AJNR

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M. Castillo

AJNR Am J Neuroradiol 2011, 32 (8) 1363-1364
doi: https://doi.org/10.3174/ajnr.A2303
http://www.ajnr.org/content/32/8/1363

Globish and the Empire

When an empire collapses, one of the most important legacies it can leave behind is its language. Spanish is the fourth most commonly spoken language in the world. Nearly 400 million people do so, most in Latin America. The Spanish Empire started to gain force in the early 1500s and attained its peak with the colonization of the Caribbean and the Americas.[1] By the time the empire had nearly disappeared in the mid-1800s, Spanish was the official language in more than 20 countries. To be sure, the Spanish spoken outside of Spain has mutated. My wife often reminds me that I do not speak Spanish, but "Caribbean." Perhaps, only in distant Argentina and Chile does Spanish remain closest to its roots. Curiously, where Spanish has mutated, many of its original expressions remain intact. My wife also points out that at times I tend to speak like her grandmother—that is, many of the idiomatic phrases of long ago remain frozen outside of Spain. Of course, Spanish, like other languages, has become "tainted" by English, something that the Real Academia de la Lengua Española battles with constantly.

The French Empire was different from the Spanish one in that its expansion occurred not only far away but also within Continental Europe.[2] There are currently 21 Francophone countries outside of Europe and 4 in it. To the *chagrin* of the French, these countries are small except for Canada, the Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and French ranks eleventh in a list of the most commonly spoken languages (about 129 million individuals).[3] The diffusion of the French language is interesting because in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was the language of culture, science, politics, and diplomacy and was studied and spoken by all learned individuals. As the French will admit—and not so happily—their language has also become "tainted" by *anglicismes*; witness: "le weekend," "le shopping," "le parking," etc. Despite efforts of the Academie Francaise, synonyms for many English words do not exist in French. In the largest Francophone cities—Kinshasa, Brazzaville, and Montreal—French has also strayed from its roots.

After English, perhaps the most successfully exported language is Portuguese. Outside of Portugal, there are 7 countries where Portuguese is the official language. It ranks seventh in the world's most commonly spoken languages and is the second most common in South America. About 250 million individuals speak it worldwide. The Portuguese Empire started about the same time as the Spanish one but ended earlier, in the early 1700s, when many of its territories were taken over by the Dutch and its trading along the Indian Ocean came to an end.[4]

Languages may also spread not only on the basis of actual physical colonization but by economic factors. By virtue of its large size and growing economy, China's languages (especially Mandarin) are now the second most commonly learned after English.[5] China is clearly becoming the great economic empire of the 21st century, and Mandarin is spoken by more than 850 million people, followed distantly by English (510 million) and Hindustani (490 million). Despite this, Spanish, Portuguese, and French are still highly ranked as popular languages to learn.

One of the fiercest colonizers were the British. Their empire started late by European standards—16th and 17th centuries—but by the early 1900s, they dominated more than one-fourth of the world. Their most important outpost was the original 13 American colonies, from where English would propagate to the rest of the world. The end of World War II brought to a close the last vestiges of that great empire but led to a tremendous expansion in the use and learning of its language.

There is no doubt that the most successful export of the United States has been its culture and language. Although we do not speak about an "American Empire," we certainly speak of "American Imperialism." This last term reflects the military, economic, political, and cultural influence of our society on the rest of the world.[6] American imperialism began in the late 1800s after victory in the Spanish-American War and still goes on today. Even though our economic status is declining, globalization has assured that our culture and language continue to be omnipresent. Everywhere you go, you find American fast food, for which we do not want to be known. However, all places you go you can speak English, and our scientific status continues to be admired.

Even if the rest of the world seems intent on learning English, we Americans speak few languages. The US State Department has divided languages according to their ease of learning. One can achieve minimal proficiency with 600 hours of learning in the Latin and Germanic languages (so-called category 1 languages). To be minimally proficient in a category 2 language, you will need about 1100 hours of class work (these include Slavic, Turk, other Indo-European languages such as Persian and Hindi, and some non-Indo-European such as Georgian, Hebrew, and many African languages; Swahili is ranked easier than the rest, at 900 hours). The hardest (category 3), requiring more than 2200 hours of learning, are Arabic, Japanese, Korean, and the Chinese languages. In the United States, less than 9% of the population is bilingual; multilinguality is even less common. We are not alone. Although Anglophones are generally monoglots, Hispanophones and Francophones are also guilty of uniligualism.

Whereas monolinguality is limiting, worse is semilinguality. Children of immigrants face this significant problem—that is, before correctly learning their native language, a second is forced upon them, resulting in suboptimal command of both. If you happen to learn a second language before puberty, you will probably be a "compound bilingual." In this situation, words in different languages are anchored by similar abstract concepts. This means your communication competency will be high in both languages. When it comes to English and Spanish, I consider myself a compound linguist. It really does not matter if my PowerPoint presentations are written in either language or in which language I must give them. In this scenario, languages have truly become communication tools and may be easily interchanged. As one starts to learn another language, the new one is said to be *subordinated* to the first one. Practice will eventually result in the new language becoming *coordinated* with the maternal one. However, even coordinated speakers will use their original language to think through the newly acquired one. This is the reason why subordinated or coordinated speakers have lower communica-

tion competencies in their new language. Languages are currencies and make us richer and more prestigious. Polylinguality is not democratic; one language is generally more prestigious than others. It is not uncommon for the heritage (maternal) language to be replaced, generally in the second generation, by a more prestigious learned one (a common situation in the United States). Today, there is no more prestigious language than English. Not only is it the universal language of science, but it is the true lingua franca.

During the first few years of the second millennium, it seemed the fate of English was in doubt. The unpopularity of American foreign policy seemed to threaten a widespread acceptance of English. Then, suddenly, Barack Obama was elected, and American English recovered its prestige as the language of democracy and diplomacy. Curiously, by the time this happened, the English spoken throughout the world had changed and was on its way to become what is now known as Globish. The term "Globish" was coined by Jean-Paul Nerriere in 1995.[7] Globish initially comprised about 1500 words that were mainly intended for business transactions, but as Robert McCrum tells us in his fascinating book, *Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language*,[8] Globish is like a river accepting many tributaries and has become enormous and laden with many new words. One can think of Pidgin English as an ancestor of Globish. This simplified version of English served a purpose when different groups of people needed a common ground. African slaves forced into the Americas would not have survived in its absence. Historically, "black" English has been extremely mutable due to its predominant oral transmission (as is Globish). The most recent iteration of this is African American vernacular English (Ebonics), whereas the most recent iteration of English is Globish. Words like "hip," "cool," "cat," and "chick" are now parts of everyday English (and of Globish). Globish speaks to all of us, and Mr. Obama is a true master of a universal English ("I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white words."—*Dreams of My Father*[9]). Obama's English (and Globish) is perfect (and elegant) for our globalized world. Everything about a globalized world—literature, science, Internet, economy, mass tourism—points toward the need for a common language. Globish will certainly rid us of the anxiety of miscommunication so pointedly addressed by Sofia Coppola in the film *Lost in Translation*.

Although speaking with the correct accent is desirable and graceful, Globish pays little attention to this. As English continues to be universally adopted, accents become less critical and acquire a certain importance because they inform us of the speaker's background and nationality. In America, we continue to be somewhat intolerant of accents. Proof of this is the countless complaints at scientific meetings when non-native speakers have the courage to use English. How many of us would be brave enough to present in Mandarin in front of a Chinese audience? We should remember that English has become stronger thanks to China. The Chinese movie *Crazy English* follows Li Yang throughout his English teachings. His motto, "conquer English to make China stronger," leads me to believe that once the Chinese indeed conquer it, English will truly be the real lingua franca.[10] The second engine in reinforcing the use of English as the lingua franca is India, for its high-tech centers, such as Bangalore and its impressive entertainment industry (Bollywood), rely on it.

About 5000 languages are now spoken in the world. Within the next century, more than 90% of these will disappear.[11] The Bible says: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). Unfortunately, this follows: "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." Attempts to establish universal languages have failed before (who of us can speak Esperanto?). Latin, once the lingua franca, split into many languages that today share little with each other. Let's try to use English to improve ourselves and our sciences, for science may be a new empire and only a unified one can be successful and lasting. At the *American Journal of Neuroradiology*, we take the usage of English seriously, but we also recognize that our English-as-a-second-language authors comprise most of our contributors. My advice for them is straightforward: There is no way to avoid Globish, so keep it simple and do your best not to confuse your colleagues.

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M. Castillo
Editor-in-Chief

http://dx.doi.org/10.3174/ajnr.A2303