Language Simplification and Language Globalization[1]

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Abstract: *Identifying the English language as having an international status in mind, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the characteristics or factors a language (any language) must exhibit in order to become a global language. The focus of the paper, however, will be on those characteristics rendering a language structurally simple. An argument that such characteristics represent the most important among all others to qualify a language as a candidate for a global role will follow.*

1. Introduction

English today is considered as the worldwide dominant lingua franca. It is spoken or used by more than two billion people around the world, of whom about 400 million are native speakers. Many researchers have tackled the aspects characterizing English leading to its supremacy as the unchallenged supernational language of the world (see, for example, Crystal 2003; Grabe 1988; Jenkins 2000; Navarro 1997; Prabha 1994). English indeed is the language mostly learned by second or foreign language learners around the globe; the language of the World Wide Web (WWW), of air and maritime navigation, of diplomacy, and of science and medicine.

2. Factors and Characteristics other than Language Simplification

In this section, I will investigate the factors and/or characteristics other than language simplification by which a language can gain a globally recognized status. To begin with, the number of people speaking or using a language is one factor. Swales (1993) holds that languages of wider communication prosper and occupy a central position in internationality.

Clearly, English is not the only language currently fulfilling this kind of role. Following Navarro (1997) languages can be seen as forming part of a global system consisting of several major constellations, each with its own set of local languages related to one central language, namely, the one spoken by the most multilinguals within the constellation. Some ten or twelve constellations can be readily identified. Some map fairly closely onto borders and those of

immediate neighbors (e.g., Russian or German). Some, such as French or Portuguese, link an erstwhile colonial power and its former dependencies despite territorial separation, while others connect a dominate group in a large, socially complex country with other linguistic groups within the country and with a widely scattered Diaspora (e.g., Hindi or Chinese).

One of the less often mentioned languages operating in this fashion is Urdu, a language for which McArthur, (1999) makes a plea, arguing that it should be taught in South Africa as a language of cross-cultural communication, to strengthen links between that country and the Indian sub-continent, and to foster mutual tolerance and understanding. Other languages of this type are Malay – in both its Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia varieties – and Bengali, both spoken by more speakers than German or Japanese, yet rarely mentioned in this context, presumably because of the relatively minor geopolitical roles played by the nations with which they are associated. Within each constellation, the communicative potential of the dominant languages is a factor of its prevalence as a mother tongue and its spread among multilinguals. This is an advantageous situation that the elites in charge of their respective sphere of influence are unlikely to relinquish, especially since maintaining this advantage becomes easier as nations grow wealthier.

A second factor likely to affect the supremacy potential of a language is the degree of exposure to standardization. Bruthiaux (2002), for example, argues that the wide distribution of Arabic across national borders should in principle make that language at least as impervious to standardization as English. This should ensure that no single variety dominates and that the language is permitted to adapt to local environments while maintaining sufficient unity to function as a language of international communication. However, this potential for adaptation is reduced by the close association of the language with a religious message that does not lend itself readily to relativistic interpretations. As a result, the potential for Arabic to adapt to local settings, especially in its written – hence most easily standardized – form and to take on a global role must be regarded as limited, even if other geopolitical factors were favorable.

Moreover, a major factor in the globalization of a language is its appeal as a modernizing and liberating force. Prabhu (1994) argues that in a rapidly changing world, access to knowledge is no longer a luxury enjoyed by a tiny leisured class sitting at the apex of a feudal society. Today, it is a major predictor of which members of a society are likely to see tangible improvement in their standard of living and which are likely to stay poor. Admittedly, knowledge comes in many forms and is carried by many linguistic vehicles. However, if knowledge is

likely to lead to beneficial change, it must be – as Prabhu puts it – of the "learning" and "thinking" as opposed to the "doing type." In developing societies especially, such thinking and learning is likely to lead to an interest in what might be termed "big ideas" such as democratic participation and civil rights and to a turn of mind favoring inquiry, criticism, and skepticism.

Much as Latin linked the intellectual community of medieval Europe, English now connects policy-makers, business leaders, academics, and other professionals who share a set of values and practices largely congruent with that identified by Prabhu. To some, this value transplant is to be welcome because it is relatively neutral. That is, it allows users – especially in former colonial settings such as India, South Africa, or Nigeria, for example – to bypass traditional structures and emotionally charged ethnic attachments, indigenizing in the process both values and the language that carries them.

As Petzold and Berns (2000) show in the case of Hungary, along with the repaid political and economic change that accompanied the waning of Russian influence in the country in the 1990s came a sudden rush of interest in English as an international language and an abrupt switch from Russian to English as the dominant second language in the country's schools. Yet, more than mere commercial relations must have been involved in this process as German was – at least in principle – a viable alternative since an older German- speaking population survived and Germany quickly replaced the former Soviet Union as Hungary's dominant trading partner and soon established itself as the country's principal source of tourism income. One further consideration: the widespread use of a language will allow greater mobility among populations, especially where migration in search of employment is facilitated by the presence of a shared language (Munat 2005).

Finally, languages with a well-documented history of global spread or at least a widely reported reputation of such a history have a potential to assume a super national status. However, the current poor geopolitical and economic trends of the speakers of such languages may have adverse impacts on their potential for globalization.

To sum up, a number of factors have been discussed in this section to show that any language exhibiting one or more of them gains a potential for globality. These factors are the sheer numbers of speakers, the degree of exposure to standardization, appeal of a language as a modernizing and liberating drive, and a history of global reach. Nevertheless, it will be argued below that such factors, individually or collectively, are insufficient for a specific language to become globalized.

3.   Language Simplification

Language simplification refers to modifications that make sentences or utterances easier to perceive, understand, or produce. Such modifications have been investigated in some (13) so-called simplified registers [for an extensive review, see Tweissi 1998]. Of the most commonly studied simplified registers are: foreigner talk, speech directed by native speakers of a language to non-native speakers; baby talk (or motherese), speech directed by caretakers to children; teacher talk, speech used by native speaker teachers when addressing foreign language learners; and child speech.

The linguistic characteristics involved in language simplification occur at the four linguistic levels: phonology, morphology/lexicon, syntax, and semantics. At the phonological level, a speech characterized by fewer phonological processes, frequent main stress usage, transparent (enunciated) utterances, and less consonant cluster reduction is classified as simple speech (simple in the sense that it is not complex). At the morphological/lexical level, the uses of more common vocabulary, minimal amount of compound words, less amount of idiomatic expressions, and fewer inflectional morphemes are among the features commonly used to reflect the simple nature of a language. At the syntactic level, the following structural aspects are considered of simplifying effect in language: fewer subordinate clause, the centrality of the present tense in the time-meaning frame of the language, less number of embeddings in an utterance, fewer number of S-nodes in the sentence, and the frequent topic–comment structure. And at the semantic level, the use of hyponyms, and avoidance of using ambiguous words contribute to the meaning clarity in language.

While all of the above-mentioned language simplification features characterize spoken varieties of language, there have been a number of studies on written forms of language that serve simplification functions. For example, Janda (1985) conducted a pioneering study on the variety of simplified English used in note-taking (NT). His data came from seven sets of notes, each taken down by a different student at Stanford University as a record of a different lecture given between June, 1974, and December, 1976. None of the seven note-takers knew, at the time of taking their notes, that these would later be subject to linguistic analysis. For each set of notes, the first fifty (semi-) sentences were singled out to be analyzed via comparison with the lecture text on which they had been based. Janda (1985:142) says that he takes it "to be relatively uncontroversial that the purpose in taking notes is normally to have a potentially permanent record of at least the salient points of a lecture ….. in NT there is an absolute premium placed on surface brevity." He further says :

> In NT, what is reduced is actual sentences, while natural, spontaneous baby talk and foreigner talk involve the reduction of non-observable and (at best potential utterances … I would argue that NT is entitled to a special position among SRs (simplified registers), because of the unique opportunity it presents for studying actual, concrete linguistic simplification, with totally observable input and output (*ibid*.: 443).

The results of Janda's (1985) study show the following features of simplification:

(1) Omission of finite "be" from affirmative, negative, equational, and existential copula usage;

(2) Omission of articles (especially the indefinite article);

(3) Omission of unstressed pronouns (especially pronominal subject), and;

(4) Use of topic – comment structure.

Janda says that, on the one hand, elements which are more likely to be recovered from context may sustain more omissions in NT, while, on the other hand, elements which are less likely to be recovered from context are less likely to be omitted. Furthermore, contentful words are less likely to be omitted in NT. Prepositions are considered less recoverable from context and more like content words. Second, note-takers tend to convert active sentences into passive ones. Janda (1985:451) explains this phenomenon by assuming "that note-takers favor copula deletion and phrase omission to such an extent that they will take the trouble to perform a "passive transformation" in order to be able to omit the added copula and "downgraded" former subject." Third, he notes the presence of hypotactic (subordination) constructions to a higher degree in NT. The following explanations is given by Janda (*ibid.*:450) for this difference.

> BT and FT lack hypo taxis presumably because to employ it would overtax the linguistic capabilities of the listeners. But NT derives from an input that is already highly hypotactic, and its users are perfectly capable of processing linguistic subordination … Rather, note-takers, constraints are only the need for surface-brevity and the lack of time.

Zwicky and Zwicky (1980; 1981) have investigated two other written simplified registers in English: the restaurant menu register (1980) and (among what they call telegraphic registers) the cookbook register (1981). They emphasize that beside informativeness, brevity is a prime drive behind the reductions involved in these registers. They also point out that although limited space may be the constraint behind the use of brevity in restaurant menus, it is interesting to find the persistence of brevity in such registers even when the limitation of space is eliminated as in the case of cookbooks. Thus, they conclude "that the principles of

registral form are, at least in part, conventional" (Zwicky & Zwicky 1981:539).

They identified the following characteristics in the restaurant menu register: (1) heavy use of modifying past participles, such as topped, dipped, and garlic-accented; (2) heavy use of "tasty adjectives," such as rich, crisp, generous, zesty, and fresh; and (3) frequent shifts to other language vocabulary, especially French (Zwicky & Zwicky 1980). The following characteristics were identified in the cookbook register: (1) absence of first person pronouns; (2) absence of various prepositions; (3) omission of copula; (4) object deletions; (5) article deletions; (6) use of imperative; and (7) orthographic abbreviations (Zwicky & Zwicky 1981).

In her argument for why English exhibits a linguistic motivation that renders it as a vehicular language appropriate for globalization, Munat, (2005:146) says that the script of English is easily learned, at least by those members of the world's language communities who are already familiar with the Latin script, thus overlooking millions of speakers whose language is written in Cyrillic characters or Hebrew or Arabic script or Chinese radicals, to name only a few of the world's writing systems. She also adds that the phonological structure of English is believed to be relatively easy, entailing as it does about forty-two different phonemes (approximately eighteen vowel sounds and twenty-four consonant sounds, excluding some non-distinctive regional variations) which correspond to twenty-six alphabetic characters. This orthographic system is admittedly an imperfect representation of the single phonemes and causes considerable difficulties when passing from the oral to the written medium or vice-versa. The two systems, in fact, must be learned as separate entities.

From the grammatical point of view, Munat (2005) further argues that English is intrinsically simple by comparison with a host of other languages, having lost its case system and having reduced gender makers to only a few pronouns. The system to verbal tenses is rudimentary, at least by comparison with the major European languages, in that it has only a present and past tense. All other time references are constructed from a variety of auxiliaries and modals along with participles, a source of great confusion for most learners, especially those coming from languages having a more complete inflectional system.

Crystal (2003) shows that what is commonly referred to as "Global English" has its own, somewhat simplified, grammar and lexicon, in order to achieve communicative efficiency. And various manuals of style aim to guarantee a minimum standard of "clear writing." Among the more specifically linguistic advice discussed in the literature are the following suggestions:

- - Conveying meaning is more important than correct grammar
- - Keep sentences short
- - Avoid words with multiple meetings
- - Avoid metaphors
- - Avoid slang
- - Avoid variation of synonyms
- - Use common words (but not too common)
- - Make sure that "it" is unambiguous
- - Avoid using nouns as adjectives

It is worth noting that most of language simplification features have a reduction effect. For example, the use of fewer numbers of embedded clauses in a sentence renders it shorter in length, and hence easier to process by the interlocutor. Compare (a) and (b) below:

    a.   "Having explained the problem to his students, the teacher grouped the class into couples to practice the exercise."

    b.   "The teacher explained the problem to his students. "He then grouped the class into couples to practice the exercise."

Another example is the use of hyponyms where a cover word like "flower" is used in place of detail words such as "roses," "tulip," "lavender," etc.

    This reducing effect of language simplification is in congruence with one of the world globalization's pillars, namely *downsizing*. This principle of downsizing refers to the reduction of employees, number of bureaucratic levels, and overall size in a company in an attempt to increaser efficiency and profitability. It has prevailed in almost all sectors of organization, such as schools and universities around the world.

4.   Discussion

In this section I will show that the factors or characteristics other than language simplification, while indeed contributing to the supremacy of a language in gaining global status, are yet not determining factors. I will also explain how the linguistic simplicity of language can achieve most of these factors and characteristics. To be sure, I am talking about a language employed by a large number of speakers (native or non-native), largely exposed to standardization, has positive connotations of democracy, and has a history of expansion.

    Chinese (especially Mandarin), Hindi, and Urdu are languages spoken by a sheer mass of native speakers in the world. But none of them, yet, has been viewed as a supernational language. Bruthiaux (2002) argues that although critical mass is a key ingredient in the process of self-expansion, it is not sufficient for a language to compete

for a global status. He says as in all monopolistic situations, lack of competition blunts incentives and inertia becomes a dominant characteristic of participants in the monopoly, be they providers or consumers. These circumstances probably already apply to speakers of English as their first language, who may see no benefit in making the effort to learn a second language. But it may increasingly apply to potential users of languages of international communication, who may see no reason to challenge the dominant global language since they typically have few emotional ties with that or any other supranational language. In her study of attitudes toward English among international graduate students on a US campus, Munro (1996) found that her subjects saw English as playing as essentially instrumental role in their plans. Subjects were somewhat passive in their acceptance of their future role as Ambassadors for English and lacked incentives to support competitors to a language that had served them well and could be expected to underpin their career plans. To these homebound graduate students – the future policy shapers and predictors of cultural direction in increasingly outward-oriented nations – critical mass appears to have already ruled out any serious thought that there could even be a competitor for English as a global language (Munro 1996:134).

Many languages in the world have undergone a process of standardization, but only one, that is English, has gained a global position. Arabic, for example, has maintained a standard variety that has survived over fourteen centuries, thanks to the Holy Quran. But even in the heyday of Arab-Muslim civilization in the Middle Ages, Arabic had never been a global language. Similarly, Greek, German, and Russian have also been exposed to various degrees of standardization, yet not one of them has gained a supranational status. Despite the geopolitical and military power Russian was affiliated with, the language remained relatively local.

As for connotation with democracy, English and French are in order. No one can deny the advanced political democracy practised in both England and France. The question cast is why English, and not French has been chosen by the rest of the world to be the world lingua franca? Of course, part of the answer to this question must be that association with democracy is not the only determining factor in language globalization.

Arabic and Spanish are among languages with a well-documented history of international, wide reach, yet neither of them is a serious challenge to English as the current global language. Some may argue that the chances of Arabic's globalization might have been hampered by its use of scripts shared by few other languages (e.g., Persian). But if the use of an uncommon script is the major obstacle for

Arabic, how can this be used to explain the situation of Spanish, as it uses the same Roman alphabet as English?

To sum up, so far I have shown that a number of factors or characteristics other than linguistic simplicity of a language do contribute to the supremacy of a language, though none of them can in principle be considered the determining factor.

Now I turn to language simplification by which a language receives a number of modifications in the sound system, inflectional and lexical aspects, syntactic structure', and semantic features. Such modifications are reportedly efficient in rendering a language easier to perceive, use, and learn. Thus, the number of people who would choose such a language as a second means of communication will surely be much greater than those who would choose a language with a complicated linguistic nature. This enables the simplified language to gain mass expansion among speakers in the world. Moreover, in support of a linguistic globalization, a programmatic view assures that a language with simplifying modifications facilitates international exchange and promotes understanding among the people of the world. It renders interpreters, translators, and costly equipment unnecessary. It also allows greater mobility, as, for example, in the search for employment. Moreover, a language with simpler linguistic features and flexible orthographic system will render transmission of knowledge facilitated (Sotillo 2000; Wooldridge 2001).

5.   Conclusion

I have surveyed some of the principal social, political, historical, and linguistic factors and characteristics considered in linguistic globalization, but much remains to be investigated. The risks of excessive language simplification as well as the ethical issues of rendering a language ungrammatical due to such excess are yet to be considered. The danger that a monolithic global language may cause for languages with fewer numbers of speakers is another issue to have in mind. Ultimately, the fundamental consideration must be that the goal of the people of the world in choosing one language over another, especially as a second or global language, must be guided by the principle of promoting solidarity among the diverse nations of the world.

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Note

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