

# MCDONALDISATION OR DIVERSITY? NOTES ON THE USE OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Keynote speech to the conference “Bi- and multilingual universities: Challenges and future prospects”, University of Helsinki 1-3 September 2005  
Universitetet i Oslo/Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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*What do you call a person who can speak three languages? Trilingual*

*What do you call a person who can speak two languages? Bilingual*

*What do you call a person who can speak one language? American*

## **Aphorism from the Internet**

The disappearance of languages, described in rather normative terms as language death by some linguists (e.g. Crystal 2000), has often been associated with the spread of English. Now it must be said that languages other than English, such as Bahasa Indonesia, must take their share of the responsibility, in the same way as it must be said that all that is not well in the world cannot be blamed on the Americans.

While unsentimental attitudes to language death do exist among linguists (e.g. Keats 2003) who see a promising creative potential in hybrid languages like Spanglish, such views are debated and controversial. This lecture is not taking on that topic, although what I have to say will be tangential to the question of language death. Rather than looking at the disappearance of languages, I shall take this opportunity to reflect on the implications of the ever-growing preponderance of English as the second (or, in many cases, third) language of

the world – the single most important, increasingly unchallenged language of international communication.

The global dominance of English is reflected in many ways, not least through the linguistic insularity, indeed parochialism, of the English-speaking parts of the world. On a wonderful website called Index Translationum ([http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=7810&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=7810&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)), the UNESCO has collected a variety of statistical material on translations between 1979 and 2002. It reveals that 834,856 books were translated from English in the period – the figures for French, the runner-up language, are 141,801, and for Finnish 5,888.

Regarding target languages, the German-speaking world is the keenest on being enriched by impulses from abroad. 243,144 books were translated into German (only 141,129 books were translated from German), while 164,794 books were translated into English. The impressive number of 36,898 books were translated into Finnish.

In other words, while the Finns translated more than six times as many books as the number of Finnish books published abroad, and the Germans translated nearly twice as much into German as that which went in the opposite direction, more than five times as many books were translated from English as into English. While just 5.4 per cent of the books translated from German in 2002 had English as their destination language, more than two-thirds of the books translated into German were from English.

It is almost impossible to believe it, but if the UNESCO statistics are correct, more books were translated in Denmark (5 million inhabitants) than in the United States (300 million inhabitants); and more books were translated in poor Bulgaria than in the rich United Kingdom.

According to statistics on Internet use, 51.3% of communication on the Internet is in English (while a mere 5% of the world's population speaks it as

their first language). Regarding academic publishing, I have been unable to find reliable figures, but everyone seems to agree that the proportion of English has increased steadily since the Second World War. In some fields, more than 90% of publications are in English. According to the British Council, about 25 per cent of the world's population speak English "to some level of competence"; and they add, in a perhaps not overly disinterested vein, that "demand from the other three-quarters is increasing". "Everybody wants to speak it." (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/english/>). However, due to the uneven population growth in the world, the proportion of native speakers of English has gone down from 9 to 5 per cent in the last fifty years.

Our preliminary conclusion must nevertheless be that while James Joyce learned a dozen European languages in order to be able to communicate with the world, today it seems as if one would do just fine.

The topic of this lecture is not the situation of English in the world as such, but slightly more modestly, the hegemony of English in academic discourse. We are not talking about language death. On an Interrail trip to the shores of the Mediterranean more than twenty years ago, I met a young American who was convinced that Greek was dying out rapidly. He had discovered that everyone he met (presumably young, urban Greeks) was learning English. As if bilingualism were impossible. As any linguist (and a few anthropologists) could have told him, bi-, tri- or even multilingualism is the norm in human societies; monolingualism is the exception. So the spread of English as a foreign language (EFL) does not mean that vernaculars are dying out. But it has other consequences.

A term often used in the research bureaucracies of small countries is internationalisation. An instance of new public management newspeak, it means "teach your courses in English!". In the same discursive framework, "international publications" are also favoured, and this tends to mean "publish wherever you like, as long as you do it in an English-language journal published abroad". (It could be *The Botswana journal of postmodern studies* for that matter, as long as it is foreign and Anglophone.)

As a result, academic work in nondominant languages is becoming marginalised and difficult to sustain, at least in smallish countries. With German, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese it is different, but even there the tendency is marked. Yet it is well known that certain things can and should only be said in certain languages. It may in fact be true that some ideas can only be expressed properly in German, and that certain ideas, say, about German society, should be expressed in German for the benefit of the German public sphere. I shall have more to say about this aspect of academic monolingualism later.

English as a shared language of communication has certain obvious advantages. Its functioning can be compared to that of Microsoft Word. Nobody likes Microsoft and few like its unlovely word processor (at least that goes for those of us who are familiar with superior alternatives...), but its great virtue lies in making communication possible and frictionless worldwide. In the old days, that is to say the 1980s, each major computer manufacturer had its own operating system and its own software. As a result, the electronic transmission of texts became cumbersome and often impossible. It was the era of the Tower of Babel of word processing.

With the total dominance of Microsoft Word, the result is comparable to that of the total dominance of English (or, for most of us, EFL). Everything is compatible with everything else; yet, many of us feel, even if we cannot prove, that it shapes our thoughts in insidious ways.

Let us, therefore, try to identify some of the characteristics of EFL, and to reflect on the ways in which our writing (and talking) is influenced by the fact that a large proportion of us – that is, academics – regularly use a language other than our vernacular, that is to say a language different from the one we lead our everyday life in. (A comparison with medieval Latin is inevitable, but it will have to wait for now.) In a certain, obvious sense, the universal usage of English places everybody except the native speakers at a disadvantage. Just as women and blacks have always been forced to perform twice as well as the

“universal human”, that is the middle-aged white man from a metropolitan country, non-native speakers in reality have to accomplish more than native speakers to be considered equal achievers. So there is a dimension of symbolic power here, which was recognized at a meeting in the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in the early 1990s. A Danish colleague ingeniously suggested that everybody had to speak a language other than their own at the conference. (In practice, this would force the Britons to speak French.) Naturally, the suggestion was not taken on, but the point, which was about a discrepancy in symbolic power, was well taken.

In order to come closer to an understanding of the characteristics of EFL, it may be instructive to look at the ways it is taught. There are courses available for translating between “plain English” and EFL. One such online course, or really a teaser for a course ([http://www.webpagecontent.com/arc\\_archive/139/5/](http://www.webpagecontent.com/arc_archive/139/5/)), offers a great deal of advice – not, this time, for the foreigner wanting to express himself better in a foreign language, but for natives wanting to be understood by foreigners. As everybody knows, English as a foreign language is not the same language as English spoken by natives. More than one first-time foreign visitor to London, with top marks in English from his or her school, has been shocked and outraged upon discovering that it is plainly impossible to understand what the cockney cabman is saying.

The examples discussed in the online course are instructive in suggesting some changes to be expected when an increasing amount of communication takes place between people who are not using their first language.

- One is advised to use short sentences.
- One is advised to avoid false subjects such as “It” in sentences like “It is extraordinary how warm the weather is”. It is better to say “The weather is extraordinarily warm”.
- Miniwords, or fillers, such as get, go, lot, by, for, it, he, the, a, of, are

discouraged as they can lead to confusion.

- Complex questions are discouraged, such as “You don't have the courage to acknowledge that your allegations have no factual basis whatsoever, do you?” Rather say, “Do you admit that you have made false allegations?” (I like this example. It prepares the native speaker for encounters he may expect with foreigners.)
- Similarly, double negatives are discouraged: “The results were not displeasing” should be avoided. Instead say, “The results were pleasing”.
- One is moreover advised not to use idioms such as “the tip of the iceberg”, “just around the corner” and so on.
- Plainly, all kinds of ambiguity are discouraged to avoid misunderstandings. Negative words are also discouraged, as in “The shipment will not arrive until late January” – it is better to say “The shipment will arrive in late January”.

In other words, authors of courses like this one want native speakers to avoid colloquialisms and idioms, understatement and metaphor. In the hard sciences, I suspect the challenge of avoiding figures of speech, the flavour of colloquialism and idiomatic expressions is modest. In humanities and some social sciences, it is much more serious, since the main aim of writing in such disciplines may not be parsimony and clarity, but richness and nuance.

Let us return to academic English and conference English. Although there is a considerable, and growing, literature on English as an international language and, notably, some of the local varieties developing in places like Hong Kong (Joseph 2005) and the Caribbean (Wells 1982), sociolinguistic or sociological studies of academic and conference English still seem to be thin on the ground. What follows is therefore tentative – please excuse my ignorance if necessary.

First, there appear to be few discernable regional variants in academic

English. Unlike the varieties of literary English or spoken English in ex-colonies such as India or Nigeria or even Australia or South Africa, nearly always seen as enriching, variations in academic English are never seen as virtuous.

The differences between foreigners and native speakers is often commented upon, here as in other kinds of context. American English appears easier to understand than British English, probably for historical reasons. The USA historically needed a cheap cultural entrance ticket in order to be able to assimilate immigrants quickly. But this difference is not, I would argue, the most marked one.

First, there is an interesting relationship between the oral and the written here. English as an academic and conference language is largely a written version even if it is often spoken. Lots of people at conferences speak more or less like books. One may even sometimes think: She cannot be a native speaker, her grammar is too correct. This is quite different from the kind of English one hears among immigrants who have learnt it as a kind of speech. Second, a useful distinction may be the one, introduced decades ago by the anthropologist Edward Hall (1966), between high and low context. His debatable, but very intriguing view was that certain spoken languages depended on a great deal of nonverbal communication, while others contained and needed little nonverbal content. High context languages in Hall's account were Arabic and Italian; low context languages were German and Swedish. Be this as it may, it may shed light on academic EFL to describe it as a low-context language. It is ideally stripped of the quotidian, the subtle and the understatement. Or one could, following Geertz (1982), call it an extremely experience-distant language.

I teach quite a lot in English, usually to non-native speakers. Like many of you. I notice that because of the lack of a shared cultural environment, I tell fewer jokes about local politicians and avoid word-play than I do at home. Come to think of it, I often tend to avoid jokes altogether when I teach in English to students who may struggle with the language, and who cannot

reasonably be expected to understand my bad jokes. As a compensation, the students probably learn more.

Thirdly, the difference between English as spoken by natives and academic EFL is much more marked than it is in writing. After all, academics are reading, writing people. This phenomenon is, incidentally, far from unknown in other contexts. It is said about Joseph Conrad that he spoke so bad English that only his close friends could understand him. And Vladimir Nabokov famously said: “I think like a genius, I write like a great writer, and I speak like a child.” This difference may lead us to expect that native speakers get the upper hand in discussion sessions at conferences, if not at formal presentations. In my experience, they do.

The problem is not just a technical one of vocabulary and pronunciation. In fact, it may be the case that certain things can only be said in one’s vernacular. Walter Benjamin recommended that in translations, the flavour of the originating language should be audible – in other words, that an English translation of Goethe should resound with a German accent and cumbersome sentence construction.

The other side of the coin is nevertheless that for non-native speakers, certain things are more easily said in English, since by using English, one avoids the clutter and disruptions of personal experience. This corresponds to the low-context language of Hall or, perhaps, the so-called elaborated code of Basil Bernstein, which that linguist associated with educated, middle-class people. But in some ways, the elaborated code is really in some ways more restricted than Bernstein’s restricted code (which he associated with the working class), since it erases the implicit, the metaphorical and the idiomatic. One may write a perfectly sound scholarly article and not know a broom from a brush, or a balcony from a verandah; and one may be a world intellectual writing one’s main work in English without being able to use puns and metaphors from cricket.

The final point, alluded to earlier, is that academic EFL is and remains an



expression of standardisation and homogenisation. The flattening work of English as a foreign language is a continuation of the work of nation-building, the search for linguistic common denominators. Since it is being compartmentalised to a few, limited contexts, this unbeautiful language of pragmatic intercultural communication does not lead to the disappearance of vernaculars. What it does, though, is to shift the intellectual scene in many countries where English is not the vernacular. Since academics increasingly relate to an English-speaking public sphere, the domestic intellectual discourse suffers. At the University of Oslo, there are scholars who have devoted their lives to the dissemination of Foucault's ideas in Scandinavia, or to criticising the welfare state for its unintentional side-effects. Under the present academic regime, publishing in English has an immeasurably higher value than writing essentially the same texts in Norwegian. However, lots of people introduce Foucault in English and besides, a Norwegian-language public sphere should be capable of having its own debates going, tailored to a Norwegian world of experience and able to influence public opinion and policymakers in the country. Similarly, writers who specialise in the Scandinavian welfare state cannot say the same things to foreign readers as they do to the domestic ones. They have to "contribute to the international debate" (another newspeak expression), meaning that local context must be explained step by step since prior knowledge cannot be taken for granted.

The domestic public spheres in many countries risk losing their cutting-edge contributors to the Anglophone world. Being a middle-sized fish in a large pond can be more satisfying than being a large fish in a small pond, and yet certain important things can only and should only be said in vernacular languages. Only a couple of weeks ago, the economic historian Einar Lie published the last volume of a collaborative history of Hydro, Norway's most important industrial enterprise. That book, impressively researched and convincingly argued, is going to make a difference in the self-understanding of the country, and will doubtless have subtle effects on politics. Had he written it in English, the impact would have been minimal (but he would then have a major "international" publication to his name).

Academic EFL, necessary as it is for mutual intelligibility, is threatening to replace vernaculars in intellectual discourse, and the result is that domestic or national issues are marginalised.

The world is becoming a poorer place in this way. However, notwithstanding the impoverishment of the domestic public spheres, which is a serious issue these days, especially in the smaller countries, I am convinced that we could do better than merely imitate the metropolises, even if the aim is to communicate with the world. We could in fact, rather than imitating a sexless, vaguely transatlantic norm, infuse international English with local colour. In medieval times, there was no norm of pronunciation for Latin. Swedes and Frenchmen pronounced the same words very differently. (Whether they were able to understand each other is another issue. Maybe it didn't matter so much.) Local expressions, jokes, saws, even strange forms of syntax should find their place in the local versions of the emerging "world Englishes" (Melchers and Shaw 2005), all within the bounds of intelligibility of course. And if a sufficient number of us did this, the hegemonic status of English as spoken by natives might eventually disappear. There would be Greek, German and Italian variants of English, discernably local and experience-near, all of them distinctive. This might enrich both English and vernaculars.

So as you can see, I'm not, at the end of the day, a worried puritan. In my world, Spanglish is a perfectly reasonable response to a difficult linguistic situation, and one cannot rule out that something exciting might even come out of it. Looking at the history of English, continuously adding vocabulary while simultaneously shedding dead structural wood, such a diversification would confirm the greatness, the generosity and the pragmatic liberalism of the English language. The alternative is the McDonaldisation of English: the universalism of standardisation and simplification.

Rather than settling for a common denominator – short sentences, no ambiguities, and so on, we might encourage pluralism. Future editors of the *OED* may curse us for making their job more difficult, but future James Joyces will rejoice.

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