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## English as a World Language in Academic Writing

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### ABSTRACT

*Language is a phenomenon which can hardly be viewed separate from its very inherent component, culture. This component does by all means play a significant role in enabling the language to gain a global status. No doubt, some prominent issues do contribute to this process: political, economic, and military supremacy, to name but a few. This study aims to shed light on the issue regarding the use of English as a first, second or foreign language around the world with a specific reference to academic writing. We will first outline the present situation of English as an international language, and discuss the use of it across the world by global organizations and various nations. We will then present a historical background of English as a 'lingua franca,' or as some scholars call it, 'English as an International Language' (EIL). We will proceed with a brief history of milestones paving the way for this language in gaining its international status as a world language in academic writing. Despite the fact that this language is a truly recognized world language in most scientific fields, the trend in most nations is more toward preserving their linguistic identity. This study concludes with the caveat that although the overwhelming hegemony of English causes pessimism in most nations, our observations reveal that these nations are well aware of the fact that scientific recognition in the international arena entails the use of English in academic writing.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that English has become the language of choice for many international scholarly journals. The trend is on a rise, and academia is left with almost no choice but to publish in English in order to obtain international recognition. In this respect, academic English, for the majority, means both an opportunity and a threat. The international community may get the chance to get to know the author and his or her work well. If not, the researcher and his or her work are, in a sense, deprived of this opportunity (Bakopoulos, 1997). For Crystal (1997), conversation without a common language between academicians from different nationalities, both in the virtual and real world, would prove impossible.

In the modern world, English has become the language of not only science but also aviation, computing, diplomacy, and tourism. It is listed as the official or co-official language of over 42 countries and is spoken extensively in other countries where it has no official status. English plays a part in the cultural, political, or economic life of the following countries (Graddol, 1997):

Antigua and Barbuda	Irish Republic	St Vincent and Grenadines
Australia	Jamaica	Singapore
Bahamas	Liberia	South Africa
Barbados	Malaysia	Suriname
Belize	Montserrat	Trinidad and Tobago
Bermuda	Namibia	United Kingdom
Brunei	New Zealand	(England, Scotland, N. Ireland, Wales)
Canada	Nigeria	United States of America
Cayman Island	Papua New Guinea	Virgin Island (Br)
Gibraltar	Philippines	Virgin Island (US)
Grenada	Puerto Rico	Zambia
Guam	Sierra Leone	Zimbabwe
Guyana	St Kitts and Nevis	
India	St Lucia	

This compares to 27 for French, 20 for Spanish and 17 for Arabic. This domination is unique in history. We could argue that English is on its way to becoming the world's unofficial international language. Despite the fact that Mandarin (Chinese) is spoken by far more people as a first language, English is now the most widespread of all the world's languages.

It may be an exaggeration to argue that humans are on the way to a pre-Babylonian state; yet most feel the need for a *lingua franca*. English seems to be the language most available to meet this need, which has become rather obvious following WWII. The foundation date of the United Nations, which serves as the "chief international forum," is 1945. This union badly needed a *lingua franca*. The Secretariat thus decided to use English and French, the two working languages, as its means of communication between partners. Had it not done so, there would have been an urgent need for multi-way translation-interpretation facilities, which would have been rather costly and inconvenient. Graddol (1997) identified three types of speakers using English: those who speak it as a first language (around 375 million speakers), those who speak it as second or additional language (again, some 375 million speakers), and those who learn it as a foreign language (about 750 million learners). Graddol (1997) also identified the major domains of English as:

1. Working language of international organizations and conferences
2. Scientific publications
3. International banking, economic affairs and trade
4. Advertising for global brands
5. Audio-visual cultural products such as film, TV, popular music
6. International tourism
7. Tertiary (university) education
8. International safety (airline and maritime travels)

9. International law
10. As a “relay language” in interpretation and translation
11. Technology transfer
12. Internet communication. (p. 8)

Translation problems from other languages into English cause serious problems for people doing business. For example, a recent doctoral study in international law in the United States concluded that the French language protection measures are in conflict with the principle of a common market with the free movement of goods, services, labor, and capital. Such conflict, it is believed, could soon lead corporate lawyers to challenge national language legislation and demand an English-only market throughout the EU (Phillipson, 2001).

Although scholars attribute the spread of English to Britain’s and the USA’s economic and military power in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, these two factors are not enough to account for this spread. For example, with a population of 1.6 billion people, India will be the world’s most populous country by 2050. Hindi, the official language of India, was promoted as a common language by the British in this country. Despite this fact, English somehow managed to remain the official second language. No doubt, mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century reforms played a key role in enabling English to be promulgated as the language of administration. India became independent from Britain in 1947, and the English language was supposed to be phased out by 1965. However, today English and Hindi are the official languages; educated Indians nowadays speak and write in English fluently, and it is spreading faster in India than in any other country (Fennell, 2001).

Unlike the Americans and British, who simply allow the spread of English to take its course, the French have spent billions on promoting their language in French-speaking territories in Africa and the Pacific. Pushed by the Académie Française, the French government has imposed sanctions on officials or agencies financed by taxes that are found using Americanisms or English phrases where a French equivalent exists (Johnson, 2004). A recent and striking example is Turkmenistan: Niyazov (Former President of Turkmenistan) pursued strong nationalistic policies to encourage the use of the Turkmen language over Russian and banned access to Russian-language media, leading to an increased exodus of some of the country’s most educated citizens and the decimation of its school system (“Turkmenistan’s Authoritarian President,” 2006).

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH**

“The biggest setback for English would have been if Bill Gates had grown up speaking Chinese,” stated Crystal (1997). For Crystal, English owes its status as an international language to computer genius Bill Gates, arguing that a major condition for a language to become international is political power and those who speak the language.

As a result of the Industrial Revolution, which paved the way for Britain’s economic predominance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English language spread quickly all across the world. Then, the strong political and military predominance of the US after World War II made way for a substantial economic and cultural influence that displaced French from the sphere of diplomacy, and fixed English as the standard language for international communication. Thus, British colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and American capitalism and technological progress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were undoubtedly the main causes for the spread of English throughout the world.

Today, English is recognized as undoubtedly the most important language to learn for the increasingly mobile international community. This is a fact that seems to be irreversible. English has become the official language of the business and scientific world (Schütz, 2005). Dieu (2005) states that,

Before the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which ended the First World War between Germany and the Allies, diplomacy was conducted in French. However, President Wilson succeeded in having the treaty in English as well. Since then, English started being used in diplomacy and gradually in economic relations and the media. During the II World War, America intervened both militarily and economically to save Europe from chaos. From then onwards, the United States have consolidated their cultural, economical and technological power: inventions, rock and roll, the first man on the moon, the revolution of the Internet, the country's growing prosperity and commercial aggressiveness have contributed to the further expansion and importance of English in the world today. (p. 2)

As the above information implies, there is nothing intrinsically wonderful about English which makes it a global language: neither its pronunciation nor its grammar or spelling are simpler than any other language. Yet despite this fact, while English was once spoken by around 4-5 million people during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), it has now become a widely spoken language, used by around 1.5 billion people (Crystal, 1999).

Sometimes, it is suggested that the inherently beautiful or logical structure of English or its lack of grammatical gender may be accounting for its international success. Crystal (1997) argues that these assertions are "misconceived" because despite their gender differences, Latin and French were once the major international languages, and ease of learning cannot only be attributed to English. Children of all cultures learn to talk more or less in the same period of time regardless of the differences in the grammar of languages.

Although the globalization of English is not to be attributed to any intrinsic quality, we believe that the flexibility of English people in borrowing from other languages in the historical process is another factor in the globalization of English. It is obvious that the most common way that languages influence each other is the exchange of words. Much is made about the contemporary borrowing of English words from other languages, but this phenomenon is not new, nor is it done very often by historical standards. The large-scale importation of words from Latin, French, and other languages into English in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was more significant. Some languages have borrowed so much that they have become scarcely recognizable.

## **PUBLISHING IN ENGLISH**

In its role as a global language, English has become one of the most important academic and professional tools. English is increasingly recognized as, undoubtedly, the most important language to learn by the international community. This is a fact that seems to be irreversible. English has become the official language of the business and scientific world, although in academic and scientific communities, formal English usage is prevalent. With creative and

flowery use of the language at a minimum, the development of International English often centers on academic and scientific communities.

In a study on database analysis, Narvaez-Berthelemot and Russell (2001)<sup>1</sup> found that English was the main language of publication for journals. The authors argue that communication in the social sciences and humanities is considered more likely to occur in the native language of the researcher or the language of the culture in which the study was carried out, unlike the natural sciences where English is the *lingua franca*. Their analysis of databases, however, suggests that English also plays a central role in the dissemination of results from the ‘softer’ sciences. French was the second most frequent language of publication, followed by German and Japanese

Testa (2006)<sup>2</sup>, Director of Editorial Development at Thomson Scientific, explains the four main components effective in the Thomson Scientific selection process: (a) Timeliness, (b) International editorial conventions, (c) Peer review, and (d) English-language bibliographic information. English has become the standard language in the international research community, especially in natural sciences. It is for this reason that Thomson Scientific tries to focus on journals that publish their full text or, at the very least, their bibliographic information in English.

Regarding the citation indices, we could provide brief information on SCI (Science Citation Index Expanded) and SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index): SCI is a multidisciplinary index, with searchable author abstracts, covering the journal literature of the sciences. It indexes more than 5,900 major journals across 150 scientific disciplines, covering approximately 2,100 more journals than its SCI print and CD-ROM counterparts, with all cited references captured. As of January 1991, it contains searchable, full-length, English-language author abstracts for approximately 70% of the articles in the index. Conversely, the SSCI is a multidisciplinary index with searchable author abstracts, covering the journal literature of the social sciences. It indexes more than 1,725 journals spanning fifty disciplines, as well as covering individually selected, relevant items from over 3,300 of the world’s leading scientific and technical journals. As of January 1992, SSCI contains searchable, full-length, English-language author abstracts for approximately 60% of the articles in the index (Weill & Weill, 2006).

Within the academic field it has been said that one has to “publish in English or perish” (Viereck, 1996, p. 20; quoted in Spichtinger, 2000). As early as in 1980 when the universal hegemony of English was not so strongly felt, two thirds of the publications of French scholars were in English. In some domains, English has, to a very large extent, replaced German as a scientific language. This becomes visible in the renaming of journals: the *Archiv für Kreislaufforschung*, for instance, was turned into *Basic Research in Cardiology*. Around 1950, all contributions to the *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie* were in German. Now, 95% are in English. The journal was renamed *Ethology*<sup>3</sup> two years later (Graddol, 1997). The table below reflects this shift.

Regarding Turkey, we could give an example from ULAKBIM<sup>4</sup>—titles, abstracts, and key words in a foreign language, especially in English, are some of the prerequisites of Ulakbim to index a journal. Sometimes we see journals which strongly advise authors to provide a quality English translation of the manuscript. English is favoured so much that it raises awareness among Turkish learners of English from all levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) about the universal role it plays in Turkey. This leads them to express dissatisfaction with opportunities pertinent to English instruction given at schools (Bada, 2002).

**Table 1.** Disciplines in which German Scholars Claim English to be their Working Language (Graddol, 1997, p. 9).

Physics	98%	Veterinary Sciences	53%
Chemistry	83%	Economics	48%
Biology	81%	Sport Sciences	40%
Psychology	81%	Linguistics	35%
Mathematics	78%	Education	27%
Earth Sciences	76%	Literature	23%
Medical Sciences	72%	History	20%
Sociology	72%	Classics	17%
Philosophy	56%	Theology	12%
Forestry	55%	Law	8%

Not only in journals, but also among books, English has the lion's share. According to Bowker Publishers in the United States (North America's leading provider of bibliographic information, the official agency for assigning ISBNs in the United States), United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand released 375,000 new titles and editions in 2004. Anglo-American publishers published 80% of all new English-language books in 2004, while the US alone accounted for 52% of the total. Including imported editions available in multiple markets, the total number of new English language books available for sale in the English-speaking world in 2004 was a staggering 450,000 ("English-Speaking Countries," 2006).

This, however, especially poses serious difficulties for non-western researchers. Canagarajah (2002), also a non-western researcher, argues that non-western academics face difficulties in getting their papers published in English-language journals due to the geopolitics and egotism of academia. Reviewers of such journals do not want to work with non-western manuscript submissions that require extensive editorial change, and dismiss them because of poor language. Canagarajah (1999) is quite aware that to get published, language learners have to acquire the preferred values, discourse conventions, and knowledge content of the academy as well as certain linguistic skills.

## CONCLUSION

From a culturally neutral perspective, International English offers the users its own advantages: this type of English saves scholars from having to re-edit publications for individual regional markets. Teachers and learners of English as a second language also find it an attractive idea; both are often concerned that their English should be neutral, without British, American, Canadian, or Australian colouring. This is because any regional variety of English has a set of political, social, and cultural connotations attached to it (Peters, 2004).

The facts and figures provided above would be considered pessimistic by some as they suggest that the world is moving into a monolingual hegemony in which cultural traits of other languages are either assimilated or annihilated. Yet, as Crystal (2001) suggests, this pessimism is not to last: with the internet's globalization, the presence of other languages has steadily risen. By the mid-90s, a widely quoted figure was that about 80% of the content of the World Wide Web was in English; a figure supported by the first comprehensive study of language distribution

on the Internet, carried out in 1997 by Babel (Crystal, 2001). This showed English well ahead, but with several other languages, notably German, Japanese, French, and Spanish, entering the ring. Since then the estimates for English have been falling, with some commentators predicting that before long, the Web will be predominantly non-English as communications infrastructure develops in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. In 1998, the total number of new non-English websites passed the number of new English websites. At a conference on search engine strategies in 2000, Alta Vista was predicting that by 2002, less than half of the web would be in English.

In an analysis published on the UNESCO Courier website, which is a publication providing coverage and analysis of international relations and political science, Breton (2000) explains what the speakers of other major languages have done and are currently doing to stand up to domination of a single language:

- In 1945, the Arab League was founded. Today, it is populated by 250 million people in twenty-two states.
- In order to promote linguistic, economic, and political cooperation, the countries which share a French linguistic heritage created the International Organization of French-Speaking Countries, which (like the Commonwealth) embraces more than fifty countries with over 500 million inhabitants.
- Since 1991, there have been conferences of Dutch speakers from eight or more communities representing some 40 million people, as well as Ibero-American summits, which, every two years, bring together more than twenty countries (350 million inhabitants).
- Turkish-speaking summits have been held biennially since 1992, with delegates from six independent countries (120 million people) of Europe, Central Asia, and small ethnic communities elsewhere.
- Since 1996, the Association of Portuguese-speaking countries have brought together people from seven countries (200 million people).

Despite this, Breton argues that this “language war” will result in “linguicide”: the best way to kill off a language is to teach another one; therefore, the monopoly that about 100 national languages have on education makes it inevitable that languages not taught in schools will be confined to the home and to folklore, and eventually be pushed out of nurturing, cultural environments. Underlying this change of direction is a more general shift from *globalization* to *relocalization*, which is also marked by the tendency to watch native movies, soap operas and sit-coms (Breton, 2000). Thus, it seems that, while on the one hand, we see globalization which paves the way for the role of English as an international *lingua franca*, on the other hand, the native tendencies all around the world create space for other national and local languages to reassert themselves.

Finally, we should note that even the English themselves are not pessimistic about the possible effects of the spread of English on native speakers. Commissioned by British Council, Graddol (2006) wrote a 130-page report in which he asserted that once everyone speaks English,

companies will naturally look for employees who also speak other major languages such as Mandarin Chinese or Spanish. There is a need to take radical action and plan for the future; otherwise people in the UK will find themselves at a permanent disadvantage.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Narvaez-Berthelemot and Russell (2001) analyzed SSCI, which includes only mainstream literature and the UNESCO DARE database (totally 4,326 journals), which covers social science periodical literature worldwide. The researchers also found that, although 64% of all the social science journals in UNESCO DARE were published by the high income economy countries, 97% of the journals listed in SSCI are published in those same countries.

<sup>2</sup> The highly selective multidisciplinary Web of Science (WoS) has been developed and maintained for over 40 years by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), and now Thomson Scientific. The WoS comprises several multidisciplinary citation indexes. In addition to its three major components, the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI), the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (AHCI), it also includes the Index Chemicus and Current Chemical Reactions (Testa, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Ethology is the scientific study of animal behaviour considered as a branch of zoology. A scientist who practices ethology is called an ethologist.

<sup>4</sup> *Turkish Academic Network and Information Center (ULAKBIM)* has been founded as a service unit, in association with the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey, in 1996. ULAKBIM aims at providing technological facilities such as computer networks, information technology support, and information and document delivery services, to meet the information requirements of universities and research institutions, and to increase the efficiency and productivity of their end users.

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