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## The Status of English in a Global World

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### Abstract:

Language is not only used as a means of communication, but it also carrier of the values that develop a distinctive culture and history. People identify with their situation in society through these moral, ethical and aesthetic values. In this globalized world, under the influence of the World Bank, postcolonial education systems have tended to yield priority to the former colonial languages and created a marginal status of the local languages. Most writers view the globalized world as a site of contention between the global languages and local languages. Some critics view globalization as ‘work in progress’, benign and good, which has unequal development in different regions of the globe. Some thinkers view globalization as hegemonically western phenomenon and an extension of the American imperialism. This globalization has affected all spheres of life - cultural, language, economic, political. Even, its essence is not uniform. This liquidation and bypass of boundaries have not only aided the local communities, but also led to domination of the First World countries over the Third World. This domination and intercultural mixing has erased the individual distinctions of culture and language and has promoted homogeneous global culture.

In this paper, I would like to focus on the role of the English language, and place it enjoys in a global world. I would concentrate on both aspects of the English language, how it is acting as a lingua franca allowing access to international knowledge and also, how it is acting as a killer language for native languages. Along with this, I would argue that English is a neutral tool to access the world knowledge and it is inappropriate to consider English as an imperialist tool for promoting colonial powers. Earlier, it was linked to imperialist expansion, but now it is adopted as a neutral tool to communicate with different cultures. With the expansion of technology and globalization, it has taken on a pragmatic role to facilitate the internationalisation of cultures.

**Keywords: Globalization, Linguistic Imperialism, Global English, Lingua Franca.**

This globalization has affected all spheres of life - cultural, language, economic, political. Even, its essence is not uniform. This liquidation and bypass of boundaries has not only aided the local communities, but also led to domination of the First World countries over the Third World. This domination and intercultural mixing has erased the individual distinctions of culture and language and has promoted homogeneous global culture. Even Spivak, a postcolonial theorist, in her critique of imperialism opines that colonialism initiated the complex procedure of global inequality and exploitation in the Third World. She argues that globalization is a continuation of this procedure. She lays stress on the role of culture in the creation of the inferior image of the third world. She calls this process of domination and cultural production as the worlding of the West as a world in which western ideas, interests and languages are highlighted as the world’s interests and are automatically propagated to the rest of the world. Spivak calls this operation of cultural production and domination as ‘epistemic violence’ of imperialism. Like Said, Spivak affirms that this epistemic violence of colonialism changes the subaltern’s knowledge of self. In ignorance, the subaltern legitimizes

the cultural supremacy and policies of the First World. This assists in the formation of an inferior order, and naturalizing false construct. In an interview, Spivak points that it is through Eurocentrism and globalization that the people of the First World are motivated to think that they live in the centre of the world, “they have a responsibility to help the rest and that people from other parts of the world are not fully global” (Spivak, *Signs* 622). This means that globalization is not a simple and unidirectional movement from the centre to the periphery. This shows that the operation of globalization cannot be separated from the structures of power perpetuated by European imperialism. These forces of globalization are still concentrated in the West despite their global dissemination. This dissemination of global culture within local communities has led to the subordination and the destruction of indigenous cultures.

Most writers view the globalized world as a site of contention between the global languages and local languages. The spread of English as the lingua franca is viewed as the linguistic peer to the process of economic globalization. Critics like Phillipson, Pennycook, Danny Dor and Tove Skutnabb view the dominance or spread of English as linguistic imperialism, which aimed at maintaining and reproducing economic and political inequalities between nations. Phillipson states “linguistic imperialism was manifestly a feature of the way nation-states privileged one language, and often sought actively to eradicate others, forcing their speakers to shift to the dominant languages” (Phillipson, *Continued* 2). Phillipson puts that “... once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British empire has given way to the empire of English” (Phillipson, *Linguistic* 1). Phillipson regards linguistic imperialism as a subcategory of cultural imperialism. Linguistic imperialism permeates cultural imperialism, media imperialism, scientific imperialism and educational imperialism. All these are interconnected since language is the means used to mediate and express them. Film, media, videos and television have led to the promotion of linguistic imperialism. Europe promotes English as a single world language for mutual understanding and international co-operation. World Bank, multinational corporations, educational policies, serve to ensure that English is the international language. In this manner, the dominance of English is maintained and perpetuated.

The dominance of English resulted in the linguistic genocide. Scholars use the term ‘mass murder’ instead of extinction of languages to point to the death of languages in the wake of globalization. They point out that the death of languages is not natural, but due to the working of mass media, particular institutions and formal education system that are maintained to perpetuate the dominance of English over other languages. Phillipson opines that the legitimation of English linguistic imperialism is made effective by the mechanisms of anglocentricity and professionalism. He defines anglocentricity as “the practice of judging other cultures by the standard’s of one’s own” (Phillipson, *Linguistic* 47) which leads to the devaluation of other languages and the particular cultures they took. Professionalism refers to the methods, techniques and processes of teaching and learning followed in ELT. Both anglocentricity and professionalism generate inequalities between English and other languages by legitimating English as the dominant language and rationalizing its beliefs and principles. Phillipson believes that the terms like “global English”, “English as a world language”, “Anglophone Africa”, and consideration of English as a ‘lingua franca’ “conceal the fact that the use of English serves the interests of some much better than others” (Phillipson, *Continued* 28). The reality is misinterpreted through these soft terms. English may be described as “a lingua franca”, “a lingua economica”, “a lingua cultura”, “a lingua academica” and “a lingua divina” but as Swales points out, English language also works as “a lingua tyrannosaura” and “a lingua frankensteinia” (Phillipson, *Continued* 149). This means that English is acting as a killer language, and many national languages are at risk from this

monster. Its spread is monstrous and has caused a precipitous decline in linguistic diversity. UNESCO report highlights that ten languages die out every year and more than 50% of some 6,700 languages spoken in the world are threatened with extinction.

Some critics contend that English is a neutral tool and its use as a lingua franca cannot be dismissed. As globalization has created a global village, the people of different languages need a lingua franca to communicate with one another. At present, English is a true lingua Franca and a global language. Crystal opines “a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognised in every country” (Crystal 3). English is spoken in different parts of the world as first, second or foreign language. Crystal calculates that about 85% of international organizations and 99% of European organizations are practicing English as an official language. This language has assisted people to conform to worldly changes in this globalized world. No doubt, spread of English led to the cultural and historical dominance, but the colonized were given access to the global knowledge using this. English has played a significant role in the internationalization of culture as people are no longer bound to their native cultures. It permitted them to interact with different cultures in the world. This shows that English is a tool for intercultural communication.

Even, UNESCO labelled English as lingua franca means ‘a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them.’ It eliminates linguistic gaps among the people of different regions. The people of the different parts of the world are linguistically equal. It assists people to communicate more widely and with masses of diverse culture and the international community. Pennycook agrees with Phillipson and points that English is the language of international capitalism. He also stresses that English is the language of protest. Writers of the Third World employed English as a weapon of protest to free their mother countries. They had an impact on the worldwide audience using this. It led to the unity among various linguistically different tribes steering the independence movements. Pennycook remarks, “It becomes important to acknowledge (English)... not merely as a language of imperialism, but also as a language of the opposition” (Pennycook 262). Pennycook opines that English should not be considered as a killer language, but one should adequately consider how it can be used in various contexts. Highlighting the importance of English in postcolonial contexts, Shaheera Jaffar remarks:

However, for many societies the answer does not seem to come from rejection, nor from assimilation into a foreign culture. The resolution has been to transform the intrusion of language into a tool and use it against the oppressor. It places them on a level equal to the colonizers. Not only has English been used to voice opinions against colonization, it has been amalgamated with indigenous cultures to assert one’s particular identity. (Jaffar 101)

Jaffar cites Elleke Boehmer to define this operation as “cultural boomeranging or switchback where the once colonized take the artifacts of the old master and make them their own” (ibid). In postcolonial theory, this is known as appropriation, which involves the reconstitution of English to subvert the empire, and it is defined by Ashcroft as “the process of capturing and remolding the language to new usages and it marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege” (Ashcroft, *Empire* 37).

Graddol remarks that adoption of English is leading to diversity and fragmentation as it possesses the ability to take local classes. He considers it the language in transition which is used for scientific, technological and economic purposes all over the world giving rise to new

forms and vocabularies. Graddol remarks English “allows adaptability and creativity fit neatly into local languages and code switching” (Graddol 35). Some thinkers call the phenomenon of English used in the local accent and style as ‘Glocal’ language. It means that English, an international language, expresses local identities and practices. R. K. Narayan opines that English is so transparent that it can take on the tint of any nation. Some thinkers opine that English is not wedded to a particular ethnic group or nation. Due to its adaptability and code switching, it is connected with everyone. It lacks standard form due to its transparency and flexibility to fit into local languages. This results in different Englishes like African English, American English and so on. Crystal accurately predicts the consequence of global language by pointing, “... It is that nobody owns it anymore. Or rather, everyone who has learned it now owns it – ‘has a share in it’ might be more accurate...” (Crystal 2-3). In this global village, English is acting as a unifying force to promote intercultural relationships. House points “a diglossia situation is now developing in Europe – English for various ‘pockets of expertise’ and non-private communication on one hand and national and local varieties for affective, identificatory purposes on the other hand” (House 561). Even Graddol remarks:

At one extreme, there is an unproblematic assumption that the world will eventually speak English and that this will facilitate the cultural and economic dominance of native-speaking countries (especially the US). Such a view is challenged, however, by the growing assertiveness of countries adopting English as a second language that English is now *their* language, through which they can express their own values and identities, create their own intellectual property and export goods and services to other countries. (Graddol, *Future 3*)

Graddol also points that English is not the sole cause of language loss. Some native languages vanish due to the regional language hierarchies. People shift toward the languages higher in the hierarchies leading to the destruction of other local languages. This shows that it is inappropriate to consider English as an imperialist tool for promoting colonial powers. Earlier, it was linked to imperialist expansion, but now it is adopted as a neutral tool to communicate with different cultures. With the expansion of technology and globalization, it has taken on a pragmatic role to facilitate the internationalisation of cultures. Crystal opines that English has supported some local languages, and he calls for bilingual situation. He remarks:

It is perfectly possible to develop a situation in which intelligibility and identity happily co-exist. This situation...a bilingualism where one of the languages within a speaker is the global language, providing access to the world community, and the other is a well-resourced regional language, providing access to a local community. The two functions can be seen as complementary, responding to different needs. And it is because the functions are so different that a world of linguistic diversity can in principle continue to exist in a world united by a common language. (Crystal 22)

Hence, I would conclude that people should use English language according to their need along with their own native languages. The domination of English over local languages can be challenged by the use of local languages. As Graddol and Crystal suggest, English will stand side by side with local languages. It allows the use of English according to the local taste and need, which will enhance the use of local languages for international communication. This needs an awareness that people in outer and expanding circle should try



to maintain their own languages while making use of English. This will lead to harmony of English with local languages.

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