English in the Information Society

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Writing in English or not?
Our topic

We have talked about the Information Society, about the whether it is really something new or not, and about freedom of access vs. IPR.

Now we turn to English. And the frame question is “Why English?”

This can be subdivided into a series of aspects:

What advantages and disadvantages does English have?
The frame question is “Why English?”

Achebe

Achebe speaks of reality. What does this presumably stand in contrast to?

• the ideal situation
• a change in the present situation

How did English gain its position?

• British colonialism
• It divided some ethnic groups
• It united various groups
• It allowed communication between them
  • within a given state
  • Pan-African
  • a world language
The frame question is “Why English?”

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

English was imposed on Kenya.

- Is English *the* language? the one all others have to bow before in deference?
  No. Not as Ngũgĩ tells how it was imposed.
  - humiliation
  - denunciation
  - lessons in being traitors

- Using English meant:
  - praise and rewards
  - opportunity
  - a sign of intelligence and ability
  - the creation of an African (English) elite
  - moving farther away from oneself

Other

- may inhibit learning; cf. UN position on language rights
- without well-developed literacy in one language, literacy in a second one is highly restricted
What advantages and disadvantages does English have?

Advantages:

**Achebe**
- English (or French) as access to a reading public
- Part of the project of new nations
- The local languages as tributaries to English (central)

Despite: legacy of racial arrogance and prejudice

**Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o**
- none mentioned
Disadvantages: Achebe

• Can a ESL or EFL speaker use English effectively?
  Yes. The opposite is half truth and half bogus mystique. Not just Conrad.
• Is true African literature only possible if written in an African language?
  Is everything else a dead end, sterile, uncreative, and full of frustration?
  No. But this literature will have different cultural roots, which it will make associations to.
  Rather: “a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language” (193)
• Is the standard that of ENL?
  No. Achebe hopes not. The English must be “universal,” yet able to express the writer’s experience.
  • Is it betrayal for someone to abandon their mother tongue in favor of English?
    Well, “there is no other choice.”
    It is important to use English without just imitating it.
Disadvantages
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

• What is the function of language?
  • communication
  • culture (moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge, right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean – until distinctive, in short “the basis of a people’s identity” and language is its “collective memory bank” (196)
• English is foreign to African culture
• Ergo: English is not suitable
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

Culture:
• product and reflection of history, i.e. of human communication
• source of images of nature and nurture
• transmits its images through language, a specific language

“Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.” (196)

English (or any colonial language)?
Domination of the mental universe of the colonized, control of how people perceive themselves. “Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control.” (196)

This even applies to technology, which “always appears to us as slightly external” (196) “Learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience.” (197) And history, geography, music were always the bourgeois European center of the universe (197).
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

After the book the excerpt comes from (Decolonising the Mind, 1986) he said he would only write in Gikũyũ and Kiswahili and rely on translation to insure a continuing dialog with all.

• Doesn’t this invalidate his arguments?

• Does writing in languages other than English help to de-hegemonize the world?

• Is there a difference in regard to this questions between literary and non-literary works?

How do Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o differ?
Seidlhofer (2006)

• Spread of English: not proximity but accessibility (air travel, electronic technology)
• Post-colonial uses of English: institutionalized, indigenized varieties, including EFL varieties

Yet disputed:
• emphasize on corpus studies instead of elicitation and intuition
• the widest spread of English is as a lingua franca (with no ENL speakers involved)
• descriptive effort has gone into Inner Circles Englishes and some Outer Circles instances as well
• EFL teaching emphasizes focusing on the actual language
• EFL speakers dominate world-wide
• shouldn’t this impact on teaching?
Coulmas (1987)

Rejects any “special endowments” of English. All because of the colonial past of GB (95). Despite worries about cultural colonialism, “English is rarely seriously threatened”

Advantages:
• large number of speakers
• clout
• demand for it in international contexts (96)
• “Speaking English means that you can just walk up to anyone, say ‘hi!’ and you’re in the middle of a conversation between equals. Thus the English language is being reduced to a lingua franca of social cripples.” (105)
• adequate for communication in all social domains of modern life (102)
Disadvantages:

• the developing international variety ("Airplane English") "is just like airplane food (economy class), dull and tasteless..." (105)

• the possibility that the language "influences the formation of novel scientific concepts – especially in the humanities – and that hence the increasing tendency of scientists to write in English will have a profound impact on the future development of science." (cf. W. Traxel 1979) = “Internationalität oder Provinzialismus? Über die Bedeutung der deutschen Sprache für deutschsprachige Psychologen,” Psychological Beiträge 17(1975), 584-594) (106)

• demands in writing and publishing are high (AmE or BrE); at conferences virtually everything is accepted in speaking which can be understood (106)

Further point:

• choice of the language used allows control over the interchange (100f)
How about a pluralistic model?
Its component parts would consist of
- ENL (many varieties),
- ESL (many varieties),
and
- EFL (many varieties)
But is this
- an additive model or
- leveled, koiné model

A variety may be defined as one “used extensively and consistently by a community of speakers with their own sociocultural identity, primarily in regular face-to-face contact” (Seidlhofer: 210, cf. Schneider 2003)

These involved primary socialization within a primary community.

Postmodern international, global communities are often virtual discourse communities sharing “a common communicative purpose or, more recently, as communities of practice.” (Seidlhofer: 211)

These communities are less likely to be seen as reified.
“So with the current proliferation of possibilities created by electronic means and effortless global mobility, changes in communications have accelerated and forced changes in the nature of communication: the media now available have changed the modes of use.” (Seidlhofer: 211)

English:
• already in a pivotal position
• a language of secondary socialization, “a means of wider communication to conduct transactions outside one’s primary social space and speech community.” (211)

International:
• professionals need international networks as do
• business people
• researchers
• many chatroom users (very real communities)

EFL: a variety not so much in terms of “dialects” as of registers (211)
Consequences:
• new concept of legitimate community
• legitimate linguistic variety

Appropriateness:
• register-driven
• not fully conform with ENL norms
• with their own in-group markers of shared sociocultural identity

Norms are descriptive, but can be raised to standards (prescriptive)

Expectations of EFL users
• default norms are ENL norms, specifically StE ones
• use is resistant to some of these norms
• community identification via EFL?
Literature


