

English as an International Language for Multinational Communication

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1. The Current Status of English

Contemporary English has two functional and structural characteristics that no other languages have developed in the history of linguistic evolution. Functionally speaking, English has conspicuously spread among non-native speakers as a sizable number of Asian, African, Pacific, and Caribbean countries designate it as their official, associate official, or working language. English is used as such in 70 countries (around 36%) of the 193-nation world.

From a different point of view, while there are five countries where English is a native language for many, if not most of their citizens, there are several dozen nations for which English serves as an official language. To this, add more than a hundred countries where students are learning English as a language for international communication!

This is true in Asia. English is here to stay in Asia. It is a language of commerce, administration, and education in many countries of the region. In Asia, huge geopolitical spaces exist: China (pop. 1.3 billion), India (pop. 1 billion), and ASEAN (pop. 500 million), and English is used as an essential language for intranational and international communication along with other Asian languages.

Thus, from a Japanese point of view, English is not the language for us to use only with Americans, the British, or any other native speakers. Rather, English is the language for us to use with Chinese and Koreans. It is the language for us to use with Europeans, Africans, Arabs, South Americans, and many others. That English has become an international language means that it has become a language for multinational communication. Particularly, it is important to recognize its widespread role in Asia.

2. English as a Multicultural Language

At the same time, the spread of English does not assure the transplantation of American English or British English throughout the world. Hearing about the worldwide spread of English, many Japanese may have a mental picture of American English or British English spreading all over the world, telling themselves to hurry up and get on the bandwagon. But this is not the situation.

The fact is that English is becoming a conspicuously diverse language. Everyone speaks English with an accent. As Americans speak American English and Britons British English, Asians, Europeans, Africans, and South Americans speak English with their own characteristics. The internationalization of English has caused the diversification of English.

Thus, Indians speak Indian English, Singaporeans Singaporean English, Philippine people Philippine English, to mention some examples from the Asian scene. Similarly, Chinese, Thais, Indonesians, Vietnamese, and Japanese have structural and behavioral features in their national patterns of English, which originate from their communal languages and cultures.

3. Diffusion and Adaptation

In order to understand these English language trends, it is important to fully comprehend the relation of diffusion and adaptation. If things are to spread, they must most normally mutate. For example, there would be no McDonald's stores in India if they insisted on offering beef hamburgers. Cows are holy and beef is taboo in Hinduism, which is the religion of many people in India. McDonald's stores in Mumbai (Bombay) and other cities are popular spots because they serve chicken or mutton burgers, a great change needed to assure the spread of this fast-food chain in a place whose cultural tradition is so different from that of the original country.

This principle apparently is applied to language, too. The internationalization of English prompts the diversification of English. In other words, the diversification is the cost we have to pay for the internationalization of English. Here, it is important to recognize that English has become an international common language simply because it is being created as a culturally diverse language.

The popular assumption might state that a common language should be a uniform language. But this is not true. A common language cannot be but a diverse language. A lot of allowances have to be made, and differences accepted. If American English standards of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics were imposed upon all users of English, English would never become an international common language.

4. De-Anglo-Americanization of English

As such, the spread of English as a language for multinational and multicultural communication employed by non-native speakers implies that English is

becoming more and more de-Anglo-Americanized all over the world. This creates new structural, pragmatic, and functional dimensions in contemporary English.

People of the 3rd World first worried invariably that if they chose English as their official language after independence, they might retain some self-destructive remnants of Anglo-American colonialism. Yet, while they continued using English in their own social, cultural, and linguistic contexts, they discovered that they could solve this anxiety. They have created their own varieties of English best fit for their intranational and interethnic communication.

For example, Philippine English reflects Philippine culture directly. For Philippine people, considerateness is an essential virtue. So they rarely say, "Beat it, you bum!," to an approaching beggar. They express their intention of refusal with a kind "Forgive me, sir."

Their inclination often creates ambiguities. "Yes" by Philippine people may have, besides its literal meaning, four additional meanings: (1) Maybe, (2) I don't know, (3) If you say so, and (4) I hope I have said it unenthusiastically enough for you to understand I mean no. Interpretation is left to the contexts of the situation. Japanese are not the sole people who hesitate to say "No" in an effort to avoid causing their conversation partners embarrassment.

A Japanese businessman asked his Filipino counterpart if he could pick him up at eight in the morning in the hotel, and his friend said, "I will try." So the poor Japanese kept waiting, but his friend did not come. He discovered later that, in Philippine English, "I will try" means "I don't think I can." These differences may present communication difficulties among people from different pragmatic backgrounds at first, but people usually get used to them.

Of course, it is wrong to stigmatize these varieties. Non-native speakers are not learning English to assimilate themselves to Anglo-American or any other cultural patterns. It is also absurd for non-native speakers to blame each other for speaking their own varieties and not speaking like native speakers. Mutual denigration could cause reciprocal suspicion, frustration, and mistrust, which could hinder communicative efforts.

We have so far discussed the two important characteristics of contemporary English: its internationalization and diversification. For Japanese people, English is more important as a language of self-expression and explanation than of studying the world situation. Japanese students of English are expected to talk about their ways of life to people from abroad. We can use Japanese to study world affairs, but we need English to communicate with other nationals. Perhaps, this stance can be applied to

China, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand and many other countries where English is not seen as an intra-national, but as an international language.

This lecture further explores some of these issues involved in English as an international language and discusses various logical deductions stemming from the characterization of the language as such.

References

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