Is English a 'Killer Language'?
The Globalisation of a Code

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Abstract: Does English act as a Killer-Language or not? The fact that English has gained the status of a world language goes back to British colonialism. English was imposed on the indigenous populace in order to strengthen the power of the colonists. As the example of *Papua New Guinea* shows, this can have serious consequences for people's local culture, life and identity. After the Second World War, globalization boosted the further spread of the English language, therefore influencing the language of technology, science and commerce. It even has a huge influence on countries which have an established political system and a written language of their own, such as Germany.

1. Introduction

The economic and political power of Britain and the United States in the last two centuries has enabled the English language to take on a dominating role in today's world. Its global use in fields such as publishing, science, technology, commerce, diplomacy, air-traffic control and popular music makes it necessary to define it as a WORLD LANGUAGE.

The settlement of Britain by the Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians and French led to contact with new countries and languages. Even today, migration supports and encourages the development of different varieties of English. However, this contact between two languages may not only result in the birth of a new, but also in the death of a former language.

We will illustrate language death where 'people [abandon] their language in favour of some other language seen as more prestigious or more useful' (Trask 1994:69) using the example of the language situation in Papa New Guinea. Moreover, the fact that language death need not always occur despite the presence of English will be highlighted. This can be seen in the case of Germany where English does not threaten the established language system, but rather German is influenced by the usage of an increasing number of Anglicisms. Therefore, English does not always act as a KILLER

LANGUAGE. Furthermore, we will raise the question whether the 'all-powerful' English tongue itself is threatened by other languages as well.

2. Language Death

In order to decide whether English is a killer language or not, we have to look at LANGUAGE DEATH in general. This phenomenon, like its opposite, LANGUAGE BIRTH (e.g. pidginisation and creolisation), is highly dependent on social factors. Whenever the language of a dominant nation is introduced into a less powerful society, the indigenous population may regard the new language as more prestigious than their native tongue (i.e. people who speak the former fluently have more access to authority) and therefore gradually turn bilingual. The country's indigenous language is in time abandoned or incorporated into the foreign one. Further, 'the minority language then ... becomes appropriate for use in fewer and fewer contexts, until it is entirely supplanted by the incoming language' (McMahon 1994:285). This language shift - or the act of 'dying' – happens gradually over several generations[1].

However, Latin or Ancient Greek, which are usually associated with the phrase 'dead language' have simply undergone 'the normal processes of linguistic change' (McMahon 1994:285). Ancient Greek developed into Modern Greek while Latin split into a wide range of modern Roman languages such as Italian, French or Spanish. 'What happened ... is not death, but metamorphosis' (McMahon 1994:285), and since their modern forms are still used today, these languages are very much alive.

According to McMahon (1994:286), two subtypes of language death can be determined. The first is LANGUAGE SUICIDE: a language slowly but surely absorbs material (e.g. by borrowing words) from the more prestigious one until the two languages are scarcely distinguishable from one and another. Although the term suicide may suggest that the indigenous populace chose to kill off its own language, this is usually not the case.

The other subtype is known as LANGUAGE MURDER: this development is also gradual (as is language suicide) but contrary to the prior the two languages do not, or rarely, mix. The indigenous population adopts the prestigious language, which is usually not related to their own, as a second language. Again, a bilingual society is formed - though the speakers of the more prestigious language typically remain monolingual -

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[1] This process is called LINGUISTIC OBSOLESCENCE (McMahon 1994:285).

but the children are only taught the dominant language at school and no longer are instructed how to speak their native tongue[2].

It is crucial to look at the socio-political context when dealing with language death. The more established and prestigious the native language is, the more likely speakers will stick to it. In this case, the two languages simply influence and change each other, but usually, none of them dies.

3. Global English

After the Second World War a new development referred to as GLOBALISATION began. This process was accompanied by an increasing - consciously brought about - permeability of national borders. The world's leading economic powers in particular opened their borders in favour of free trade (e.g. GATT: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) in addition to deregulation and liberalization of the financial markets.

Economic as well as cultural goods are being exchanged along with the current process of globalisation. This implies that not only the economy (i.e. production, transportation, trade), but also cultural products such as art, music, fashion, lifestyle, communication (World Wide Web) and language are being globalised. The globalisation process is thus taking place on various levels. In this paper, however, the issue of language is the main aspect of interest.

The two central questions we must ask ourselves are: How is it that English has its present-day status of a world language? And why is English and not for example German, French or Chinese being globalised? To find answers to these questions we need to go back in time to the 16th century. One main reason for this development is the expansion of British colonial power. Another explanation, which somehow seems to supersede colonialism, is the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power in the 20th century. Still, one could argue, that with the downfall of the British Empire the power and spread of the English language should have ended. Two theories which try to explain why this did not happen will be presented in this paper with relevant case studies following.

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[2] McMahon uses four case-studies to illustrate the phenomenon of language murder (1994: 391-307). Namely: Hungarian in Austria: Gal (1979); East Sutherland Gaelic: Dorian (1981); Irish Gaelic: Hindley (1990); Dyirbal (Australia): Schmidt (1985).

The older of the two theories is the so called EXPLOITATION THEORY (Mair 2002:160-163, 165). Its supporters claim that English was systematically spread by the British and the Americans with the help of language planning policies, in order to maintain a certain indirect control over post-colonial countries. They also point out that the English language, being imposed on developing countries, prevents these nations from independent political and cultural development, making it impossible for the indigenous populace to participate in this process. According to the exploitation theory, a 'Western' world view is transported into the recipient societies along with the English language, which in turn threatens people's local culture, life and identity.

In opposition to the exploitation theory, the professed GRASSROOTS THEORY (Mair 2002:163-165), claims that the English of today cannot be seen as an imperialist language, controlled and spread solely by the economically powerful. The advocates of the grassroots theory rather believe English to be an ideologically neutral language that stands for globalisation and modernisation. They also call attention to the fact that English is voluntarily used as a means of (cross-border) communication by individuals and groups each contributing to the 'continuing spread of English for many different and sometimes limited and mutually incompatible reasons' (Mair 2002:168). As a consequence, the English language is subject to constant change which results in the continual production of new varieties of English.

On the following pages two different ways in which English can be perceived by non-native speakers will be presented.

4. English as a Killer Language: Papua New Guinea

From the linguistic point of view, no language is inherently superior to another. Therefore, it depends very much on the political and economic power of its speakers whether a language acts as a killer language. The historical development of multilingual Papua New Guinea over the last few centuries shows how power relations were established by colonisation and thus offers a good example of the exploitation theory.

4.1. Linguistic Situation before Colonisation

A multitude of languages existed in pre-colonial Papua New Guinea, but their status toward each other was egalitarian. 'Each group was ethnocentric about its own speech variety. Since groups were small anyway and everyone knew that each group

thought that its own language was best, the situation was egalitarian' (Romaine 1992:56). Therefore, linguistically conditioned social stratification and the idea of nationalistic consciousness did not exist. There was no writing system as their culture was oral-based and thus no standard variety could develop.

Due to contact with other groups through warfare, intermarriage or trade there must have been people who spoke more than one language. They were predominantly chiefs and trade people (Romaine 1992:56).

4.2. Linguistic Changes brought about through Colonisation

The linguistic situation within Papua New Guinea was radically changed with the invasion of European colonists. In 1884, the British and later the Australians took command of the south-eastern part of the island. In order to be able to communicate with the indigenous people, who were mistreated as cheap plantation workers by the colonists, a contact language was needed and TOK PISIN developed. English served as SUPERSTRATE and the various local tongues as SUBSTRATE[3]. Tok Pisin continued to gain importance, developing from a JARGON to a PIDGIN. Furthermore it became increasingly prestigious, as the indigenous populace realised that the knowledge of this language was crucial to gain access to the white men's world, which included better jobs and European goods (Romaine 1992:84-85).

As a consequence, the populace's language usage shifted more and more from local languages to Tok Pisin and parents passed it on to their children[4]. Romaine states that even in the remote village of Gapun where the villagers are entirely self sufficient (hunting and agriculture) and Tok Pisin is obviously not needed for economic reasons, it is at the same time valued highly. 'Villagers who do not speak Tok Pisin are regarded as pagan and uncivilized' (Romaine 1994:95). The children recognize that their parents see this language as a symbol of modernity and prestige and consequently gradually stop talking the local language. This mirrors the typical process of language death; people become ashamed of their own language and abandon it in favour of a more prestigious one. Eventually, they no longer pass on their native tongue to their children so that '[t]he minority language is then effectively deserted by its speakers, becoming appropriate for use in fewer and fewer contexts, until it is entirely supplanted by the incoming language' (McMahon

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[3] Pidgin and creoles are mixed languages. The vocabulary tends to be taken from the superstrate (dominant language) and the grammar from the substrate (subordinate indigenous languages) (Romaine 1994: 169).
[4] Language Shift.

1994:285). Thus, the strong usage of Tok Pisin posed a threat to maintaining indigenous languages and has resulted in the disappearance of many of the local languages.

Tok Pisin itself has gradually developed from a pidgin to a CREOLE, principally in urban areas, where it is already the primary language of many children. After Papua New Guinea regained independence in 1975, Tok Pisin attained official language status alongside English and HIRI MOTU[5]. It was used as everyday language in urban centres and discussions took place whether it should become the national language. Nevertheless it has never obtained the same status as English, which has remained the language of education and of the ruling class until today. In urban settings where the exposure of Tok Pisin to English is very high, a process of DECREOLISATION is slowly emerging. Increasingly more English loan words have been adopted and the phonology has been assimilated as well, which has ultimately created a much more anglicised variety of Tok Pisin. This process often occurs under conditions, in which a creole is used alongside its superstrate language and eventually results in language suicide (McMahon 1994:287).

However, LANGUAGE LOSS is not merely a result of urbanisation and modernisation, but it is also due to the absence of local languages in the educational system. Schools play a key role in preserving minority languages and consequently their cultural values. Yet, through colonialism Western education standards were brought along. In Papua New Guinea, as in most colonised countries, the language of the ruling elite was predominant in schools. MULTILINGUALISM was believed to be an obstacle to the development of the state and a common language crucial for unification. By providing the indigenous people with an educational system and so allowing them a certain amount of literacy, the colonists were in a position to spread their own cultural ideologies. 'Missions wanted to educate indigenous people in order to convert them, while governments wanted to train them to work in the service of Europeans' (Romaine 1992:21). This is why English was established as the official medium for education. Even though Tok Pisin was used as an educational language in some missionary schools, English was applied in all government and in most of the missionary schools.

Imposing the dominant language as the sole medium of education has serious consequences for indigenous languages and their speakers. Romaine describes a situation she encountered in a village school. In this village the hierarchy of languages was displayed on a notice board in the classroom which was divided into

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[5] Another lingua franca (Romaine 1992:18-19).

the sections 'good', 'bad' and 'worst'. 'To speak English was good; to speak Tok Pisin was bad, but to speak Tok Ples [local language] was worst' (Romaine 1992:20). For pupils of a cultural background different from that of the elite, schooling is connected with learning a second language. Moreover, their attitudes towards their own language are tarnished by situations like the one depicted above. They start to regard their language and themselves as being inferior to the dominant culture and forthwith abandon it. A consequence of the loss of language is the loss of identity. 'It is through and by language … that selfhoods are constructed, identities are forged, and social processes are enacted' (McCarty 2002:304). In this case it becomes clear that language suicide often is accompanied by a loss of identity.

The claim that killer languages and resulting language deaths are essentially about power can be proved with this example of Papua New Guinea. Obviously it is not language itself which kills other languages. It is when a politically, economically and culturally powerful society imposes on a less powerful one for profitable reasons that language death can occur.

5. English – German

In the case of Papua New Guinea, the colonial background and the lack of an official written standard lead to language suicide and made English act as a killer language. But a totally different situation can be found in other countries, such as Germany, that were not colonized but have an established political system and a written language of their own. The power distribution may still be unbalanced, but this does not lead to such radical changes in the language system as it did in Papua New Guinea. It is interesting to see the role English plays in this context. Therefore we have taken Germany as an example to illustrate that the use of English by non-native speakers does not have to result in language suicide.

5.1. Historical Background

5.1.1. Establishing a Language System

English and German are related to each other since both have their roots in West Germanic. Given that both realms were situated near each other, it is not surprising that they underwent similar developments and that their strands of history are greatly intertwined. In the fifth century, for example, Germanic tribes from today's northern Germany invaded Britain and settled there, establishing seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Several other points in history were crucial for the language development and distribution of those two languages. The process of Christianization beginning in seventh century England played an essential role in both countries. One of its major consequences was the introduction of a new writing system: The change from runes to a 'Celtic version of the Latin alphabet' (Barber: 2000:106). Germany was Christianized about 200 years later by the English monk Bonifatius. Certain loan words such as *heilig* (holy) consequently found their way into German (Görlach 2002:13). The earliest written documents of Old High German can also be dated back to this period.

The invention of the printing press in 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg affected both languages profoundly, first in Germany and later in England, where it was introduced by William Caxton. For German as well as English this meant that a Standard language could finally be established. With his translation of the Bible, Martin Luther set the foundation for a uniform system. This is one of the main differences between German and the languages of Papua New Guinea, which had no written system.

5.1.2. Global Situation

In the nineteenth century, England acquired the leading role in Europe thanks to the Industrial Revolution. As a result many English loan words from the technical area were incorporated into the German language.

Britain's influence was expanded even further through the colonisation of different countries. Germany on the other hand, though it had several colonies itself (e.g. Namibia and Cameroon), could never reach a comparable power. But according to Ammon (2002:139-141), scientific publications were as frequent in German as in English.

World War I was the end of German Colonisation and after the Second World War Germany was temporarily left with limited resources for further developments in science and technology. Consequently, English took over as the principal language in this field.

More essentially, the Peace Treaty of Versaille was officially written in French and English since the USA had already attained its status as a world power. German therefore was not one of the official languages of the League of Nations and as a consequence it was excluded from the official languages of the United Nations.

5.2. Anglicisms in the German Language

Nowadays, Anglicisms occur to a great extent in German. Often the connotations of the loan words are assimilated to the receiver language and differ completely from their original use. They are rather 'unevenly spread in the vocabulary as far as domains, degrees of formality, technicality, frequency, and social variables ... are concerned' (Görlach 2002:28). Görlach (2002:28, 30) points out that according to the Dictionary of European Anglicisms, most of the loanwords are either technical (e.g. *space shuttle* or *black box*) or colloquial (e.g. *Jeans* or *do-it-yourself*).

Technical loan words are restricted to scientific and technological jargons. Before the Second World War, the German terminology was still used within these spheres, but afterwards English expressions were more likely to be adopted for international use.

Colloquial loan words appear particularly in youth language, journalism and advertising. Contrary to technological terms, which tend to be written and less frequently used, the colloquial Anglicisms usually occur in speech. They are often associated with a certain lifestyle or fashionable prestige and are therefore rather short-living. Besides, 'the meaning of colloquial items is often vague'(Görlach 2002:28).

Basically, Anglicisms enter the receiver language through word borrowing and can be separated in 'quotation words' (Görlach 2002:29) and fully integrated items. There is a continuum between these two. English words are partially integrated into the German language by replacement. They occasionally keep their original meaning or spelling, but are generally assimilated. In addition, the receiver language often produces so-called PSEUDO-LOANS (Görlach 2002:29) of which three types can be distinguished: Lexical, morphological and semantic pseudo-loans[6].

5.3. English – German: Conclusion

Whether English acts as a killer language or not depends largely on the political systems and the power distribution. The example of the English-German relation shows that, although English can have a great impact even on an established language system, no language death occurs in this context.

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[6] Lexical pseudo-loans: Compounds of English words that do not exist in the donor language, e.g. German: *Dressman*; morphological pseudo-loans: Shortened items in the recipient language, e.g. German: *Pulli, Happyend, Gin Tonic* or *Dämmerschoppe*n (late-night shopping); semantic pseudo-loans: The meaning of an Anglicism differs from the meaning of the English word, e.g. German: *Gangway* – E: *steps, ramp* (Görlach 2002:29-30).

In Germany the native language is predominant in all major areas. In education for example, English is merely taught as a foreign language to serve as an international LINGUA FRANCA. Therefore given that English is voluntarily chosen, one should rather refer to the grassroots theory. It is not used, as the exploitation model states, to enforce 'Anglo-American capitalist interests' (Mair 2002:165) but for global communication.

The influence of English on the German language is not stronger than the influence of French or Latin; it is simply another part of its constant linguistic changes.

6. English Threatened?

English is spread all over the world and therefore has many regional variations. Native speakers and linguists are now confronted with the 'negative aspects' of the globalisation of their language.

One of the problems which have arisen is the difficulty to define a standard language. All varieties have their roots in Great Britain but have developed differently over time. However, as the differences in written English are very small and can be neglected, Barber claims that 'it is this [the literary language], if anything, which deserves to be called Standard English' (Barber 2000:261).

Furthermore, there are many countries in which English is used as a second language. And since the exchange between two languages works both ways, English does not only influence other languages but is also influenced by it. 'Code-mixing takes place to some degree everywhere that English is spoken alongside another language, and is a normal feature of bilingualism'(Encyclopedia 1995:115). Native speakers may fear that their mother tongue is violated by these influences, because modern communication and mass media enable these new varieties to mix with the English they use as a first language. Thus, the question of who should control this process and how it should be done arises.

Another threat is posed by immigrants to English-speaking countries. Because of their immense number there is no language shift (no adoption of English by later generations), so that in certain areas there are more speakers of a foreign language than of English. In the US, for example, 'the growth in the number of Hispanic speakers has prompted a major protectionist movement … an ensuing reaction … and a sociolinguistic controversy of unprecedented proportions' (Encyclopedia 1995:115). Therefore it becomes clear that English is not only threatening other

languages but at the same time is threatened itself. Where this on-going process will lead we cannot tell yet, but time will definitely show.

7. Summary and Conclusion

Now all that remains is to decide whether English really does act as a killer language or not. To answer this question let us make a quick summary of the key facts.

There are two subtypes of language death. The first is language murder, in which a more prestigious language is adopted by a society who then opts to forgo its indigenous tongue or is forced to do so. The second is language suicide, here a language gradually adopts more and more features from a more prestigious language until the two are hardly distinguishable from each other.

A significant aspect which must be taken into account is globalisation. Two different theories have been constructed concerning the role English can play as a world language. It can either act in an imperialistic manner (exploitation theory) or it can take on a neutral role enabling cross-border communication (grass roots theory).

Languages are merely instrumental, functioning only according to the social, political, cultural and historical factors of their current society. Consequently, other than the historical circumstances which promoted the English speaking culture to a world power, there is no justifiable reason why any other language could not have acted in the same way as English.

The two chosen case studies show that on the one hand English acts as a killer language. This is demonstrated by the example of Papua New Guinea, to which the exploitation model can be applied. On the other hand English can be considered to be neutral, enabling different societies to communicate with each other without assimilating the second language. This situation chiefly occurs between English and other dominant languages, as established in the example of German versus English.

Finally it must be taken into account that English itself is actually threatened, continually evolving and changing. The English language does not only impose its vocabulary on other languages, but is also constantly adopting expressions from other languages and cultures as well.
Therefore English cannot be said to be a killer language in such general term. English acts according to the situation at hand, this can be in a neutral or in a dominant way.

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