

Title	Linguistic imperialism and teaching English in Japan
Sub Title	
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Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	1997
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.73, (1997. 12) ,p.508- 517
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	安藤伸介, 岩崎春雄両教授退任記念論文集
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-00730001-0508

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Linguistic Imperialism and Teaching English in Japan

Noritmitsu Tosu

It is a well known fact that linguists disagree as to how many languages obtain in the present world. Some linguists would say we have 4,000 languages and others 5,000 and there are even those who claim more than 6,000 of them. We all know that this disparity exists mainly because we simply do not have any purely linguistic criteria to decide whether any particular linguistic varieties belong to the same language or to different languages. The criteria are social or political rather than linguistic. Thus, Flemish and Dutch are linguistically almost the same, but for some people, at least, they are different languages as their different names suggest, mainly because one is spoken in Netherlands and the other in Belgium.

The important fact is that whatever the number of the languages currently used in the world, the simple arithmetic would show that each nation must have at least a score of languages in its boundary if we evenly divide the total number of languages by the number of nations. This linguistic diversity notwithstanding, we are somehow managing to communicate with each other in one way or another. One reason is, of course, that a great many people, as well as the nations themselves, are multilingual and the people concerned are able to find one or more languages they can communicate with. It just happens that a great majority of those multilingual people are bilingual of their native language and English. In this case we call English a *lingua franca* or a

common language.

In the history of mankind, there has been a plenty of lingua francas, such as Greek, Latin, Arabic, French, Swahili, Hausa and so on. They have been, however confined to particular regions such as the Mediterranean, West Europe, East and West Africas and so on. Some of them, Hausa, Swahili and Spanish, for example, are so used even today for their particular regions. In light of this, the dominance of English throughout the world as the lingua franca is unprecedented in our history, and naturally draws our attention to the consequences that is supposed to bear.

Some critics such as Oishi(1990), Tsuda(1993) and Nakamura (1996-1997) to name only a few, call this phenomenon English Imperialism and argue against it for various reasons. Their arguments against English Imperialism can be summarized in the following four points.

1. English is not particularly suitable for the lingua franca for its irregularities in terms of morphology, syntax as well as orthography.

2. Dominance of English over other languages unfairly favors the native speakers of the language and put the non-native speakers in a disadvantageous position.

3. Language is an important factor of ethnic identity without which one cannot feel solidarity within the group.

4. Linguistic diversity assures us various ways of looking at the world without which our world views would be very monistic and simplistic.

In the following sections, I will take each one of those problems and will try to counter-argue them.

1. As for the unsuitability of English language as a lingua franca for linguist reasons.

It is often said that because of its history English has developed very irregular forms resulting, on the one hand, in a great many homonyms (including homophones like rite, right, write and homographs like lead (material) lead(for dogs) etc. etc.), and thus producing a very irregular correspondences between orthography and pronunciation, on the other.

Is this irregularity confined to English? It seems to me that this kind of irregularity is intrinsic to a natural (as opposed to artificial) language. In Japanese, for example, we can cite without any difficulty numerous examples of homonyms. Indeed Japanese is notorious for its multiplicity of homonyms.

It is certainly the case that in some languages like German and French the correspondence of pronunciation and orthography is more regular than in English. These languages, however, have their own irregularities in other respects, which English doesn't have. For instance, these languages, indeed most of the European languages for that matter, have as one of their grammatical categories gender systems. As far as the majority of words is concerned, gender corresponds to sex when it comes to animate nouns. But we can easily find plenty of exceptions to this. Why is it that German *Maedchen*, *Faeulein* are neuter while they apparently refer to female people and why is it that in French the feminine *la sentinelle* refers to a strapping young man? (cf. Palmer 1976)

It seems that more important factor in this respect is the morphological and inflectional simplicity of English as a result of the fact that it has lost its gender as well as case categories in the course of its history. It is my impression (as well as others'. see for example Kato (1970) and this impression has to be proved) that English is an easy language, because of its morphological simplicity, to get into (so

to speak) but rather difficult to master in the sense that even for advanced students of English it is not rare to run into inscrutable literature. On the other hand, German and French are difficult to get into partly because of their inflectional complexities in terms of gender and case, but once you enter in it is not so difficult to become proficient in them in the sense that you rarely meet literature which you cannot decipher. In other words, if you become proficient enough in English to be able to read a newspaper, the chances are you still will run into literature you can not understand, while in German and French that is very unlikely. But to be proficient enough to read a paper in German and French requires more time and energy than it is the case with English and our communicative competence in a language required as a means to communicate with others demands no more than the reading ability of papers. In that sense English is more suitable for foreigners to learn as their second language than at least German and French, or than most of the European languages for that matter.

2. As to the second point ; selecting English as the *lingua franca* would put the native speakers unfairly in an advantageous position as against the non-native speakers of English.

This claim is certainly true to a certain extent. It is obvious that non-native speakers have to learn English in the first place while native speakers don't, and that we all know that to be proficient in English, or in any language for that matter, requires plenty of time and effort. Not only that we must learn the language but the fact that we can not be as proficient as native speakers tends to allow them to dominate conversations between us.

This inequality, however, is more apparent than real. Consider, for example, the conversation between Indians and Americans. We are sometimes surprised to find how verbose Indians can be on these scenes

despite the fact that for them English is their second language. Why is this the case? The answer seems to lie in the fact that Indians have already established their kind of English and it has been recognized as such throughout the world and they do not seem to feel the slightest hesitation in speaking it. Indian educational system also contributes to this. As is well known, higher education in India is generally conducted in English, and in addition to that English has become a kind of official language along with Hindi because Hindi is geographically restricted to northern part of India.

If this is the case, it is arguable that we can develop our own kinds of English and use them without regard to the standards of Standard American English or Standard British English. After all, various versions of Standard English throughout the world vary from one another considerably. As a matter of fact many countries, including Singapore, have developed their own kinds of English and they have been being recognized as such. In light of this, beliefs in 'native speakers' have to be abandoned. We need not ask them to edit our English every time we write in English, as is so often the case even among academicians. (This paper is not in any way edited in this sense)

The situation of the world being so, it is not only non-native speakers that are forced to pay attention to native speakers' English but these also must exercise a considerable amount of attention when they hear non-native speakers' English. Of course the heavier burden is on us non-native speakers but the difference is not as big as it first appears. If, therefore, we can use our kinds of English as our second language without much hesitancy, this seeming inequality must diminish to a considerable degree.

After all, it does not seem to be a very productive attitude just to lament over the linguistic inequality and refrain from using English

as the lingua franca of our day. Our complaint that Arab countries monopolize the production of oil can not be heard seriously by anybody. Accidents certainly contribute to the present status of English but that can not be helped. We can not 'rectify' it just as we can not 'rectify' the oil monopoly by Arabic peoples.

Incidentally, while many of those who are critical of English dominance do not propose any alternative solutions as to how we can communicate without using English, some advocate the use of artificial languages like Esperanto. Good intentions and much effort on the part of Esperantists notwithstanding, Esperanto, or any other candidates of artificial languages for that matter, has never been, and will never be, at least in the foreseeable future, widely employed as the lingua franca of the world. We can cite several reasons for this.

One is that Esperanto is not as language neutral as it is generally claimed to be. It derives much of its basic structure from European languages and, therefore, much easier for Europeans to learn than for any other peoples and in that sense not neutral in the strict sense of the word. Secondly, and much more importantly, Esperanto does not have the necessary redundancy in its structure, without which it is very difficult to communicate in a noisy situation. In spite of the fact that our linguistic knowledge has been expanded significantly in these decades, our knowledge of the nature of language is not sufficient enough to install the necessary amount of redundancy in any artificial language.

3. We will consider the problems three and four together, since both of them seem to presuppose the same thing.

It is almost a truism to say that language plays a very important role in identifying the speakers of that particular language as a group. It is not the case that the people speak Greek because they are Greeks,

but that they are Greeks because they speak Greek. This is especially true of small ethnic groups like Basque, who do not have much else, besides language, to identify themselves with. This identifying role of language also applies to various varieties of a particular language. We tend to use different varieties of a language according to our social class, ethnic origin, age, sex, occupation and so on, thus identifying ourselves as belonging to particular groups and strengthening our bond thereby.

All this, however, doesn't mean that we can not use the lingua franca in the situations where some kind of common means of communication is needed. Using English as a lingua franca does not require to give up our native languages as a daily means of communication and our main source of expressing ourselves. Just as we do not have to abandon our local dialects to speak the standard dialect, neither do we have to give up our own language in using the lingua franca. In most of the cases, our own native languages have their own strong traditions of literature and those can, and will, last almost eternally.

Basically the same argument can be applied to the problem four ; linguistic diversity assures us the diversity of our ways of looking at things. I wholeheartedly agree with, say, Miyaoka (1996) when he says that it is important not to put too much emphasis on the role of language as a means of communication, since that will tend to lead to pragmatic thinking that allowing plural languages to exist is economically of no use. Just as the diversity of flora and fauna is vital to our living, so is linguistic diversity, which will ensure that our ways of thinking, our world views, our aesthetic apparatuses etc. will not be monotonous, simplistic, nor monolithic.

This requirement of linguistic diversity does not in any way

conflict with the need of a common linguistic means with which we can communicate cross-culturally. It may be the case that we lose some aspects of our language as our use of English increases. Linguistic capacity of our language as a formal means of communication, for example, may be eclipsed a little and thus may cause a decrease of linguistic vitality of our language. That is exactly what happened to our geographical dialects in the past. But our national language is different from our local dialects in that the former has a strong tradition of literature while the latter does not.

In any case, we are now living in the truly global era in which our electronic information is exchanged on the daily basis and we definitely need some kind of common means of communication. For instance, given the fact that almost all the academic papers are now written in English and more than seventy percent of information on the internet is transmitted in English, it is *de facto* the common language of the world, even if *de jure* it is not.

Given the situation being as described above, it is not difficult to see how vitally important to introduce English teaching to elementary schools in this country. Although linguists are not agreed as to when is the most appropriate age for the children to start learning their second language, our experience suggests that English must be taught at a much earlier stage than it is today. In my opinion, it must be introduced to the fifth graders at the latest, preferably much earlier.

It is not only the age for school children to learn English but also the way of teaching it that is crucial. English should be taught not only as one of the subjects; it should be used to teach other subjects as well. For instance, by using English when you teach mathematics, you can simultaneously teach both of them. The use of English as a means of teaching other subjects should be increased as the students go higher

up in their grades. The effectiveness of this method has been proved in various parts of the world but we only have to think of the fact that the excellent users of English in this country such as Kanzo Uchimura, Joo Nijima and Kinnosuke Natume, were all taught English in this way. Did they lose their identities as Japanese? Did they lose their linguistic capacity in Japanese language?

There is no doubt that Japan is far behind other Asian countries in the area of teaching English as a second language. In view of the fact that we have to communicate with those Asian peoples using English, it is a sheer anachronism to vehemently oppose to the introduction of English to elementary schools.

Incidentally, one of the side effects of teaching English to elementary pupils is that if they become proficient enough in the language, they would not perhaps hesitate to go to colleges and universities in English speaking countries, especially in the United States, simply because they offer much better programs for most of the students, thus helping revitalize Japanese colleges. Regrettably, since our institutions of higher education are hopelessly far behind those of the United States, majority of better students, having acquired English proficiency, will head for the better places to seek their college education despite of the national boundaries. It seems to me that that is the only possible way to improve the standard of our institutions of higher education.

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