



Cultural Imperialism and Erosion of Linguistic Diversity: Imprints of Globalization of English

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of English as a global lingua franca has given rise to debates involving the imprints as far as linguistic and cultural diversity is concerned. Keeping in view the essential role of English as a global language and its imprints on cultural and linguistic horizons, the present essay is intended to pursue the answer to the question “How far does the idea of globalization of English contribute to cultural imperialism and the erosion of linguistic diversity?” Through the perspective of synthesizing diverse ranges of viewpoints from varied sources i.e. academic, journalistic and commentaries, the essay is anticipated to figure out the arguments from both sides to critically evaluate the issue. As far as the structure of the essay is concerned it has involved thematic patterns initiated from the historical context of English as a global lingua franca, its persona on cultural imperialism, and its imprints on linguistic diversity followed by counterarguments and mitigation techniques to minimize the negative features of globalization of English in terms of cultural imperialism and erosion of linguistic diversity. The potential findings of the study involve that the inexorable facade of the English Language in a globalized context has presented it as a double-edged sword. At one hand, it has enacted as a tool for cultural homogenization and on the other hand, it also has facilitated as a means to promote cross-cultural communication.

Introduction

English as a Global Lingua Franca

The current persona of English as a globalized language is highly dependent on certain assorted historical processes such as colonization, cultural dominance and economic influences. The rise of the British Empire during the 19th and 20th centuries has given a great impetus to the rise and spread of English as a lingua franca across colonies. In the views of Crystal (2003), the expansion of the British Empire across the regions has given the English Language the status to act as a tool for administrative, educational and commercial communication and activities across Africa, Asia, America, and the Pacific. Until the culmination of direct colonial regime, English was well established to be a mode of written and spoken colonial legacy. The impact of the English Language was deeply rooted in countries such as India where it was taken as a language of higher education, judicial proceedings and running the system of Govt.

Kachru (1986) has rightly pointed out that the facades of the English Language in India had given rise to an elite class of English speakers, who were and are at the back of the post-colonial regime. Likewise, in the 20th century, the rise of the USA as a

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superpower has further advanced the persona of the English Language. The economic influence, cultural dominance and technological advancement of the USA greatly contributed towards the interplay of English as a global language (Graddol, 1997). USA dominance on the Internet, entertainment, business activities and digital assertion has led the English Language to be the default language of global activities across the globe (Crystal, 2006). This prominence of English led to the adoption of English as an official language in many countries, which led to linguistic imperialism. Under linguistic imperialism, English-speaking countries continued to dominate the lingual and cultural aspects of former colonies, (Phillipson, 1992).

On the contrary, there are arguments, that English expansion is not merely due to its historical processes but rather due to its utility due to its exponential role in advancing education, business, and communication which is termed as a pragmatic approach by Crystal (2003) contrary to the historical approach. The critics who have anti-imperialist views are of the notion that English has extended as a global lingua franca because it is practical and it has pragmatic and empirical values. To them, it has bridged the gap between people and has extended seamless interaction and communication across cultures. It has empowered people who speak indigenous languages to share the fruits of global citizenship by letting them have the impact of global partnership. In addition, English has fostered potential in education, business, and communication and has reshaped the cross cultural interface and dialogue.

Role of English in Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism refers to the notion of influence or dominance of one culture over the other, primarily through the interplay of language. Phillipson (1992) pointed out the fact that the expansion of English as a lingua franca formulates a culture of linguistic imperialism and dominance. Due to the spread of English as an imperial language, English-speaking culture imposes its values, norms, and customs on those people who are non-native English speakers. This perspective was and is highlighted by people from diverse fields of activities, i.e., policymakers, politicians, activists, and journalists on public forums with regard to loss of local cultural norms and values. They voiced that loss of identity in terms of culture and language is due to the dominance of English as a language and as a culture. It is because when minority and indigenous languages are neglected and English is promoted at each frontier, it will lead to the extinction of those languages along with the traditions and values attached to those indigenous languages. So, the English Language is deemed to be responsible for local, minority and indigenous language loss or death while expanding its scope around the globe.

Phillipson (1992), in addition, is of the view that dominance of English is not merely limited to linguistic dominance. Rather, it is extended to cultural imperialism through historical context of colonials. It means that colonial regimes and empires have utilized the English language as a tool for cultural subjugation of the people. The result of this dominance is the devaluation and marginalization of indigenous languages and cultures. In addition, this has potentially led to the decline of local languages and cultures in the hands of powerful English language and culture. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) amplified this cultural influence through lingual imperialism by adding that Internet, media, and digital access is primarily dependent on English language, which has further aggregated the decline of local and indigenous languages. It is because local languages are unable to compete to English as a mode of all the media and digital assertion around the world. Such a situation potentially empowers English language and results in the homogenization of cultural practices. Additionally, there are growing trends around the world, especially in colonized regions, to inculcate and prioritize English as a medium of instruction, which has further led to the linguistic and cultural imperialism of English.

On the contrary, online forums and social media platforms are vocalizing their voices against such cultural imperialism through their words, actions, and activities. People are having sentiments against such cultural homogenization, but it is continuing to exert its exponential growth side by side. Likewise, there are arguments that are voiced against cultural imperialism through linguistic influence. Supporters of English as a globalized phenomenon such as McCrum (2010) is of the view that English dominance is neither due to colonial, historical nor due to cultural imperialism, rather it is due to it being a neutral tool for communication. It is further aggregated due to its role as a global medium of collaboration and due to the fact that it is widely understood by the people of all the regions and cultures. This point of view suggests that English as a language doesn't impose anything inherently. Rather, it is meant to enable a common platform for all users or speakers to interact across cultures without being influenced or dominated by the cultural aspects associated with English as a language.

Counterarguments

The notion of globalization of English due to culture imperialism is widely known, but it too is not devoid of counterarguments. Critics of cultural imperialism are of the view that expansion of English as a global language is due to its pragmatic and utilization based approach rather than mere imposition of cultural values. Crystal (2003) raised a voice that exponential growth of English around the world is due to its pragmatic value rather than mere cultural imperialism. To him, English is adopted by people and states due to its value and ability to deal with business markets, higher education, technology usage, and global

communication. It has also promoted world trade, diplomacy, and technological advancement. McCrum (2010) favoured English as a globalized language because of being a neutral tool of interface across cultures.

To him, English has transcended linguistic and cultural barriers and has assisted people from cross-cultural contexts to communicate and interact with each other. This has also assisted in sharing and transmitting ideas and concepts without necessarily imposing cultural values. This notion negates that English dominance is due to culture and colonial impact. Rather, it supports English as a global language due to its practical implications. Fishman (2001) has put his viewpoint that stressed upon the preservation of Multilingualism. To him, English must be incorporated in all walks of life along with other local and indigenous languages so that these may support each other. It will not only lead to more dynamic and multilingual society but also a multicultural society.

Both English and indigenous languages may coexist and coincide with each other to promote harmony, diversity, and interactivity. Graddol (2006) has also put forth the counterarguments that English language is a source of cultural exchange rather than exerting cultural dominance. Due to English language literature, art, music, and fine arts have enacted as mediums for global exchange and no more as gadgets for cultural subjugation. Pennycook (2017) has highlighted the fact that economic and educational values are incorporated through English, and these can not be disdained merely because of the English language. English proficiency is highly rated for scientific exploration, medical advancement, technological literacy, and global citizenship.

Erosion of Linguistic Diversity

The expansion of English as a language has a substantial impact as far as linguistic diversity is concerned. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) talked about the concept of language death. According to this concept, local and indigenous languages are endangered because the speakers of those languages are showing a paradigm shift towards English being a global language. Their interest in English and the exponential persona of English worldwide has resulted in the decline or vanishing of local and indigenous languages around the world. The shift towards English language is not devoid of its pragmatic and practical use. People of local and indigenous languages are turning towards English due to the economic, social, cultural, and technological advantages that English has to offer. Local and indigenous languages are unable to meet users' or speakers' global needs, which has resulted in the erosion of such languages.

Nettle and Romaine (2000) have pinned down the seriousness of language loss or language death by adding around half of the minority and indigenous languages, i.e., around 7000 languages are at risk of extinction. Such languages are endangered due to the dominance of English and because such languages are no longer useful in the global context and are limited to mere ceremonial use. Emphasis on English as a medium of instruction in many countries is also one of the major reasons behind decline of local, indigenous, and minority languages as English is exponentially replacing those languages. Graddol (2006) is of the view that media, technology and their reliance on English is yet another key reason behind the erosion of linguistic diversity around the world. Internet, media, literature, art, and technology are using English as an essential component of communication, which has put other minority languages at risk of extinction.

Counterarguments

On the contrary, some scholars and arguments are not akin to the notion of language loss or death as indicated above. Such arguments suggest that the exponential growth of English doesn't essentially include minority language loss or death. Fishman (2001) is of the view that minority languages can survive along with English, as Multilingualism is a key to navigating in the global context of citizenship. However, he stressed the need to have suitable policies and educational setup to support Multilingualism. Scholars who are in favour of this perspective of Multilingualism advocate language preservation for linguistic diversity, along with the notion of English as a globalized lingua franca. Hornberger (2008) stresses the need to have effective language policies to mitigate the negative imprints of English as a source of lingual imperialism.

In addition, he suggested that the revitalization of native languages, education in mother languages, and the official status of minority languages can assist a great deal in preserving extinct languages and thrive in a multilingual context. Pennycook (2007) proposed that the concept of hybridity at both lingual and cultural levels can be an effective tool to have interaction between English and minority languages go side by side rather than putting each other down. These aspects can vitalize the existence of minority languages along with the globalization of English as a global language. These counterarguments recommend that the expansion of English as a language doesn't impose linguistic erosion. It can be curtailed through effective language policies, preservation of minority languages through revitalization, and as a means of Multilingualism.

Mitigation Strategies to Find a Balance

Contrary to cultural and linguistic imperialism theory, other arguments have acted as mitigated approaches to counter those arguments associated with the idea of cultural imperialism and linguistic erosion. Crystal (2003) deemed the exponential growth and expansion of English is due to its pragmatic and empirical roadmap, rather than mere cultural influence. Critics who have similar views to Crystal have argued that English is adopted as a lingua franca globally because of its utility value in the global interface, collaboration, and tool for mutual coexistence, rather than as a tool for cultural imposition. They have supported their arguments through the examples of those countries where there is English as a second language without any noticeable cultural assimilation. To mitigate the potential arguments that highlight the negative persona of English globalization, critics of anti-imperialist views have proposed varied strategies to counter the imprints of cultural imperialism and linguistic erosion.

Such strategies include bilingual rather than monolingual education, preservation of endangered languages, vitalization of minority languages through effective language policies, and encouraging linguistic diversity across disciplines such as media, the Internet and the technological arena (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). By implementing these strategies, it is possible to balance the imperialist view of global English and the pragmatic value of English as a global lingua franca. In addition, it will support cultural and linguistic diversity rather than linguistic erosion and cultural dominance. On the contrary to cultural imperialism and linguistic erosion, some deem that the globalization of English has opened new avenues of potential opportunities. David Crystal (2008), an illustrious linguist, has stressed the persona of English as a global lingua franca which is a common language that abridges cultures and lets hands in communication across cultures.

In addition, proficiency in the English language potentially opens avenues for education, employment, entertainment and active participation as far as global citizenship is concerned. On the other hand, instead of making minority languages extinct, there are arguments that speakers of minority languages are fortunate to have English as a tool for empowerment in terms of social mobility and interface. Smith (2023) being a journalist has put the same idea in these words “English is a passport to a better life...it shouldn't be seen as a threat, but as an opportunity.” It is a potential perspective which is frequently echoed in online forums and discussion boards. One of the users of English Language learning apps has pointed out a testimonial to it, “Learning English has opened doors for my career... I can now collaborate with people from all over the world” (User testimonial, Duolingo, 2024).

However, it is undeniable that the issue is not as much simple as a mere dichotomy between imperialism and empowerment in terms of globalization of English as a lingua franca. The imprints of English as a globalized phenomenon are reliant on varied factors such as cultural contexts, socio-economic factors, educational policies, and the agency with language communities (Shohamy, 2006). Some critics are in favour of having multilingualism where English and other minority languages coexist, finding a balance between English proficiency and continued utilization of local languages side by side as a balanced solution. This approach is highly recommended for linguistic diversity, cultural identity and to preserve knowledge (UNESCO, 2003). The concept of multilingualism is meant to foster a more inclusive and holistic world where communication doesn't encompass at the cost of cultural or language loss or death.

Conclusion

The globalization of English as a lingua franca is a complex issue which has dual imprints, i.e. negative and positive as far as cultural imperialism and linguistic diversity in terms of erosion are concerned. It can not be denied that the exponential expansion of English is deemed due to historical processes i.e. colonial regime and empire which served as a powerful tool to influence colonized regions. English as a language and culture has deeply impacted the life of non-native English due to cultural imperialism. On the contrary, there is a view that English dominance as a language is not wholly or necessarily reliant on the imposition of culture. Rather, the pragmatic value and utility of English as a global lingua franca has been the key behind the exponential expansion of English. Likewise, the arguments that voiced English linguistic dominance has endangered minority and Indigenous languages seem valid, even though there is a counterargument to it.

That is, instead of acting for the extinction of minority and local languages, English has acted as a bridge to fill the gap across cultures and languages as a means of global interface. To sum up, it is highly advisable to keep a balance between proficiency in the English Language and revitalization of minority and indigenous languages for an inclusive and globalized world around. Even though English dominance around the world is unmatched, efforts need to be put in to ensure the coexistence of indigenous languages to interface and enrich each other to maximize the potential and opportunities. English tapestry as an exponential tool of the interface should not be at the cost of cultural loss or language death, rather a collaborative environment should be promoted around the globe between languages and cultures for a harmonious intercultural interface.

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