



English as a Global language

David Crystal

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David Crystal, a professor of Linguistics and an authority on English Language, has written a major work on the status of English as a global language. This book is an informed estimate by one of the distinguished scholars of language about the future of English. The book has five chapters. In the introductory chapter, 'David Crystal, presents a historical summary of the global development

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of English and an analysis of the current spread and status of English as a first and second language internationally. He draws the attention of the readers by raising three pertinent questions regarding the status and suitability of the English Language. What makes a language global? Why is English the global language? And has it anything substantial to make it worth-existing?

In the first chapter, Crystal says that power of the users, either political or economic, makes a language global, and in the same way, English is no exception. This review focuses on Crystal's assessment of the global position of English in terms of linguistic imperialism.

In the first chapter, Crystal gives the total number of users of English as a first language, a second language and a foreign language. A statistics in 2002 shows there are over 500 million native speakers of English. To this one could add a further 300 million who regularly speak English as a second language. In fact, it has been estimated that in total around a billion people use English with varying degrees of proficiency.

Crystal, however, admits that a language becomes global not because of its number of users, but because of other factors. These factors, according to Crystal, are the economic, political and even technological power of the people, i.e. its native speakers. "Why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are." (Crystal, 5)

The author has shown how through historical evolution English has achieved the status of a global language. Crystal also brings some other significant languages like Greek, Latin, French, etc. into consideration for comparison and argues how these once-powerful languages lost their glory and power when economic and political power of the peoples using these languages got diminished. Crystal says, "The fact is that there is the closest of links between language dominance and cultural power. . . . Without a strong power base, whether political, military or economic, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication" (5). However, in this connection, he outright rejects the linguistic properties and excellences of a language in acquiring the status of an international language. It sounds like an imperialistic viewpoint that eulogizes the power-cult of a nation speaking that particular language. Crystal strongly argues that the history of a global language can be traced through the successful expedition of its soldier- and sailor-speakers. He says, "English has gone global in the same vein. The reasons for this are to do with the political and economic power of Britain in the nineteenth century and the US in the twentieth century." (53)

Crystal admits the role of economic power for the spread of a language. He also points out that although a militarily powerful nation might establish a language, an economically powerful nation maintains and expands it. On account of the

British political imperialism English had become a language of a vast region. And by the end of the nineteenth century America had overtaken Britain as the world's fastest growing economy. By the end of the twentieth century attainment of economic power by US had come to determine the future of English as a global language.

The term Linguistic Imperialism attracted attention from among the scholars of applied linguistics since the publication of Robert Philipson's influential 1992 book *Linguistic Imperialism*. Encyclopedia Britannica defines, "Linguistic Imperialism involves the transfer of a dominant language to other peoples. The transfer is certainly a demonstration of power--traditionally military power, but also in the modern world, economic power--and aspects of the dominant culture are usually transferred along with the language." (Gerald Knowles)

This theory is also seen in the context of Cultural Imperialism. English established itself as the dominant language of those countries by dint of cultural power. English became the medium of instructions and official activities in the colonies. Learning and using English became a matter of prestige for people of those countries. As a prestige symbol English attracted the attention of a lot of people. We all know that social prestige also accrues from power. In this connection, we can consider the role of UK and US, two cradles of English, in determining the 'correct' use of English. The hegemonistic role of two powerful countries to determine the accuracy of English usage worldwide corroborates the power-cult dogma. It is an irony that accuracy of English is still determined by US and UK even though it is widely claimed that English is no longer the sole possession of these two powerful countries where English had developed into a full-fledged language.

The English language imperialists argue in favor of English saying that English has economic utility, and it stands as a symbol for material advancement and efficiency. In the fourth chapter titled "why English? The Cultural Legacy" Crystal drives the point home that the urge for material advancement and need for attaining efficiency motivate people to learn English nowadays. Or he says that it may be the other way round because people have to learn English since at present knowing English means connectivity with the global village. Crystal says, "Far more important for the English language in the post-war world, was the way in which the cultural legacies of the colonial era and the technological revolution were being felt on an international scale. English was now emerging as a medium of communication in growth areas which would gradually shape the character of the twentieth century domestic and professional life" (78). Crystal shows through statistics how international relations, the media, international travel, international safety, education and telecommunication via internet have become totally dependent on English.

Before Crystal, Pittman gave a political answer to the question, "Why English?" Pitman was the editor of *The Phonetic Journal*. In the issue of 13 September 1873, he made calculations about English as the language of future. "English, the language of the British Empire, became a means of cultural integration. The British Empire covers nearly one-third of the earth's surface, and British subjects are nearly a fourth of the population of the world.....The civilizing influence of Britain was a desirable goal anywhere in the world, and that the English language was an essential means of achieving this end. (Pittman, 70 qtd. in Crystal) The British colonizers considered the culture of the colonized inferior. In the same vein, they considered the language of colonies inadequate and unequal with their language. Philipson defines English linguistic imperialism as the dominance asserted and retained by the established and continuous reconstitution of structures and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. "So, English, Crystal frequently says, has attained the global status because of being the language of culturally powerful nations.

In Chapter 1, Crystal vehemently denies the fact that as a language English has any linguistic excellence: "It is often suggested, for example, that there must be something inherently beautiful or logical about the structure of English, in order to explain why it is now so widely used. 'It has less grammar than other languages', some have suggested. English doesn't have a lot of endings on its words, nor do we have to remember the difference between masculine, feminine and neuter gender, so it must be easier to learn.....Such arguments are misconceived" (5-6). Crystal says that to make a language global, ease or complexity in structure has nothing to do. He adds, "Correspondingly, inconvenient structural properties (such as awkward spelling) do not stop a language achieving international status either" (7). To Crystal what counts as the most important thing to make a language international is the power (political, economic or technological) of the speakers, but not its linguistic excellences.

The way Crystal overlooks the linguistic properties of the English language is perplexing and calls his viewpoint into question. He ignores or rejects the inherent structural features of English and its suitability to learn. Though linguists have not yet discovered any parameter to determine the degrees of difficulty of languages, English inherently possesses some salient features that make it highly popular as an L2 to people around the world. A study of the assets of English will help us understand the causes of its wider acceptability. They, according to Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, as mentioned in the book, *A History of The English Language*, are: 1). Cosmopolitan Vocabulary, 2. Inflectional Simplicity. 3. Natural Gender.

A study of these assets of English follows-

1. Cosmopolitan Vocabulary-

The mixed character of English is its greatest asset. English is a Germanic language. Dutch, Flemish, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian belong to this group. It has many common grammatical structures and words with these languages. In the English Language, words derived from Latin are more than half. These borrowings are through French and other Romance languages. That is, there are many words from French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. So, English appears very familiar to peoples speaking these languages. So, Baugh and Cable say, "All of this means that English presents a somewhat familiar appearance to any one who speaks either a Germanic or a Romance language"(10). There are some parts of the language which are not required to be learnt at all, or if it to be learnt, can be done with little effort. As a result of practice through many centuries, English has got the capability of easy assimilation from outside elements.

Apart from assimilation from mother and sister language families, English has borrowed a lot of words from languages like Hebrew, Arabic, Hindi Urdu, Bengali, Chinese, Polynesian and even aboriginal languages of Brazil. These heterogeneous elements have been assimilated successfully into English. So this cosmopolitan vocabulary is an undoubted asset to any language that seeks to attain international use."(Baugh and Cable,10)

2. Inflectional Simplicity-

Inflectional simplicity of English is its prominent asset .The English Language has become progressively simple. Sanskrit, Greek and Latin for example, as classical languages of early date, have inflections of the noun, the adjective, the verb and to some extent, the pronoun." In this process of simplification English has gone further than any other language in Europe" (Baugh and Cable, 11). With negligible exceptions to a few cases, the letter 's' is commonly added for plural forms of majority of nouns. We also know that in English words elaborate Germanic inflections for adjectives have been eliminated except for the indication of comparative and superlative degrees. English has shed off all complexity of personal endings. The English language has no complicated subject-verb agreement system that makes German difficult for the non-native speakers to learn.

3. Neuter Gender-

English has adopted a natural gender. On the other hand, the gender system of all other European languages is complex. "In studying other European

languages, the student labors under the heavy burden of memorizing, along with the meaning of every noun, its gender'' (Baugh and Cable, 11). In the Romance languages, there are two genders, and all nouns that would be neuter in English are there either masculine or feminine. In English, the gender specification has become simple during the Middle English period and today the gender of every noun in the dictionary is known instantly. Meaning dictates the gender in English. All living creatures have either masculine or feminine gender names according to the sex of the individual, and all other nouns are neuter. Attributive gender is personification and a matter of rhetoric, not grammar in the English Language.

From a socio-linguistic point of view, Crystal's observation may sound justified and acceptable. But, the power-cult factor that he repeatedly emphasizes for gaining the global status by English gives rise to controversy because he completely ignores the linguistic and artistic properties of English as a language. The linguistic properties of English are enough to outweigh the power factors as mentioned by Crystal. The economic and technological power of the Japanese cannot make Japanese a dominant language, let alone a global one. So Crystal's argument, "The biggest potential setback to English as a global language . . . would have taken place a generation ago if Bill Gates had grown up speaking Chinese," (112) again reflects his imperialistic viewpoint.