again” (Mykants, 2007). Though this possibility exists, the movement is much less powerful than the push toward English as a universal language.

The Cost of Loss

There is great danger in allowing the diversity of world languages to dwindle. Not only are we simply losing language diversity and leaning toward complete homogenization of language, but we also allow methods of thinking to be lost. Additionally, we lose devices to truly express a certain culture, their values, and their traditions. This is the negative side to the globalization of English.

One of the important aspects of having diversity of language is that different languages are apt to think and solve in distinct ways. As Alexandra Méndez, author for the Harvard Political Review, states, “[P]eople who speak different languages offer unique creative problem-solving perspectives that are both productive and lucrative” (Méndez, 2013). As we let smaller languages disappear, we allow possible cures, solutions, and explanations to disappear as well. These languages are not only culturally valuable, but also financially viable. Of this, Eric Garland writes, For instance, knowledge about unique medicines and treatments used by aboriginal groups could be lost forever if the language used to transmit that information is banned by a majority culture” (Garland, Eric 2006). Meaningful information is simply lost when the language that was originally used to transmit it becomes extinct. Language holds an incredible possibility for change and progress, which should be valued and protected.

A second reason to save minority languages is that it not only affects our world language arena, but it affects individuals. Méndez explains, “Language provides a vehicle of expressing not simply meaning but also culture and identity” (Méndez, 2013). When cultural languages are drowned out by the power of English, an entire community loses their means for expressing their own distinct values and culture. They are forced to use a non-native language to express what is best expressed in their native language. This only demonstrates another way in which Western culture can consume smaller cultures. Of this, Méndez writes, “If we accept the rank of English over Spanish and of Spanish over Nahuatl, then we may implicitly accept the hierarchy of Western culture over indigenous culture”

(Méndez, 2013). This limits the ways in which people across the world can think and express themselves, while letting certain details of culture vanish into history.

Conclusion

Globalization has had a paradoxical effect on the emerging patterns of world languages. In powerful ways, globalization has forced minority languages to endangerment and extinction, while propelling the power of the English language around the world. This has led to a disadvantage for people who do not speak English because they are not able to communicate fully with the vast English-speaking companies, economies, and governments. In other ways, this push toward English has sparked a movement of language preservation and revitalization, and technology spread by globalization has been the most important factor in this movement. A great loss comes with the dwindling language diversity. Vital information can die with a minority language. It may take with it cures, treatments, medicines, and solutions that have not been transmitted to another language, or are best expressed in a native tongue. Not only is information lost, but individuals are not able to express their identity and culture fully through the use of a majority language, and we lose possibly significant details of culture. Though the universalization of English has created easier trade and cooperation, it has also pushed native languages down the latter of importance. Though the language revival movement exists, the promotion of English as a universal language is much stronger, and we are likely to see English remain a universal language.

References

- Blommaert, J. (2010). The sociolinguistics of globalization. *Cambridge University Press*, 1-14. Retrieved from http://www.langtoninfo.co.uk/web_content/9780521884068_frontmatter.pdf
- Cerny, M. (2010). Language death versus language survival: A global perspective. *University of Ostrava*, 1-7. Retrieved from <http://conference.osu.eu/globalization/publ/06-cerny.pdf>
- Garland, E. (2006). Can minority languages be saved? *The Futurist*, 31-36. Retrieved from http://www.omniglot.com/language/articles/minority_languages.pdf
- Johnson, A. The rise of English: The language of globalization in China and the European Union. *Macalester International*, 8, 131-168. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1447&context=macintl>
- Mastin, L. (2011). The history of English. *The History of English*. Retrieved from http://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/history_late_modern.html
- Méndez, A. (2012). Globalization and revitalizing endangered languages. *Harvard Political Review*. Retrieved from <http://harvardpolitics.com/covers/global-migration/globalization-and-revitalizing-endangered-languages/>
- Munat, J. (2005). English as a vehicular language: A case of globalization or linguistic imperialism? *University of Pisa*, 143-154. Retrieved from http://www.stm.unipi.it/programmasocrates/clionet/books/language2/11_Munat.pdf
- Mydans, S. (2007). Across cultures, English is the word. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/09/world/asia/09iht-englede.1.5198685.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>
- Turin, M. (2013). Globalization helps preserve endangered languages. *Yale Global*. Retrieved from <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/globalization-helps-preserve-endangered-languages>