

The Global Dominance of English Language

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The last century has witnessed the penetration of English into the economic, political and cultural domains. Now, it has become more than a language; a big commodity. The main cause for its dominance and unhalting spread is globalisation. Due to globalisation, the world has become a smaller place (a global village, to use a MacLuhan's phrase). It has a deeper impact on our lives as it deals with "the interconnectedness of the world through new systems of communication" (Sachs 26).

This expansion of social relations and interconnectedness involves the acceleration of social and political activities. It speeds up the world with the development of trade, capital and a new system of transportation and communication. Not only this, distant events have a deeper impact on our lives. This results in the blurring of boundaries between domestic issues and global affairs.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin suggest that this liquidation of boundaries in the age of technology has not only benefited the local communities, but also led to the domination of the First World countries over the Third World. This demonstrates that globalisation has turned the whole world into a site of struggle, contestation and resistance. This cultural globalisation has helped the West to foist its culture and language on the Third World. It has fostered new forms of inequalities leading to the cultural conflicts among the nations. Against this backdrop, the spread of English as the lingua franca is viewed as a linguistic component of the process of economic globalisation. The dominance of European languages has destructive and deleterious effects throughout the world leading to unbalanced cultural understanding among different cultures. Today, English has become the most powerful tool of cultural dominance. The Oxford English Dictionary considers linguistic deprivation as equivalent to ignorance of English. People having knowledge of English are privileged over people who do not know English. It also occupies an authoritative place in science, information technology, commerce, internet, shipping, world market and education system. About the dominance of English, Edward Said remarks:

English, the lingua Franca for metropolitan Britain: global, comprehensive, and with so vast a social authority as to be accessible to anyone speaking to and about the nation. This Lingua Franca locates England at the focal point of the world also resided over by its power, illuminated by its ideas and culture, kept productive by the attitudes of its moral teachers, artists, legislators. (*Culture* 123)

Said argues that the very language we use may be complicit in perpetuating forms of knowledge which support a colonialist vision of the world. He contends that imperialism is not only related to political and economic domination, but also associated with cultural activities, language, underlying structures and ideologies that link the centre with the periphery.

Similarly, the critics like Robert Phillipson, Alastair Pennycook, Danny Dor and Tove Skutnabb view the widespread dominance of English as a form of linguistic imperialism, which has induced economic and political inequalities within and between nations. They believe that language plays a central role in the processes of

creation as well as resistance of linguistic imperialism. In *Critical Applied Linguistics*, Pennycook suggests that linguistic imperialism takes place when English is seen as a gateway to education, employment and popular culture. He further states: "Linguistic imperialism is first and foremost an economic model, with the nations at the centre exploiting the nations in the periphery" (62). This shows that language and power are closely associated. Language helps in exercising power. Those whose language is spoken are automatically more powerful than those whose language is only spoken by a smaller number of people. If one culture forces its language on a population, it not only imposes words, but its culture, its beliefs and ways of interpreting and thinking about the world. As a result, indigenous languages, cultural codes, concepts and ways of thinking are automatically invalidated in expression and value. Thus, cultural imperialism deals with domination of others through language. As language and culture are inextricably intertwined, the spread of English language has contributed to the worldwide spread of Western civilisation and especially American culture. This phenomenon is also termed as "Americanization" of local cultures.

In *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson highlights the way in which English plays an important role in promoting imperialism. He further suggests that due to the ideological, cultural and elitist power of English, the countries having English as a native language are benefited. English is upgraded to such an extent that huge demand has been created for English teachers. In the African context, Phillipson mentions: "Once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad; now we are sending English teachers... Africa is hungry for the English language... Support to the English language is and must remain an integral part of Britain's technical assistance to Anglophone Africa" (*Linguistic* 9). This means the British have intentionally promoted the global spread of English through books, dictionaries, textbooks and education policies. They know that this spread of English is beneficial for them economically, culturally and politically.

David Held believes that English language has become so dominant that "it provides a linguistic infrastructure as powerful as any technological system for transmitting ideas and cultures" (486). Similarly, Nicola Galloway and Health Rose note the inequalities created by English language and believe that "English may be an asset" but this has not benefited everyone equally "due to unequal access to language education... social, political and educational disadvantage exist for those who do not speak it" (61). The total dominance of English on the internet demonstrates that the process of global Englishization is very pervasive. Nearly 80% of the matter posted on the internet is in English. Galloway cites UNESCO report of 2009 which states: "English comprised 45 percent of the content on the internet, which was down from previous estimates in the 80-90 percent range but still substantial considering English speakers represent just 10 percent of the world's population" (55). The report further notes that other European languages like Spanish and French have "less than 10 percent of the information on the internet" (55).

Abram De Swaan attempted to explain the global spread of English through a particular model. His model is based upon the assumption that all languages have different prevalence and centrality. He thinks that a language has a high prevalence if it is spoken – as a native or non-native language – by a large number of people. A language has a high centrality if it is used by a large number of multilingual population having minor languages as their native languages. He also considers these two terms as independent, and suggests that language may be very prevalent but not central (e.g. Japanese) or very central but not too prevalent (e.g. Swahili). Some languages (e.g. Russian) are both prevalent and central. De Swaan uses the term "communication value or Q-

value” to predict the demand of a particular language. Swaan proposes that if an individual wants to communicate with a wider audience and beyond one’s local circle, then he will have to use a language with a high communication value or the Q-value. De Swaan defines Q-value as “the multiplication of a language’s centrality by its prevalence” (65). At present, English has the highest Q-value of all which implies that it is in “high demand by foreign language learners” (65). As the number of users of English increases, its Q-value increases. This means that this is a self-perpetuating phenomenon as with the increase in demand of a language; there is an increase in its Q-value, which makes the language more valuable and attractive. This is what is happening with English. This self-perpetuating process has raised the level of English to such an extent that it enjoys the status of lingua franca. Due to this, more and more learners learn it to make it more central and prevalent. This can be controlled only, when each country promotes and preserves its national language. This can be possible simply by “safeguarding the domain of domestic politics, national culture, education, law and so forth as the preserve of the indigenous language” (De Swaan 119).

It is sufficiently clear that linguistic imperialism is a threat arising from the speedy expansion of English, even when English is viewed as a lingua franca. D. Cooke considers English language like “Trojan horse” which is initially welcomed by the colonised nations, but which eventually completely dominates or destroys the native languages. Socio-linguists point out that the impact of English is worldwide, and its expansive reach is undeniable and unstoppable. Even the languages like French, Spanish, Arabic and German are losing their currency as the languages of international communication and have assumed the status of regional languages. The effect of English has been observed on the pronunciation and word order of different languages. Different languages seem to absorb English words leading to linguistic hybridity, which can be defined as the process in which foreign words enter into a native language. There is an advent of Asian and African words into English. This helps us to conclude that the process of Englishization is equivalent to the process of economic globalisation. In this globalised world, under the influence of the World Bank, postcolonial education systems have tended to give priority to the former colonial language and a marginal status to local languages. Nowadays, English can be considered as the protocol for oral and written communication across national frontiers. In this context, Phillipson outlines:

Throughout the entire post-colonial world, English has been marketed as the language of international communication and understanding, economic development, national unity and similar positive aspirations, but these soft-sell terms obscure the reality of globalisation, which is that the majority of the world’s population is being impoverished, that natural resources are being plundered in unsustainable ways, that the global cultural and linguistic ecology is under threat, and that speakers of most languages do not have their linguistic human rights respected. (Continued 42)

The unchecked spread of English has given it a peculiar status and has made it a dominant language, encroaching upon other languages. No doubt, globalisation is changing the face of culture around the globe by integrating the world economy. But it appears to be posing a threat to multilingualism. As more and more people rely on major languages that are used on the internet today, minority languages are on the verge of extinction. To explain this phenomenon, Phillipson borrows the term “McDonaldization” to sociolinguistics, which means the encroachment of killer English into the linguistic ecology of native tongues. The spread of English has led to the extinction of local languages and cultures associated with it. Phillipson asserts that the

spread of English is such "that English is both replacing other languages and displacing them" (*Linguistic* 27). In the same vein, Granville Prince has used the phrase "Killer Language" for English to emphasise the fact that languages do not die naturally. Instead, they are murdered. Regarding the dominance of English, Crystal remarks that if the growth of English is not halted, it will be the only language on earth and that will be "the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known" (viii).

It can be concluded that the dominance of English has resulted in linguistic genocide. The critics like Robert Phillipson, Skutnabb-Kangas, Miklos Kontra and Alamin Mazrui use the term "mass murder" instead of extinction of languages to refer to the death of languages in the wake of globalisation. They assert that the extinction of languages is taking place due to the widespread impact of mass media, specific institutions and formal education systems being maintained to perpetuate the dominance of English over other languages. Phillipson believes that phrases like "global English," "English as a world language," "Anglophone Africa," and "English as a lingua franca" "conceal the fact that the use of English serves the interests of some much better than others" (*Continued* 28). English may be described as "a lingua franca" (a medium of international communication), "a lingua economica" (language used in business and commercial organisations), "a lingua cultura" (a carrier of English culture), "a lingua academica" (a medium of higher learning and research) and "a lingua divina" (the language of God) (149). Phillipson further argues that reality is misapprehended through these gentle terms. He also cites Swales who points out that English language also works as "a lingua tyrannosaura" (a powerful carnivore gobbling other languages) and "a lingua frankensteinia" (monster killing native languages) (*Continued* 149). The dominance of English has caused a sharp decline in linguistic diversity in the postcolonial world. This implies that many national languages are at risk from this monster. There is a need to promote multilingualism along with English language.

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