One world, one language?

Barbarians! That's what the Roman Empire, in its latter days, called the Germanic tribes migrating south. The Romans had borrowed the word from the Greek barbaros, meaning 'unable to speak intelligibl

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In those days, you either spoke Latin or did not exist. Almost two millennia later, the descendants of the Germanic tribes have taken over the civilised world, relocated it outside the Mediterranean, and not speaking English is beyond the pale.

The triumph of English

So, what fate awaits modern-day barbarians? By a number of converging accounts, the non-English speaking hordes are in the process of being assimilated: In a small book of grand pronouncements [1], the eminent linguist David Crystal puts the case for English as the global language. He estimates that a total of up to 1,800 million people – 30% of the world population - are already "reasonably competent" in English, of whom "670 million have a native or native-like command" [2] of the language. About one billion people are learning it. In the European Union, according to a 2001 Eurobarometer survey, English – the mother tongue of only 16% of the EU's population – is spoken as a foreign language by a further 31% [3]. And when asked what language they find the most useful besides their mother tongue, 75% of respondents answered English.

The figures are overwhelming but also deceptive. If there is no denying the fact that English is widely used and taught, the numbers above are educated guesswork at best, since most data on foreign-language speakers is self-reported. And we'll never know what it means to be "reasonably competent" in English. But does it matter? What is more interesting certainly is the fact that the seemingly inexorable advance of English is fuelled by an unprecedented world-class status.

Over 85% of the scientific, technological or academic production in the world today is done in English [4]. In most countries and industries, a knowledge of English is an invaluable asset on the labour market. Multinationals, whether France's Alcatel or AXA, or Germany's DaimlerChrysler, use English as their corporate language. Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian has recently suggested making English the country's second official language, and there have been similar exhortations in Japan. The European Union's monetary policy is decided at Frankfurt, Germany, but in English. In the corridors of power, whether in Brussels, Geneva or New York, official discourse is produced in English first, then translated. Anybody who's anybody speaks English, or they'd be nobody.

And for the common people, English is simply prestigious. It has become the glittering symbol of the affluence and modernity of the technologically superior United States. From Tokyo to Paris, from Moscow to Dakar, English is in. Nobody wants to be a barbarian anymore.
But if English is in, does it mean that autochthonous languages are out – or should be? Not at all. Some, like Crystal, are quick to point out that English is merely fulfilling a functional need for a *lingua franca* in this globalised world. People will use English for business, but will naturally switch back to their local vernaculars at home. The fact that two-thirds of the world's children grow up in bilingual or multilingual environments is evidence enough that using a language for international communication does not imply abandoning other idioms in more local contexts, nor indeed one's cultural roots.

Others are not so sure. They see a threat to linguistic diversity or even an open encouragement to *linguicide*. They fear a process of acculturation.

**Lingua Anglia**

Many arguments have been levelled against the mainstreaming of English as a communication language. On the political side, some authors have questioned the fact that the spread of English is simply a natural and rational process in this global village. They recall that there are powerful reasons for the promotion of English: centre-to-periphery free-market ideologies demand a high level of homogenisation for the penetration of purportedly global values and products. They insist that English is not power-neutral: local elites trained in English in Western universities and acculturated to Western values are often found to be defending global capitalist interests against their people's. In many former colonies, the continued use of the coloniser's language in government only serves to consolidate the elite's grasp on power and prevent popular participation in public affairs. Also, one should not forget that English as a Second Language (ESL) has become a multi-billion dollar industry in the UK and the United States.[5]

Indeed, the very fact that English is so much associated with power – whether economic, political or other – explains the attraction it exerts on many in less favourable positions. For them, learning English is simply an exercise in upward mobility.

**Communicative competence**

But they're not out of the woods yet. Ultimately, the usefulness of English, or any *lingua franca* for that matter, depends on the communicative competence of speakers. Communication is efficient only when a speaker says – and his audience understands – what he means to say. Of course, experience shows that the communication process itself has many twists and turns even in monolingual environments and for perfectly homogeneous groups, let alone in the type of situations where the need for a *lingua franca* arises.

As all conference interpreters know, speakers with a poor command of the language will use various coping mechanisms to get the job done: reading prepared statements aloud in a thick accent and in total disregard for the prosody of the language instead of speaking extemporaneously, borrowing heavily or even calquing from their mother tongue, over-simplifying the message at the risk of being infantilised. As far as form is concerned, the result ranges from the extremely comical to the extremely painful. As for substance, it is often thin on the ground. Simply because it is difficult to be at one's best in a foreign language. Non-native speakers will often find that they cannot put their points across as well as they would want to. And when the ordeal's over, there comes question time. I'll always remember the compunction of a French director – who had laboured in Badly Spoken English over his company's production capacity problems – after having his increasingly fast and furious American boss repeat the same question for the third time, and still not getting it. The New Yorker roared again, using the exact same words as previously, only faster: - "Did I get it right that you just don't have the HR bandwidth to go into that production space right
now?"
"Eer.., yes", articulated the Frenchman, finally groping for the neatly cellophaned pack of earphones on his table and looking despairingly at the interpreters in the French booth.
"OK. You're fired!", answered the American, and left the room.

Whatever the *lingua franca*, the rule is invariable. You don't say as much as you would want to but only as much as your language skills allow. This can be particularly tough when you're dealing with unrelenting native speakers. So much for the promise of unfettered second language communication.

However, language problems are not the whole picture. Cultural differences can trip you up when you least expect it, even if the interlanguage is mastered to near-perfection by all sides.

A recent European Commission report on the "Impact of Multicultural and Multilingual Crews on Maritime Communication" [6] quotes the following example that took place during a period of military tension between Egypt and Greece:

> Egyptian pilots radioed [in English] their intention to land at an airbase on Cyprus and the Greek traffic controllers reportedly responded with silence. The Greeks intended thereby to indicate refusal of permission to land, but the Egyptians interpreted silence as assent.

> The result of the misunderstanding in this case was the loss of a number of lives when the Greeks fired on the planes as they approached the runway.

**Mutual intelligibility**

Yet, it is fair to say, the casualties will not always be in the camp of non-native speakers. Global English will not necessarily make it easier for native speakers to understand the wider world's murmur – if ever they should want to. As the language is taught and used all over the world in so many different communities and for so many different reasons, learners and users are inevitably influenced by local varieties of English that can impede efficient cross-border communication. In the words of a disenchanted British regular at international events: "When everyone speaks English, I'm never sure they've understood exactly what I've said, and I never know if they're saying what they mean".

It works both ways. Some years ago, a European professional association operating in English, French and German decided to cut costs and considered adopting a *lingua franca*. There was some dilly-dallying, on the part of the French especially, but in the end everybody accepted that you have to speak English in a single European market. In the newsletter that announced the new policy, the association's president, a German, explicitly called on the British to dumb down their language so that everybody could understand them without interpreters.

In fact, international English is a misnomer. World Englishes would be a better term. Such are the hard realities of authentic language usage: in the day-to-day interactions between speakers of various social, occupational or cultural backgrounds, every language is drawn into a centrifugal spiral of heteroglossia. People do not speak by the book. Words acquire new meanings. Like-minded groups develop their own repertoire and jargon. Accents go native. Local vernaculars interfere. Soon the resulting hybrid becomes the received linguistic standard. In a homogeneous speech community, those centrifugal forces will be checked by the unifying effects of the mass media, the education system or official language use. But World English has no world guardian. And for someone in Singapore, or Nigeria, the linguistic norms cannot come from Britain or the USA alone. Nobody wants 'their' language taken away from them.
Babel has come back to haunt us though the back door.

**International Auxiliary Languages**

Is there no other way to overcome the language barrier? Nobody can dispute the need for efficient international communication in today's world, and few will dispute the validity of the arguments against Global English: the difficulties inherent in the language itself, such as the mismatch between spelling and pronunciation, the language's strong ideological ballast, or the inevitable mutual intelligibility problems.

Lateral thinking is required. In Europe, some have been promoting the cause of Esperanto. They claim that, as an artificial language, it is ideologically neutral and would give no one an undue first-language advantage. Moreover, fluency could be achieved at a much lower cost. Claude Piron, who has written extensively about Esperanto, asserts that it "can be learned in an eighth of the time required to be able to communicate in an acceptable way in another foreign language, and in a thirtieth of the time required to have an actual mastery of another foreign language." [7]

The case is compelling, but many remain unconvinced. Most people do not learn a language for the fun of it. Who will spend, say, 500 hours of their time learning a language on which there is no visible premium? Who will there be to emulate? And how different from international English will Esperanto behave when used not only just by benevolent humanists serving the cause of cross-cultural understanding, but you and me pursuing our own interests?

**Language in use**

It's easy to get off track in the language debate. Scholars have long entertained very conflicting views about what language is. Chomsky for one has held that, for all their apparent diversity, the world's 5000 languages can be boiled down to a number of universal rules hard-wired in the brain. If that's the case, then little is lost if the whole world evolves towards a single language. At the other extreme, Whorf believed that human beings are totally at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society to the point of moulding their thought processes. If so, people from different backgrounds can only talk at cross-purposes, whatever the language.

The problem with such linguistic theories is that – paradoxically enough – they do not see it as their brief to explain the actual dynamics of language use [8]. They're only interested in language as an abstract, autonomous, system. But in the end what matters is the real language, how individuals use it in particular contexts. Consider this:

A French company with global outreach is introducing a new IT system. The technology is brand new and probably beyond the grasp of many in some national IT departments, and there are rumours that the changeover will usher in outsourcing of all custom software development.

The top IT man, an American, is flown in to Europe to present the vision and the technology to IT engineers and developers in individual countries. In France, the meeting is attended by the company's CEO and its human resource director.

Even though the multinational's official language is English, interpretation into French is provided. Not many people take headsets from the hostesses upon entering the room but – two minutes into a coarse Texan accent – most get second thoughts and fetch some for them and their neighbours. When his last Powerpoint slide is over, the American packs up and leaves for the next country.

The CEO then stands up and announces – in English – that the discussion is open. People may ask
questions in French if they must. "En français aussi si vous voulez, il n'y a rien de mal à cela". Remember that all 300 people in the room are French, and that their only half valid reason for continuing in English has left the room. No one says anything. To break the ice – the CEO and his HR director start a double act – in English – on the merits of the new system. Their English is appallingly bad. The phraseology is anglified French. The vocabulary is repetitive to the extreme and often inaccurate. Not one word is stressed correctly. Their speech is peppered with the usual corporate buzzwords: shareholder value, strategic disinvestments, core business, headcount (id'coont), total customer satisfaction, etc., as so many filler phrases you can rely on when the language collapses under your feet. But most of it is Alice-in-Wonderland English: it means what you want it to mean.

There comes one question from the floor – in English also – but it is too technical for them to answer. Then an elderly man in the back of the room hesitantly asks for the mike and starts "$heu..., Je m'excuse, je vais parler français". This time, the question is not about technology but its likely impact on the workforce, and the attendant need for better training programmes. The HR director answers back, in English, reciting the list of in-house training schemes and confirming that they will be expanded. Visibly not satisfied with the answer the elderly man stands up again and asks – in basic and slow but clear English this time – what assurances management can give that this new system will not be a total waste of time and resources as was the case with a similar initiative a while back. This time the CEO answers… in French. The question was tough, and providing a firm yet elegant and diplomatic answer is essential. There are times when you don't want to lose your tongue. Having done that, he switches back to English, thanks all participants for coming and listening, encourages them to provide feedback, and closes the meeting. Enough is enough.

In order to understand what happened at that meeting, you need to focus on language in action, on the actors in this language game, and on the power relations between them. As J.L. Austin said in How to Do Things With Words, "the issuing of an utterance is the performance of an action." [9]

In the process, you realise that what people say, how they say it, their tone of voice, accent and intonation, the choice of words, what they have in mind for their listeners, who the audience is and how they want to relate to them, all play a big part in how the message will be received and understood, in how meaning will be negotiated.

So power – or ideology – is vested not in particular words nor in the use of a particular language over another, but in the – conscious or unconscious – choice of language, words, style, accent, you name it, in particular situations. As Bourdieu has shown in a remarkable analysis of such games, language wields symbolic power[10] by virtue of the system of social relations which bears on the production and reception of discourse in a particular socio-historical context.

A useful reminder also is that linguistic capital is unevenly distributed in every society. And that not everybody is a CEO who can impose the working language and change it when it suits them better.

This has to be borne in mind in the World English debate.

The Mediators

Translation – in the broadest sense of the word – is probably the unsung hero of international communication. For all the buzz about Global English and the need for a lingua franca, remarkably very little has been said or written about the extraordinary contribution of translation to the exchange of ideas, the dissemination of human knowledge and, ultimately, cross-cultural understanding.

This is probably because of its low profile as a purely intellectual activity, or at best, and until very recently, a cottage industry that has stood in the way of the modern world's drive for homogeneity
and rationality.

One of the main arguments against translation is that it is too expensive. A figure often bandied about is that the European Union's eleven official languages cost about € 700 million. That's around 40% of the EU's administrative budget, which itself is just about 5% of its total budget. Mind you, that's still about € 2 a year for each European citizen.

But the picture is incomplete. A more scientific cost-benefit analysis of translation versus the lingua franca model should take account of other cost factors. For example, has anyone tried to compute the costs of misunderstandings attributable to deficient communicative competence in lingua francas? What about the costs of having to send half-baked experts to international meetings because they speak the language, whilst their more savvy but monolingual colleagues stay at home? What about the costs of thousands of hours of individual language learning or in-depth exposure to become reasonably fluent and competent in a foreign language? And what about the wastage caused by decades of utterly incompetent foreign language teaching in most education systems? A more fruitful debate would probably be on how to improve translator and interpreter training so that they become better mediators between cultures and languages.

This being said, it is easy to understand that language professionals also make a living out of occupying the middle ground between languages and cultures. Needless to say, theirs can be a rather uncomfortable position when it comes to getting involved in a public debate about the role, function and value of languages. And when they do, they often end up using words deceptively. When interpreters make the case for continued multilingualism in the EU for instance, what they actually support is a regime whereby all national languages are recognised as official and working languages. In practice, they affirm the right of every EU citizen to speak their own language, i.e. to remain strictly monolingual...

But that sort of answer, I believe, owes less to corporatist instincts than to the actual nature of the debate in the EU, where political arguments are forever thrown back and forth across the table from the sole perspective of states clinging to their national language as a potent attribute of their sovereignty. And now that the 'hard' sovereignty issues like monetary policy or trade have been devolved to Brussels, national language or identity carry even more weight than before.

It will be difficult to find any solution to the language problem through the national prism. If we cast aside for a moment the rigidities of institutions and consider cross-language communication in practice, a striking thing is that there are multiple planes of practical arrangements where exchanges can successfully take place between people.

They range from à-la-carte translation to asymmetrical interpretation and the promotion of passive language comprehension or even a total overhaul of national education systems to make way for determined and efficient language learning policies in every country and across all classes of society.

Hopefully, one day the EU will find its proper role as a network mediating between multiple levels of institutions and actors.

In the meantime, translators and interpreters must continue to fight for linguistic equality, in the EU and elsewhere.

They should not be afraid to participate, even though, as we have seen, any debate about language or translation is eminently political.

If the trend towards Global English continues, they will be relegated to mere localisers of dominant ideologies.
Hopefully, many will remember that their real mission is to facilitate multilateral exchanges between languages and cultures.

The world is a richer place when it speaks with many voices, and it will be a more peaceful place if all can be heard.

Further reading:

A useful bibliography on lingua francas is available at
http://www.sw2.euv-frankfurt-o.de/Doktoranden/ling.franca.html

[8] Investigating la parole is the task that sociolinguistics, and especially discourse and speech acts theory, have set themselves in opposition to Saussure's fixation with la langue as an autonomous system disconnected with society or Chomsky's ideal speaker-listener. For a really comprehensive and politically committed review, see Robert de BEAUGRANDE's online resource at www.beaugrande.bizland.com

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