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## **E-Language**

### **WHAT WILL GLOBALIZATION DO TO LANGUAGES?**

#### **A FREAKONOMICS QUORUM**

By Stephen J. Dubner

The headline says it all, although the unspoken question is:

**Will globalization indeed result in the hegemony of English, as has long been promised/threatened?**

We gathered up some wise people who spend their time thinking about such things:-

- **Christian Rolling,**
- **Mark Liberman,**
- **Henry Hitchings, and**
- **John Hayden**

and asked them to answer our question. Many thanks for their insights.

**Christian Rolling**, senior interpreter and next chief of the French interpretation section at the U.N.in New York.

**"The Internet has helped curtail English language domination."**

As an interpreter, I tend to focus more on spoken words; and I suspect (being French) that you would love to read that English is (finally) going to be the universal language thanks to globalization.

But No! The Internet has helped curtail English language domination: Just over half the number of Web pages are in English.

Rudimentary English might still be the most convenient means of oral or written communication between strangers of different cultures on planet Earth, but globalization is giving a new (virtual) planetary presence to hundreds of languages and cultures through millions of Web sites, mixing text and videos.

The big loser? Grammar.

With the proliferation of text messages, e-mails, emoticons, strange abbreviations (The French love CUL, which means a\*\*) why bother about style or form?

Web sites are more polished, but even there, spelling mistakes abound.

**John Hayden**, president of Versation, parent company of English, baby! a social networking site for English language learners around the world.

**"English is like a cell phone provider offering the best plan. But if the dollar continues to drop, the most viable option could shift."**

**Globalization is synonymous with homogenization. What does this mean for languages?**

We'll be losing all but one of them, and guess which one.

Although ludicrous, this point of view is common. My friends and colleagues question me from time to time about whether a website like mine that helps people around the world learn English is necessarily a good thing.

But last I checked, **learning one language doesn't cause you to forget another**. More than half the world plays soccer, but other sports continue to thrive. Why should languages be any different?

In fact, it seems widely agreed upon that a person who speaks more than one language is worthy of admiration. The fact that nearly two billion people are learning English means that there are more bilingual people than ever before.

Though shared languages between countries are necessary for globalization to thrive, the popularity of English is incidental and could change.

English is a tool, just like a piece of technology. Much of the world's economy is tied up in English-speaking countries and for that reason, English is like a cell phone provider offering the best plan. But if the dollar continues to drop, the most viable option could shift. Mexico and Korea don't need English to communicate if Korea begins to find it profitable to learn Spanish.

This flexibility exists because other languages aren't going away. It's important to understand that English is growing as a second or third language.

I've yet to hear of a country changing its first language to English to better compete globally and I doubt that will happen.

A Bulgarian woman might fly to the U.S. for a meeting, but will still walk to the grocery store. She might send American partners news via e-mail, but will still gossip on her neighbor's porch, read and sing in Bulgarian, and speak it with her family — and with you if you're smart.

Don't underestimate the value of knowing languages other than English in a globalized world. Nothing makes a trip to Japan better than knowing Japanese and if you're bidding on a contract in India, the proposal written in Hindi is sure to stand out. A philosopher who can read German articles before they're translated has an edge on his peers.

In fact, **globalization means that we have more reason than ever to learn a language**. While globalization has its benefits and drawbacks, learning a language, like almost any other

skill, is at best useful and at least a bit of personal edification (like learning Ancient Greek or fly fishing).

But at the moment, English is about as valuable as a computer in terms of the amount of cultural exchange and access to information it affords. Of course, the two are most powerful together, which is why we started English, baby!. It was a reaction to a demand.

More often than not, a new member's first blog is something to the effect of, "This is the first day of my life," which demonstrates a mind-boggling enthusiasm for, and faith in this language and technology.

**Mark Liberman**, professor of linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, blogs at Language Log.

**"If you're going to combine many countries with different national languages — and do it by political compromise rather than by military conquest — then you can't impose any single national language on the result."**

The obvious things to say about this are, well, obvious. But not everything that's obvious is entirely true, and there are some surprises behind the "duh"s.

It's obvious that English promotes American power in the global linguistic marketplace — but a slogan of **Li Yang's** Crazy English movement is **"Conquer English to Make China Stronger!"**

It's obvious that globalization will tend to wipe out smaller languages and cultures — but if you search the web for "soomaaliya" or "gabay ka," you'll find more text from the world-wide Somali diaspora than was ever produced in the horn of Africa. **It's obvious that globalized communications and popular culture will tend to homogenize local language varieties** — but some varieties of English seem to be diverging more rapidly than ever.

Much of today's linguistic politics are rooted in the residues of colonial rule, itself an earlier form of globalization — but paradoxically, the recent spread of former colonial languages is sometimes driven by local resistance to domination by outsiders.

In 1950, the Indian constitution established Hindi as the official language of the central government, and the use of English as a "subsidiary official language," inherited from the days of British colonial rule, was supposed to end by 1965. However, less than a sixth of the Indian population speaks Hindi natively, and for elite speakers of India's other 400-odd languages, especially in the south, the imposition of Hindi felt like a kind of conquest, whereas continued use of English was an ethnically neutral option. So today, the authoritative version of acts of parliament is still the English one, Supreme Court proceedings are still in English, and so on.

The rise of English as the language of global economic opportunity just reinforces this pattern, which also applies in Pakistan, in Nigeria, and in several other former British colonies.

A particularly intense version of this sort of thing is happening in Iraq.

Kurdish officials resist being forced to do business with the central government in Arabic, and sometimes insist on English, even if their command of Arabic is excellent. They recognize that they can't force the central government to deal with them in Kurdish, but they see English, the language of the former colonial power, Britain — and of the current occupying power, the United States — as a symbol of resistance to the cultural and political hegemony of the Arabic-speaking majority.

The situation in former French colonies is more subtle. French is the ethnically-neutral lingua franca there, and the linguistic gateway to opportunity and migration. But many individuals in the Francophone world are starting to see English as a better opportunity — and the rulers of some Francophone countries have begun to feel the same way — to the immense chagrin of the French government, which works hard by various means to keep the former colonies in La Francophonie. In that context, promoting (for example) English-language schools can become a form of resistance to neocolonialism.

And at the same time that big languages like

- English,
- French,
- Chinese, and
- Arabic

have been spreading among present or past imperial subject populations, local linguistic nationalism has been increasing in strength, and winning some victories.

In Belgium — which is number one in the 2007 KOF Index of Globalization — Flemish cultural nationalism, very much based on language, is threatening to split the country in two.

Less dire versions of the same process have been happening elsewhere in Europe. Anyone who's been in Barcelona recently knows that the dominance of Catalan there has been officially acknowledged, and Spain's ratification of the **European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages** has also led to co-official status for Basque and Galician in their regions.

As a result of the same European Charter, two centuries of French official suppression of minority languages came to an end, at least officially, in 2001. (Actually, France rejected the charter as contrary to its constitution, but the Ministry of Education decided anyhow that education in Occitan, Corsican, Breton, Basque, and so on could at least in principle be allowed.)

Paradoxically, the force that freed "regional and minority" languages throughout Europe was exactly the economic and political unification created by that poster child of globalization, the European Union.

**If you're going to combine many countries with different national languages — and do it by political compromise rather than by military conquest — then you can't impose any single national language on the result. And once you admit a dozen or so national languages to official status in the resulting union, why not throw in a hundred more — even if the local nation-states have been busily trying to promote national unity by suppressing them for the past few centuries?**

**Henry Hitchings**, author of *Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: The Extraordinary Story of the Book that Defined the World*, and his most recent, *The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English*.

**"One of the intriguing consequences of globalization is that English's center of gravity is moving."**

"It's interesting that we think of nature conservation as something rather sexy, but language conservation on the whole gets dismissed as naïve and backward-looking. "

This isn't a question that belongs in the future tense; it's happening right now, and we're seeing dramatic change in the whole global system of languages. So the succinct answer would be "a lot." But I'd like to expand on this.

Today there are about 6,500 different natural languages. Eleven of them account for the speech of more than half the world's population. Those eleven are

- Mandarin Chinese,
- Spanish,
- Hindi,
- French,
- Bengali,
- Portuguese,
- Russian,
- German,
- Japanese,
- Arabic, and — of course,
- English.

English is distinguished from the others in this list by having very significant numbers of non-native speakers, and, for reasons I'll come back to, I think it's going to be the one most affected by globalization.

At the opposite end of the scale there are languages teetering on the brink of extinction. **More than half the world's languages have fewer than 5,000 speakers, and there are many hundreds that have as few as a dozen. Languages are disappearing all the time — it's estimated that a language becomes extinct roughly every two weeks.** Some of those under threat are American languages — the likes of

- Kashaya, spoken in a small part of northern California, and
- Menominee in Wisconsin.

I think we can say that almost everywhere is part of the "world system" now, and the thing about any system that integrates people is that it benefits its architects. Yes, you're going to see cultural cross-pollination, but, fundamentally, imported cultures are going to push out indigenous ones. We can look at the example of Canada: when it was colonized, more than sixty languages were spoken there, but English and French wiped almost all of them out, and only one, Inuktitut, has really clung on at all.

In the future, things that don't happen in the world's major languages are likely to be marginalized in favor of very possibly less worthy things that do happen in them. We see this a good deal already. For instance, we know that by and large a book published in English is going to have a far wider reach than one published in Czech, regardless of their respective merits.

One of the consequences is that, as students and scholars look to enhance their credentials and the visibility of their work, universities, which used to be national institutions, have become an international marketplace.

It's clear that globalization is making English especially important not just in universities, but in areas such as

- computing,
- diplomacy,

- medicine,
- shipping, and
- entertainment.

No language is currently being learned by more people — there may soon be 2 billion actively doing so — and the desire to learn it reflects a desire to be plugged into a kind of "world brain."

To many people, then, the spread of English seems a positive thing, symbolizing

- employment,
- education,
- modernity, and
- technology.

But to plenty of others it seems ominous.

They hold it responsible for grinding down or homogenizing their identities and interests. It tends to equalize values and desires, without doing the same for opportunities.

While English-speakers may think the spread of their language is simply a force for good, opening up the world and helping to advance things like feminism and human rights awareness in places they might not otherwise reach, to many other people this spread is a symptom of things they don't want: the Christian faith, for instance, and political paternalism.

So far, so unsurprising, you might say; but globalization may well have a kind of revenge effect. There's a distinct chance, I think, that it will actually undermine the position of the very native speaker who, by virtue of having a mastery of this obviously valuable language, thinks he or she is in a strong position.

Why? Because **one of the intriguing consequences of globalization is that English's center of gravity is moving. Its future is going to be defined not in America or Britain, but by the new economies of places like**

- Bangalore,
- Chongqing, and
- Bratislava.

Internationally, English is becoming the language of the urban middle classes, and as the ability to use English becomes a kind of basic skill for such people, the prestige that attaches to being able to speak it with native fluency is going to shrink. People who have a stripped-down, second-language knowledge of it may start to cut native speakers out of the equation. At the same time we're going to see a proliferation of what are sometimes called '**glocal** **Englishes**' — noticeably different forms of the global language that preserve their local roots. One of the ultimate effects may be that native speakers of English will be at a professional disadvantage, because they're seen as obstructions to the easy flow of business talk and they're competent in just this one "basic" language.

Branching out beyond English, I think it's safe to say that one of the things we are seeing, as technology breaks down borders, is that it is no longer sensible to think of a precise association between particular languages and particular territories.

**Nobody owns languages any more.** And this is likely to be especially troubling for anyone whose language is widely used by people who aren't native speakers.

As it advances, globalization seems to be whipping up its own backlash, and I'm sure we are soon going to see

- language learning and
- language conservation

become more contentious political issues. It's interesting that we think of nature conservation as something rather sexy, but **language conservation on the whole gets dismissed as naïve and backward-looking**. My hunch is that if there's one language in the top eleven I mentioned earlier that is really going to get squeezed, it's German.

Realistically, fifty years from now the world's big languages may be as few as three:

- Mandarin Chinese,
- Spanish, and
- English.

Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and Punjabi will also be pretty big — but chiefly because of massive population growth on their home turf. Arabic, too, will have grown — for religious reasons at least as much as economic ones.

At the other end of the scale, **many languages will have disappeared, irrecoverably, and with them will have disappeared their cultures.**

Courtesy: <http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/>