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ENGLISH VS "GLOBISH": THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH AS  
A GLOBAL LANGUAGE\*

A series of problems concerning the English language were the object of debate in the House of Lords in Great Britain during the month of November in 1979. The title of the document prepared by the House was *The English Language: Deterioration in Usage*; it showed worry about the way in which the idiom was changing and formulated hypotheses about what would be future language developments. During the course of his speech Lord Kings Norton asserted that:

The English language is still a wonderful instrument for communication, but I am disturbed by the ways in which uncritical performers are using and modifying the instrument, and I believe that we have reached a stage at which it needs to be defended. I am, of course, not alone in my concern<sup>1</sup>.

Kings Norton laid the blame on schools, universities and the mass media for this situation, saying that they had not carried out their roles properly. Newspapers, radio and television were spreading a language based on a series of generalizations and imprecision amongst the general public:

But most important in the context of my anxiety, my Lords, is the teaching of English. Is the way in which English is taught today producing a proper concern for well-balanced usage? I take leave to doubt it. We seem to be less critical in our usage than of old and this must surely be, at least partly, a consequence of how we have been taught.

And later on:

But, of course, the broadcasting authorities have a great influence on our usage and sometimes I feel they let us down. Years ago I know that the BBC had a Director of

\* Text of the conference held at the University of Alabama in Birmingham in November 2011 within the International Agreement between the "G. d'Annunzio" University and the above-mentioned University.

<sup>1</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1979/nov/21/the-english-language-deterioration-in>

the Spoken Word. They do not have one now. Whatever organisation has taken his place must be inadequate, because too often we hear mispronunciations and usages of the kinds I have been criticising<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, references to American “habits” were made. These were reformulating a part of the English vocabulary – *elevator* for *lift*, *location* instead of *place*, *assignment* for *job*, *I am hopeful that* instead of *I hope that*, *to meet up with* instead of the simply saying *to meet*, *to pay off* instead of *to pay* – just to cite a few of the examples given by the lord.

The speech made by Lord Perry of Walton concentrated on the continual increase in the number of English language speakers, highlighting a series of problems deriving from this spread:

A major cause of deterioration in the use of the English language is very simply the enormous increase in the number of people who are using it. It has for some time been the lingua franca of science. It is fast becoming the primary language of international communication in other fields. It is already the first language of many nations. It is already spoken by more people than is any other language save Mandarin Chinese. Increasingly it is being adopted as a second language by the nations of the world. As this happens it is quite inevitable that more and more people will use the language ineptly, for it is not an easy language to use well<sup>3</sup>.

One of the questions which often comes under discussion regards the “global” role of the English language and the possible formation of a single standard variety which is above nationality, that would be learnt by the populations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is not practical to formulate hypotheses or make predictions, because the way in which English has evolved has no precedents. Nor are there models on which to base credible theories. Despite the lack of existing models, there are substantially two outcomes that stimulate most interest: firstly the breaking up of English into different varieties leading to the loss of the role of being the lingua franca; secondly the supremacy of one single standard variety that could take the place of the others in international usage and in teaching. The last hypothesis brings to the forefront another question concerning the models that will

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

be the most widespread. Will it be British English or American English that will represent the linguistic variety to be used on a global level? Or, will there be a different standard variety that will replace those that are used now? These tensions emerge because English represents the vehicle language for international communication and establishes the formation of identity. The first function requires a common standard for an effective and reciprocal comprehension; the second shows how, inevitably, this language encourages local forms and hybrid varieties<sup>4</sup>.

### *Linguistic Rejection*

The various debates on the future of English have not led to definitive solutions, because of the variables in the field of language development. The death of Latin was unimaginable in Medieval times, while French has been progressively substituted by English as the lingua franca in the official domain. During the course of an interview, in reply to the question “What is the best historical comparison to the spread and dominance of English throughout the world?”, Nicholas Ostler replied:

English is best compared to different languages at different points in its career. If we restrict our attention to the period of spread and dominance, when English took ship after it took shape, it is quite well-compared in its early spread in the Americas to the spread of Latin in Europe: military conquest followed by farming colonization. However, unlike the Romans who spread by incorporating surrounding populations into their implanted settlements, the British spread in North America effectively swept aside and confined the native populations, while their own population was expanded not just by natural increase (large families) but by immigration, speedily followed by linguistic recruitment of immigrants into speaking English. The second phase of English imperialism, led off by the events in India in the 19th century, but continuing in the meteoric spread of English after the second World War, is very different. Here English did not spread by incomers who swept aside the local population, but by recruiting the local élites. This is re-education, rather than sweep-aside. It is similar again to the spread of Latin by the Romans – for they too in their more far-flung provinces (notably Britain!) attempted to recruit local élites, even with-

<sup>4</sup> D. GRADDOL, *The Future of English?*, London, British Council, 1997, pp. 56-57.

out colonization. It could also be compared to the spread of French in early modern Europe, where the perceived excellence of French Culture (naturally promoted by greater French wealth) led to take-up of the language, quite voluntarily, by élites all over eastern Europe<sup>5</sup>.

The uncertainty of the future of English does not however exclude the chance of singling out the motives that could hinder its inevitable and further spread. First of all, a change in its position could be due to a different distribution of political and economic power and technological and cultural influence which can be considered practically impossible when one takes into account the present position of the United States<sup>6</sup>. It is also possible that groups of people, or groups of nations, oppose global English for political motives; but this idea seems to be fairly remote too, as the opposition group would have to be extremely numerous to be able to provoke such important linguistic effects<sup>7</sup>. The phenomena of linguistic rejection are in fact limited to those countries that feel threatened by the United States or by Great Britain. They are usually ex-colonies who constantly and strongly feel the desire to detach themselves from the old dominating power. Once they have gained independence, they are anxious to put their own language into use and to promote their own culture. This is especially true where there was an excessive imposition of the colonial power's own values. This type of problem is often highlighted by writers, caught between the need to see their own language affirmed and to use it in writing their works. When authors demonstrate this skill they "culturally" go beyond the national borders which they can do solely through the use of a language that makes reading their work accessible to foreigners as well.

Amongst the best known cases of linguistic rejection, are those of Tanzania, where English had the role of being the official language together with Swahili up until 1967. That year Swahili became recognized as the only official language. In 1974, Swahili substituted English in Kenya. In Malaysia the only official language is Malay and has been

<sup>5</sup> P. COMSTOCK, "An Interview with linguist Nicholas Ostler", *California Literary Review*, April 3, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> D. DAVIES, *Varieties of Modern English*, Harlow, Pearson Education, 2005, p. 148.

<sup>7</sup> D. CRYSTAL, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 123.

since 1967. In India the role of English is considered to be of fundamental importance however it generates a climate of dissent and of scarce acceptance, as its use is in conflict with the national cultures, which are often very distant from the western ones. However, once these exceptions have been removed, most of the ex-colonies of the British Empire are able to live peacefully together with English. Another case concerns some countries which were dominated during the colonial period by European powers that were different to Great Britain, for example Algeria. After it had lived through a phase of being a French colony, the language of the ex-dominating power was replaced by English which presently represents the most commonly used idiom in the school sector<sup>8</sup>.

The phenomenon of linguistic rejection can involve countries which are not necessarily tied to a colonial past with the British Empire. It is generated by a fear of the linguistic invasion of English, which has repeatedly been accused of causing the disappearance of local languages. This feeling comes about because history offers numerous examples of minor languages that have been replaced by English: Cumbrian, various languages of the Native Americans and of the Australian Aborigines. While Gaelic, Welsh, Maori and Hawaiian fight for survival and to maintain their identity.

The will to reduce the prestige of a language also reveals the tendency towards a sort of economic protectionism on the part of the countries that carry out most of their commercial activity at a regional level rather than a global one. The use of a local idiom is considered to be a way to favour a limited form of economy, because it denies the chance to reach out to the global village. The idea of using English together with the local languages would be able to guarantee the existence of regional and national economic realities without excluding access to the global market.

#### *Demographic Development: Rival Languages.*

The power of a language is measured by the power of its speakers. This constitutes yet another obstacle when trying to make predictions about the destiny of a language. The future of a nation and its inhabitants is not easy to predict. All one has to do is observe a series of unforeseen changes that

<sup>8</sup> D. CRYSTAL, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 115.

have taken place in the last few decades which concern populations of developing countries. The demographic development of a population is determined by the difference between the birthrate and the death rate, as well as international migration. The most important factor in the present situation is that in the nations that are defined as being in the Third World, whether they are in Africa, Asia or in Latin America, there has been a significant reduction of the death rate in the twentieth century, while the birth-rate has remained virtually unchanged. However, in Europe and in North America there has been a definite reduction of the birth-rate. The populations in the developing areas are therefore getting younger and younger compared to those in the industrialized nations in the areas of Europe and North America. It is predicted that the populations of these nations will continue to increase until they will double in 2050 and India will take the place of China as the nation with the highest population in the world. Added to this is the predicted reduction of the population of the economically developed nations, in which most of the people who speak English as a first language will go on to make up a smaller and smaller proportion of the world population<sup>9</sup>. If this turns out to be true, English is destined to decline after a period of incredible growth.

At any rate, these estimates are based on evaluations of demographic growth, for which they have not taken into account the use of English as a second language and as a foreign language in the world. It is calculated that the number of individuals that make use of English as a second language will be between 350 and 400 million. If those who use it as a foreign language are added to this, the number rises to half a billion. This kind of usage of English is closely tied to the change in the linguistic habits of individuals and of whole families. There has been a great deal of research which has centred on the analysis of migrants and minority communities that gradually lose their own ethnic language and adopt the language of the majority community. Initially the change is outside of the family sphere and then even inside it<sup>10</sup>.

We are dealing with a slow process, which would not be defined as being complete within a few generations; in the

<sup>9</sup> A. BAUGH, T. CABLE, *A History of the English Language*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> D. GRADDOL, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

case of English we witness the passage from the original language to the English language, which moves from being the second language to being the first. The central position of English, as a second language used in the service sectors on a worldwide scale, is a significant point of transition for many speakers who use it for occupational reasons. Such a change requires much less time to manifest itself compared to any other linguistic change and contributes to furthering and rapidly increasing the number of people who speak English as a first language<sup>11</sup>.

Furthermore many of the ex-British-colonies such as India, Tanzania and the Philippines, chose English as their official language. Although in many cases they tried to use the English language together with vernacular languages (Hindi in India, Swahili in Tanzania, Tagalog in the Philippines), the attempt never managed to obtain concrete results and English continues to have the role of being the official language. The affirmation of local languages is seriously hampered by the lack of availability of textbooks, as happens for example with Swahili in Tanzania. On the contrary, textbooks in English are much more numerous and their continual spread is guaranteed by the more economically evolved nations. But what are the reasons that have made English take on the role of being a global language? Crystal's theory is the following:

There are two answers to the question: one is geographical-historical; the other is socio-cultural. [...] The historical account traces the movement of English around the world, beginning with the pioneering voyages to the Americas, Asia and the Antipodes. [...] The socio-cultural explanation looks at the way people all over the world, in many walks of life, have come to depend on English for their economic and social well-being. The language has penetrated deeply into the international domains of political life, business, safety, communication, entertainment, the media and education.<sup>12</sup>

Considering the present spread of English, and its role of being the global lingua franca, there are no credible motives that could lead one to think that a new global lingua franca would manage to take its place in the next fifty years. The present role that English holds is the direct consequence of a historical and cultural journey that, probably, no other

<sup>11</sup> D. GRADDOL, *English Next*, London, British Council, 2006, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> D. CRYSTAL, *English as a Global Language*, cit., pp. 29-30.

language would be able to repeat. The only credible prediction is that a small number of languages, each one with specific spheres of usage, could create a sort of linguistic oligopoly. It is the continual evolution of the world economic situation, in particular within the Asiatic and South American countries that justify such hypotheses.

There are substantially three possible future changes in this regard. The first one is that English continues to be the preferred language for international communication in Asiatic territories, both because Asia has invested in English on a purely "linguistic" level, and because the local elite would not like to risk losing the privileges they have obtained in order to favour the acceptance of new idioms. Another line of interpretation foresees the affirmation of Mandarin, the most widespread regional language that would take on the role of being the lingua franca in the Chinese territory. The third possibility is that there will not be any lingua franca in Asia and that we will see a progressive affirmation of a large number of local varieties, that will assume the role of being new foreign languages to be learnt<sup>13</sup>.

However, the European languages that will rival English in the future are German and Spanish. The importance of German beyond its national borders increased immediately after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The territories of ex-Russia, which were not inclined to confirm the presence of Russian as an auxiliary language, started to privilege German. Next, Spanish represents the language with the most rapid expansion thanks to the significant demographic increase of the population of the South American continent. These trends will continue to accept the present role of English which, at least in the immediate future, cannot be substituted by any other idiom<sup>14</sup>.

### *The New English Languages*

Learning a language means obtaining rights to it; it means having the chance to omit, add and model it according to one's needs, differentiating it from other varieties of the same language, sometimes so as to make it different in relation to the forms that already exist. This happens mainly if the number of people who adopt a determined language in a country is very high – a situation which favours the devel-

<sup>13</sup> D. GRADDOL, *The Future of English?*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> D. CRYSTAL, *English as a Global Language*, cit., p. 190.

opment of their own variety, formed by the same speakers who adapt it to suit their own needs<sup>15</sup>.

The process is gradual. At the beginning the terms are considered to be foreign and unknown; if they are used in written form they are printed between inverted commas or in italics. Later on, and it's a gradual process, they start to become part of common usage and are no longer identified as being different. A process of this type has led to the formation of a variety of English which is spoken in Singapore and is called Singlish. It is currently widespread even in the mass media, so much so that the authorities have tried to re-establish standard British English. But this intervention has led to the combined presence of Singlish and formal British, which are used respectively by speakers according to their level of education and social background. Similar situations happen in other parts of the world, and more and more often English language teachers find themselves in front of students who speak an almost unknown variety of English.

Today there are many new varieties of the English language in existence. They are defined as New Englishes. Their formation is closely tied to the will to express a national identity. The idea of acquiring the status of being an independent nation often generates such a desire. Shaping a language that is your own represents regaining one's identity. Despite this, many countries that have become independent have decided that it is not feasible given the numerous local ethnic languages in competition. At the same time, amongst these populations the sensation that continuing to use English would represent an unacceptable tie with the colonial past was strongly felt. The resolution of such a dilemma has in some cases led to the maintenance of the English language, but it has been adapted to the national needs, in particular through the addition of new lexical forms, new idiomatic expressions and new meanings for a word that is already in use<sup>16</sup>.

It has often been put forward that if the numerous varieties of the English language had continued to differentiate themselves, its history would have developed the same way Latin did: it broke up into numerous languages, later defined as the romance languages. However, there are numerous analogies between Latin and English and also some fundamental elements that differentiate them. A thousand years

<sup>15</sup> D. CRYSTAL, *The Language Revolution*, Cambridge, Polity, 2004, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, p. 32.

ago, communities were isolated one from the other and this made communication difficult. When the Roman Empire started to crumble, there was no power that could stop the fragmentation of Latin. At present there are both centripetal and centrifugal forces that are applying pressure on English: on the one hand, the need for an identity has made the varieties of this language more and more different from standard British English; on the other, the importance of intelligibility has favoured similarities and a tendency towards standardization. One of the most important consequences of globalization has been the spread of the media. This has made it possible to have instant access to other languages, and so to different varieties of English, a situation that has created a strong centripetal effect. Furthermore, living in a global village means living in a world that has "shrunk". World communities are no longer isolated from one another, and it is fundamental to be able to understand, both inside the country and on an international level<sup>17</sup>. However, the mechanisms that have so far favoured the conservation of a standard could now reveal themselves to be efficient for the future. The most important forms of technology which have made it possible to form standard varieties are the press, which allowed for a stronger stability in communication through written texts and, later on, its spread through radio and television, where the contribution towards the formation of a standardized variety was probably more important than that of the press in the twentieth century. Despite this, the predictions regarding the tendency of the global mass-media suggest that in the future the situation will be very different, and the contribution of these means of communication will be less and less relevant.

In the new millennium written forms and oral ones are more and more divergent because of the current cultural trends which encourage the use of a more colloquial language and a greater tolerance of diversity and individual styles. The latter, added to the diminished importance of the press, radio and television, suggests the idea that the institutions and the practices that kept alive a standardized form are getting weaker and that the English language nations are witnessing a destandardization of their native idiom.

In the meantime, new systems that assure the survival of intelligible varieties are getting stronger, like the one that is

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 43.

defined as CMC (computer-mediated-communication), that reduces the distances between the written and spoken forms, and which contributes to the maintenance of a standardized form together with ELT (English Language Teaching), thanks to which at least some elements that form the English language, and that is the grammar and the vocabulary, are learnt in the same way the world over. However, the nations in which English is widespread as a second language are developing their own models and teaching material that they hope to be able to export to the neighbouring nations. This represents one of the centrifugal forces that push towards the breaking up of English, above all where competition between the different varieties is very strong. In conclusion, if, within a country, the instruments for the teaching of the local variety of English are developed, if most of the population chooses to use them, then the chances that that variety is spread are very high, and so are the chances that it breaks away from the initial model. ELT can therefore determine which one will be the variety of English for the 21<sup>st</sup> century because it is through the teaching system that the preferences of the speakers are shown<sup>18</sup>.

It is not possible to predict what the role of English will be in the near future. Will it definitely represent a lingua franca that is used by global citizens as a first or second language or will it be learnt by the same people as a foreign language? According to the most credible hypotheses, the distance that separates the place in which English is widespread will lead towards a situation of multi-dialects<sup>19</sup>.

It is just as likely that we will see, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the citizens of the world becoming triglots, that is they will become competent in three different varieties of English: the first for informal national contexts, the second for formal national contexts; a third standard, super-national variety to be used in communicating with foreigners and when travelling abroad or even in virtual contexts in the global era<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> D. GRADDOL, *The Future of English?*, cit., p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> D. CRYSTAL, *The Language Revolution*, cit., pp. 46-47.

<sup>20</sup> D. CRYSTAL, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, cit., p. 113.