English as Lingua Franca: a Brief Review from Indo-Europeans to Global English

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ABSTRACT

English as Lingua Franca is a status that this language has obtained after the recognition of society. This paper introduces a brief bibliographical review on the evolution of the English Language towards its status of Lingua Franca. There are different historical, economical, military, and technological reasons that support and explain the achievement of this status. These reasons are introduced in this paper with the aim of providing a general perspective on this topic. This paper starts with an explanation about the origin of the Indo-European languages and moves towards the first Lingua Franca used in history; then the main focus lies on how English has become a global language in the current society, resulting in a language that has more non-native speakers than natives ones.

Keywords: *English; Lingua Franca; Global English; Language.*

Introduction

This paper focuses on an analysis of the evolution of the status of the English language as a *lingua franca*. The aim of this paper is to show the current linguistic situation of English language in the world, and justify why the current *lingua franca* in international scenarios is English. In order to understand the spread and repercussion of English worldwide it is necessary to discuss the origins of prior *lingua franca* and their uses in history, how English has achieved its status, and the consequences of these into the language: the creation of a new and global variety of English. The status of English language as *lingua franca* has been crucial for the globalization process that society went through especially during the decades of the 1990s and the 2000s.

The Origins

Languages have been present in the world for ages and their purpose has always been to communicate effectively and efficiently. Communication is the process of transferring information, the basis for the development of society. Therefore, communication can be defined as the tool by which mankind interacts within the members of its communities to code and decode information (Brandl, 2012; Hall, 1980; Peirce, 1960; Saussure, 1922; Wren-Lewis, 1983).

Determining the first language in history, before Indo-European, is a difficult task,

since there are many opinions, which differ in criteria to delimit whether a language can be validated as such or not. Some authors suggest that Indo-European languages were the ancestors of most present languages (Genetti, 2014; Palmer, 1954). These are referred as ancestors because they do not maintain their original form any longer, since they have evolved up to the language currently spoken in most western countries. Thus, languages are born, change, give birth to new ones, and die. In its webpage, Fischer (2003) divides languages in five groups:

1. Living, if there are people who still learn it as their first language.

2. Extinct, if the language is not living but it is still eligible.

3. Ancient, if the language is not living and it is intelligible.

4. Historic, when the language is considered distinct from modern languages that derive from it.

5. Artificial, if a language has been created for purposes of human communication.

Languages are complex tools used by mankind to fulfill their communicative goals; according to Chamot and O'Malley (1994), they vary in seeking information (using who, what, when, where, how), informing (recounting information or retelling), comparing (explaining graphic organizer and/or showing contrast), ordering (describing timeline, continuum or cycle), classifying (describing organizing principles), analyzing (describing features or main ideas), inferring (generating hypotheses to suggest cause/outcomes), justifying and persuading (giving evidence why "A" is important), solving problems (describing problem-solving procedures), synthesizing (summarizing information cohesively), and evaluating (identifying criteria, explaining priorities, etc). Consequently, these linguistic functions reflect an essential need in society to transfer information among individuals, guided by objectives and interests. Nevertheless, these communicative purposes are shattered when communicators do not share the same language and they are forced to find alternatives, which may not be as effective as expected.

Communicative stoppages would be taken as irrelevant if they were very unusual and did not interfere in individual or collective interests. However, history has proved that, as long as the world is getting more a global place, the need for communication with members of other communities is becoming more relevant. Probably, one of the major interests for people to start learning foreign languages was purely economic, parallel to the emergence of trade (Bleakley and Aimee, 2004; Gallagher-Brett, 2004). Ancient communities in some point of history started to import and export goods to communities that spoke different languages. A good example of merchants in ancient times was the Phoenicians, who sailed across the Mediterranean Sea and traded with foreigners (The Encyclopedia of World History, 2001:1). Hence, the interest in

enhancing communicative skills rose among both importers and exporters. As the number of merchants and destinies increased, the idea of establishing a *lingua franca* emerged, a language that the traders could speak and understand.

Throughout history, there have been many *lingua francas* recognized as such. In Europe, Sabir was spoken throughout the Mediterranean Sea as *lingua franca* between the XXI and the XIX Centuries before our era. Greek and Latin were also used as *lingua franca* some centuries later. Spanish became *lingua franca* during the great expansion of the Spanish colonies in America. Later, French was the language of diplomacy from the XVII Century onwards, until it was replaced in the XX Century by English, today's *lingua franca*. Additionally, apart from these, there have been other *linguas francas* throughout history in different continents, such as Afrikaans, Arabic, Azeri (in the Black Sea), Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi-Urdu (India and Pakistan), Nahuatl (Aztecs), Persian, Quechua (Peru), or Swahili (East Africa) (Abas, 2000; Björkman, 2013; Briney, 2009; Frath, 2010; Hall, 1966; Ostler, 2005).

Why English as a Lingua Franca?

As it can be observed, there has historically been a need for the use of a *lingua franca* to communicate with members of foreign communities, and many languages have been used as such. In the late XIX Century the invention of the telegraph, the radio and the telephone changed the vision of global communication in the world. More recently,

during the XX and the beginning of the XXI Centuries, the importance of the use of a *lingua franca* has been emphasized drastically with the spread of the mass media and especially the Internet. As a result, English has become the *lingua franca* worldwide (Cismas, 2010; Morrison, 2009).

Many factors have made English the *lingua franca* today. Eco (1995, pp.331) explains the reasons why English has become the *lingua franca* in the world, including Europe, where the language with most native speakers is German and not English. According to him:

The predominant position currently enjoyed by English is a historical contingency arising from the mercantile and colonial expansion of the British Empire, which was followed by American economic and technological hegemony. Of course, it may also be maintained that English has succeeded because it is rich in monosyllables, capable of absorbing foreign words and flexible in forming neologisms, etc. Yet had Hitler won the World War II and had the USA been reduced to a confederation of banana republics, we could probably today use German as a universal vehicular language.

Hence, it is clear that there are social, historical, technological and especially economic reasons to explain the supremacy of English and why it has become *lingua franca*. Besides, Caballos Bejano (2005) adds some reasons to explain the diffusion of English such as the music revolution in the 1960s (including the new rock music tendencies), the new power gained by youth,

new fashion styles, or the release of American films worldwide. Thus, the acceptance of different Anglicisms in the language has been the key factor in the choice of a foreign language in Education in the last decades. Nevertheless, there have been further reasons in the late XX Century and the early XXI that have definitively appointed English as the most powerful *lingua franca* nowadays. This important rise in recent decades has to do with the impact of media and broad communications. Especially, Internet has be1en one of the major promoters of the English language worldwide. Then, this is reinforced by the idea that the computing systems are designed by and for English-speaking countries, according to Murray (2000, pp.409):

When speakers of languages other than English try to use their mother tongue online, they are hampered by a technology that was designed for English. The character system (ASCII—American Standard Code for Information Interchange) used for written language in cyberspace privileges the Roman alphabet, making it extraordinarily difficult to represent other writing scripts without special software.

As a result, English controls international business, entertainment, research and other fields of communication. Moreover, statistics show that "English is now the dominant or official language in over 60 countries and it is represented in every continent" and "most of the scientific, technological and academic information in the world is expressed in English and over 80% of all the information stored in electronic retrieval systems is in English" (Crystal, 1997, pp.106); then, it is a must for organizations which are willing to develop international markets to work in English.

Global English: A New Variety

The fact that English has become a *lingua franca* has provoked the number of non-native speakers to be greater than that of native speakers: "although there are at least 360 million native speakers of English world-wide, Sir Randolph Quirk, writing in the Sunday Times on 17th April, 1994, estimates that in a global basis non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers" (Firth, 1996, pp.240). This means the emergence of a new variety of this language, English as a *lingua franca*, which is defined as "a contact language between people who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth, 1996, pp.240). This idea does not exclude the participation of native speakers in intercultural communication processes, but when English is used as a *lingua franca*, it is "no longer founded in the linguistic and sociocultural norms of native English speakers and their respective countries and cultures" (Gnutzmann, 2000, pp.357-358).

Furthermore, English as a *lingua franca* is as valid and correct as the standard forms of the language. Obviously, these statements could be argued by certain linguists, but fortunately this position may ne defend by differentiating language validity and

language correctness. A variety of English can be considered correct if the language form follows standard terms of grammar, lexis, orthography and pronunciation. On the other hand, a variety of English is valid if two foreigners using English as a *lingua franca* can make themselves understood, even though they are grammatically or lexically incorrect according to the Standard English (Medgyes, 1994).

Following Crystal (1997), this position can even be reinforced by defining Standard English as a variety or a dialect of English, in which the linguistic features of Standard English are matters of grammar, vocabulary, and orthography, but not a matter of pronunciation. Standard English is also the variety of English which carries linguistic prestige within a country; that prestige is recognized by adult members of the community and it is the norm of leading institutions such as the government, law courts and the media. However, Medgyes (1994, pp.5) criticizes those who believe in the superiority of any linguistic variety and states that "Received Pronunciation is unlikely ever to have been spoken by more than three or four percent of the British population" and "ordinary native speakers do not expect foreigners to speak a standard variety". Then, no variety of the language can be considered better than others to communicate among members of the society. Accordingly, English as a global language can be spoken by everyone, native speakers and foreigners.

Concluding Remarks

This paper introduces the evolution of the status of the English language towards a *lingua franca*. As it has been commented, there are social, historical, technological and economic reasons that justify the current status of English and why it has become today's *lingua franca.* This combination of these circumstances has helped English to become the language for international business, creating a new variety of the language which is spoken among both native and non-native people, being equally valid like the standard form or any other variety of the language spoken only by native speakers.

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