
From Colonial to Postcolonial: Dissemination of the English Language

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Abstract

Among the many languages spoken in the world, the English language is the most widely spoken language in regard of the number of speakers of English as a mother tongue, second language, third language, official language, or lingua franca. English has become the world language or international language with the official and practical use of English in international affairs, business, trade, sports, the internet, entertainment, organizations, mass media, politics, and economy. This paper aims to analyze historically how the English language has been used so prevalently in the world from the colonial times to the postcolonial era. The export of the English language to the colonies and dependencies worldwide during the heyday of the British Empire, the role of the education system in establishing the English language in the colonies, and how the linguistic legacy has been maintained up to the 21st century is also within the scope of the paper. This study concludes that the colonial and imperial heritage of the British Empire which transferred the English language to all the continents alongside the other social, economic, political, and military instruments was pivotal in the widespread use of English today and in the United States of America with all its economic and cultural might helped secure the privileged position of English worldwide.

Keywords: English, the British Empire, colonial, postcolonial, language

1. Introduction

Today, English is either the first or official language in more than 60 countries most of which had a colonial past with Britain. The exportation of the English language to all the continents in the world began with the geographical discoveries, the overseas trade, the growth and expansion of British military and naval power and the ensuing slave trade. The transfer of the English language gained pace with the colonialist agenda of the British Empire after the fifteenth century onwards and the industrial revolution which started in Britain in the seventeenth century. Particularly the rise of the British Empire as a colonialist state on which the sun never set because of wide geographical borders spread the English language to all the countries and communities where the British Empire held sway. Evidently, the English

language was not the single export item during the long years of imperial control over the colonies and dominions. The British Empire transferred its economic system, legal system, religion(s), administration system, sports, cuisine, law enforcement, architecture, habits, festivals, etiquette, and manners as well as “English forms of land tenure, Scottish and English banking, the Common Law, Protestantism, team sports, the limited or ‘the night watchman’ state, representative assemblies, the idea of liberty” (Ferguson, 2003, p. xxiii). The English language was also important because it was the language the colonial history was written with and it was “interwoven with British colonialism throughout colonial and post-colonial history” (Pennycook, 1988, p. 8).

2. Discussion

During the colonization of the countries, indigenous people like Caribs and Arawaks in the Caribbean, Maoris in New Zealand, Aborigines in Australia, indigenous people in the Americas, and peoples of numerous tribes in Africa were either enslaved, exterminated, marginalized, discriminated or given lesser status, and with the onset of the slave trade, the systematic denigration and destruction of the languages the enslaved people spoke began and resulted in the birth of many English-based pidgins which later transformed into creoles in different parts of the world. During the process, British assumptions, values, habits, language, and codes were imposed upon the colonized, indigenous voices were silenced, their minds were colonized and the colonized internalized British logic, perspective and values (Brydon & Tiffin, 1993; McLeod, 2000).

Particularly the use of English language as the sole medium between the colonizer and the colonized was of utmost importance. In his world-renowned and highly-acclaimed work, Fanon (1967) set out to explain the rationale behind the transfer of the English language as he asserted that “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (p. 38) and that “a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (p. 18). In a similar manner to Fanon (1967), Ashcroft et al. (1989) suggested that “one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language ... language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (p. 7). As a result of the power hierarchies set in the colonies, the colonized people who resisted and survived the annihilating impact of the colonization were obliged to speak English in their contact with the colonizers who manned the high ranks and posts in the colonial apparatuses. Indeed, the transfer of the English language was of prime significance as a supportive mechanism of physical occupation and material gains which were hard to achieve “without the existence of a set of beliefs that are held to justify the possession and continuing occupation of other peoples’ lands ... [which] are encoded into the language which the colonizers speak and to which the colonized peoples are

subjected” (McLeod, 2000, p. 37). Apparently, in order to lay grounds for a lucrative economic system in the colonies and in order to ensure that the colonial system worked efficiently and profitably for the British Empire, the English language was used as a very effective weapon by the colonizers, and it paved the way to economic exploitation and political domination of the colonies for hundreds of years.

At this point, the main pillars of the education system the British Empire implemented in the colonies must be briefly analyzed to figure out the connection between the use of the English language by millions of people and the contours of the British colonial education, which was pioneered by British-Christian missionaries. As Hall (2008) posited, education was a convenient tool to ensure the obedience and silence of the colonized to the rule of the British (p. 774). In order to spread their ideologies, norms, values, worldviews and perceptions, the British colonizers designed the education systems of the colonies upon the British model alongside the other institutions exported to the colonies. The colonial educators and administrators were deaf and blind to the specific features, needs and cultural heritage of the countries and communities they governed without heeding relevance, meaning, or practicality of British-type education systems within the countries they colonized. The British colonizers regarded education as “an important tool in converting the colonial’s viewpoint and in making him ‘gladly accept the British rule’. One way of doing this was to anglicize the native through the educational system by teaching him British history, British achievements, British Literature and the English Language” (Desai, as cited in Kirpal, 1989, p. 37). Instead of teaching the geography, climate, flora and fauna of the colonized countries, at the primary school level geography meant the detailed topography of Britain; a study of the local nation or region; and the economic geography of the British Empire. Outside their own region and the British Isles, the countries of the rest of the world were depicted as mere producers notable for what they exported to Britain. (Brydon & Tiffin, 1993, p. 47)

Nasta (1995) bitterly claimed that the colonial education system “repeatedly told them that ‘real’ places were ‘cold’ places and these were elsewhere (p. 51). In a similar manner to Nasta (1995), Jamaica Kincaid also voiced the pejorative effects of the British education she had in her country, Antigua, in her long essay, *A Small Place* (1988) saying there are millions of people like her who were “made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland, no god ... and worst and most painful of all, no tongue” and complaining that she was compelled “to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?” (p. 31). She went on to say with the English language of “the criminal” she was unable to express her feelings and opinions properly as “the language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal's point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on [her]” (Nasta, 1988, p. 32). In like manner, Brathwaite

(1981) argued that in the West Indian colonies the educational system did not recognize the presence of [the] various languages. What [the] educational system did was to recognize and maintain the language of the conquistador – the language of the planter, the language of the official, the language of the Anglican preacher. It insisted that not only would English be spoken in the Anglophone Caribbean, but that the educational system would carry the contours of an English heritage. (p. 18)

For the African colonies, Britain had a similar agenda to institute colonial education, as a result of which, the African historian P.G. Okoth claimed “Ugandans who passed through the schools were ‘brainwashed’ to discard their own cultures and embrace Western cultures, which were supposedly superior. This resulted in a culture of dependency, mental enslavement and a sense of inferiority” (as cited in Whitehead, 2005b, p. 444). This education system which resulted in “subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion ... an instrument to serve the European capitalist class in its exploitation of Africa” (Rodney, as cited in Whitehead, 2005a, p. 317) by the colonial officials like infamous Macaulay who supported English-medium education in India as he believed “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole literature of India and Arabia” (as cited in Whitehead, 2005a, p. 319). As for India, Chavan (2013) pointed out the political function of the education system which aimed at showing English “less alien” by making the Indians speak the same language with the people in the upper echelons (p. 93). Apparently, the British colonizers looked down upon the cultural and linguistic legacies of the colonized countries and they excluded the local, indigenous, and native elements from the education system they imposed upon the colonies. Consequently, the colonized people were deprived of the means to identify with and define themselves to a great extent. The official medium of communication was reduced to that of the colonizers which resulted with the colonized people striving to learn a different language which was obviously inadequate for expressing their perceptions, emotions and assumptions.

Moreover, throughout the colonial education system, the colonized people were totally exposed to the British outlook of the history which inevitably glorified and celebrated the British achievements and victories whereas they disregarded, understated or simply discarded the histories of the colonized countries and peoples. Because “colonized people were seen as lacking history, culture, religion and intelligence” the colonizers felt that it was their responsibility “to fill this void” (Pennycook, 1988, p. 56). In this endeavor, the British colonizers’ subversion, curtailing and underrating of the cultural, social and linguistic heritage of the colonized people resulted in syllabi in which the specifics of the slave history were officially denied to the descendants of that history in schools, these same primary, secondary and tertiary pupils had black/white and empire/colony relations neutralized for them through

the reading and teaching of classic English texts like *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Jane Eyre*, the novels of Dickens, *Heart of Darkness*. (Brydon & Tiffin, 1993, p. 49)

Particularly the works of the English literature were given high accord and canonized in the education system in the territories of the British Empire and English literature proved a strong 'ally' "in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education" (Viswanathan, as cited in Ashcroft et al. 1987, p. 3). Because the works of the literature imported to the colonies were "specifically concerned with colonial expansion ... embody[ing] the imperialist's point of view" (Boehmer, 1995, p. 3) and they were intended to reinforce and legitimize the colonial system as a whole. The curricula of the literature courses were designed to raise children who would appreciate British literature so the contents and the syllabi were maintained "without any fundamental alterations because of the superstitious faith in the former master's educational wisdom" (Kirpal, 1989, p. 29).

As another proof of the importance the British colonizers attached to education, the Colonial Office and the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies (ACEC) which were administered as separate units each with its own governor survived into the late 20th Century. Despite the demise and dismantling of the imperial and colonial structure, ACEC's journal, *Oversea Education*, went in circulation from 1929 until 1963. The aim was to enable colonial educators to keep in touch with each other, to maintain educational issues in unison and to share knowledge. The articles published dealt with a variety of topics including mass education, language of instruction, female/girls' education, teacher training, school curriculum, adaptation of the curriculum, examinations and higher education (Whitehead, 2003).

The post-independence and the post-colonial stage which began in the late 1940s did not end the prevalent use of the English language because the linguistic legacy of the British Empire was preserved in the administrative, educational and economic apparatuses in the formerly colonized countries. Indeed, it is paradoxical that the second phase of the British cultural domination began after the disintegration of the British imperial structure in the 1940s in the aftermath of the Second World War. After the independence and partition of India in 1947, the collapse of the British Empire gained momentum in the 1950s and the 1960s during which the great majority of the colonies secured their independence one by one. In 1931, the settler countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa had been granted large degrees of sovereignty and in 1949, to contain the nationalist movements which began to grow in the dominions, the British Commonwealth was redefined and transformed into the Commonwealth of Nations dropping the allegiance to the crown from its statute in 1949. The Monarch of the United Kingdom, however, remained the official 'Head of the Commonwealth' with almost all the ex-colonies joining the Commonwealth on a voluntary basis. The interaction

of the dominions and ex-colonies within the body of the Commonwealth is extremely important because 53 member countries of 2.4 billion people agree “the use of the English language as the medium of inter-Commonwealth relations, and acknowledge Queen Elizabeth II as the Head of the Commonwealth” according to the 5th criterion of for Commonwealth membership. The Commonwealth Charter decrees that “the special strength of the Commonwealth lies in the combination of our diversity and our shared inheritance in language, culture and the rule of law; and bound together by shared history and tradition” (<http://thecommonwealth.org>). So the great majority of formerly colonized and settler countries still act as a single body as far as cultural issues are concerned with the English Language still binding them tightly. Apparently, the English language proved to be the most pervasive and abiding export item to the colonies even after the disintegration of the British Empire.

The British Empire had already lost much of her colonies, dominance, hegemony and prestige in the aftermath of the Second World War when the new world powers, the United States of America, another English-speaking country, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, grabbed the control of the bipolar world with two alliances, NATO and Warsaw Pact. The possible decline of the English language after the collapse of the British Empire with its ages-lasting imperial and colonial supremacy has been prevented by the rise of the USA particularly after World War II. On the contrary, the rise of a new power, the United States of America as another English-speaking country cemented the position of English as an international language spoken in all walks of life. In tandem with the military and economic power of the USA, American cultural hegemony began to extend and contest the cultures and nations which managed to preserve their identity and language against the overwhelming British incursion. American impact on the English language to become a world language has gained pace with the economic power of the USA and the cultural influence it has been exerting with radio/TV, the internet, the Hollywood film industry, and popular music. American cultural artifacts, American mass media, American entertainment ways, the fast-food industry, and consumer culture habits have been exported all over the world and they have been changing the cultural eco-systems of the countries obviously with the English language accompanying all these. It is beyond doubt that today a considerable percentage of the books are published in English, a great many scientists read English, thousands of schools worldwide teach English and the data stored in retrieval systems is predominantly in English. English is also the language of the world market and business, academic conferences, scientific, academic and medical journals, safety regulations, information technology, computer hardware and software, international organizations, international travel and tourism, motion pictures, popular music and social media with the widespread use of the internet.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, the hegemonic power of the English language today is rooted in the imperial, colonial and invasive history of the British Empire. During the colonial era, the British colonizers, slave traders, administrators, sailors, navigators, discoverers, clergy, educators, traders and military enforced the English language in the colonies and dominions. The local, indigenous and native people were compelled to have their contact and communication in English with the British people of all occupations and positions as a result of the power hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized. Obviously, the most powerful instrument to implement the language of the colonizer was the education system which imposed the cultural and historical perspective of the colonizer. In the post-colonial period, although the British Empire disintegrated in the first half of the 20th century, the linguistic legacy remained intact with the establishment of the Commonwealth and particularly with the rise of another English-speaking country, the United States of America. The English language has gradually transformed into a world language, international language and de facto lingua franca in most contacts owing to the overpowering and wide-ranging impact the USA has been exerting in all walks of life in addition to the linguistic pressure and oppression exerted by the British Empire on different peoples all over the world for ages.

Disclosures

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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