

English as a Global Tongue

by Andreas Gramm

English is spoken by more people than any other language in the world, thus it is considered a world language. Today English seems to be evolving into a future global tongue as its spreading on the Internet in recent years shows (almost 80% of the world-wide-web's pages are now written in English). In this context the English language is accused of being a killer language that wipes out smaller languages as well as the cultures they represent. Scientific research has found that in fact many small languages have already vanished. However, English fits in a slot that could have been filled by any other language. It can neither be blamed for developments demanding an international lingua franca nor for the consequences of using one super language for world-wide communication.

Immense progress in fields of science and technology has created the need to facilitate a world wide exchange of knowledge. Thus the latest industrial developments demand an international language which everyone is able to understand. Because of its predominance in the industrial world it seems convenient that English will become this world language.

But, if everyone speaks the same language, will people still be able to keep their local identities? As long as regional groups manage to keep their own language for internal communication the emergence of a global tongue is no danger to their culture. In Europe globalisation has even turned into an opportunity for different regions to express their diversity. For example, Scotland and Wales are becoming more independent from the British government. The fact that in Wales children are learning Welsh again shows that if regions are interested in maintaining their regional culture an additional lingua franca for official communication will not threaten their language.

However, the loss of languages plays a role in societies that are less developed than ours. Members of small linguistic groups are changing to a language of a higher rank in hierarchy in advantage of flexibility. For example an African worker will find a job much easier if he or she applies in a larger area than just his or her local region. R.M.W. Dixon states in his essay on the "Language loss in Australian Aboriginal languages" that parents even force their children to speak English at home and avoid code-switching to their indigenous mother-tongue in order to provide better chances for their future career. As a consequence, the former vernacular languages which are now no longer spoken have lost its intrinsic function. So by trying to survive in a capitalistic system of competition the actual victims are forced to support a process which debases their own culture.

Dixon's analysis shows that "killer languages" cause the wipe out of indigenous languages. But is the English language guilty of having banished so many languages? According to Brenzinger (1991, p.40), in India most dying languages are replaced by other regional languages with a higher rank in the hierarchy of languages rather than by a world language. In those few cases where languages are replaced by English there is nothing intrinsic in the English language itself which makes it work as a killer language. The predominance of other European languages like Spanish, French and Portuguese during the colonial period has wiped out native languages in South America and Africa just as well as English has caused the loss of languages in North America and Australia.

Besides being widely spread the only distinctive feature the killer languages mentioned above have in common is that those who introduced the languages were in control of power. Now, in the after-colonial age the slogan "money makes the world go round" shows that profit has a great impact on political decisions. Considering the fact that the US Dollar is the strongest currency on earth, it does not seem coincidental that English is the only candidate for a global language. The influence of English speaking business men has become another important impulse.

No matter how we evaluate the consequences, we can be sure that English as a global language is definitely to come. A global tongue will inevitably function as a killer language, so we will not be able to preserve all languages and their cultures. Frankly, the loss of individual culture is one of the prices of progress in our modern world. If we inverse the argumentation we would have to propose: "Let us stop progress, stop scientific research and technological inventions. Let us stick to the status quo so we will save some languages!" Who would agree? So we will have to pay the price for a global language. The obvious thing to do is to teach people a skilful use of the English language now to enable them to participate in international communication so they as well will benefit from the advantages of a global tongue.

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