ANOTHER LOOK AT THE SPREAD OF ENGLISH

Josephine Ho

National Central University, Taiwan

English is now the leading language used in international communication. Close to one third of the world's independent states use English as the only official language or the co-official language (Conrad and Fishman 6–8). By 1982, the total population which uses English as either first or second language is set at 600 millions (Brumfit v). Hundreds of millions more are learning English as a foreign language in schools. In addition to its distribution among the masses, English, as one of the official languages of world bodies such as the United Nations, predominates in communication in those world bodies. The director of the language division of the United Nations office in Geneva estimates that at least 75 percent of the original documents done at the Palace of Nations are written in English. Moreover, more than half of the 120 permanent missions accredited to Geneva ask for English as their principal language while 26 more opt for English as one of their principal languages (Weinstein 163). Outside the area of politics, English is used as the primary language in science, in air traffic control and communications at sea, in banking and financing, and in many other facets of modern life. In short, just as Latin and French had been world languages in previous ages, English has now assumed the leading place.

Such a pervasive existence of the English language naturally commands the attention of sociolinguists who are interested in understanding how English ascends to the privileged status that it enjoys now over other language alternatives. A general survey of the literature in this field, however, reveals certain tendencies in approach which, interestingly enough, leave important questions unanswered. This paper then proposes to examine these blind spots in an effort to expose the assumptions of the researchers as well as to review, from the third world's vantage point, the limited relevance of behavioristic approaches in sociolinguistic research.

The basic premise of the present observation is that language adoption always takes place through power maneuvers within contexts of power, which have preemptively constituted the adoption yet are at the same time changed by the adoption. Furthermore, it would be to the advantage of the third world to look into these power maneuvers and reflect upon their impact so as to gain some insights into the predicament that the third world finds itself in.

The Purely Descriptive Approach

The first and most problematic group of sociolinguistic research adheres closely to the strictly descriptive spirit of modern linguistics and is interested in merely "describing" the gradual adoption of English by communities widely different from one another. Prime examples of such research include Richard Bailey and Manfred Gorlach's *English as a World Language*, and numerous reports and analyses by local informants which appear regularly in sociolinguistics periodicals such as *English World-Wide*. These researchers tend to see English mainly as a linguistic system which, by an accident of history, comes to perform certain social functions in a given society. Their attention thus focuses on the varieties and functions of the English language used in specific geographical regions of the world.

A typical study of this kind usually includes the following elements: (1) a brief description of the geographical area and its ethnic grouping, (2) a simple chronology of the entry of the English language into the area, (3) empirical data, in percentages, on the use of English by the population and through the various forms of media, (4) detailed listing and description of phonological, lexical, morpho-syntactic variations in the English used in the area, and (5) a brief rundown of the various occasions and functions for the use of the English language in that society. While these descriptions provide preliminary information about the general condition of English usage in various locations, they are at most useful additions to the cataloguing of linguistic data, but say nothing to provide the third world with insights into *how* English as a language comes to function in the dynamics of the lives of the residents (both users and non-users).

The most serious limitation to these studies, then, is their descriptive nature. In fact, as demonstrated in John T. Platt's classic study of English in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, being descriptive equals touching upon only the most observable, the most superficial aspects of social life, stripped of their historical, political, and social significance. For example, Platt describes the impact of English-mediated education on local residents in no more than one sentence: "With the expansion of the British colonial administration and of British commercial enterprises, employment for English-medium educated Asians became more and more available, although higher positions were filled almost exclusively by staff sent out from Britain" (387). The observed phenomenon is stated, but there is no in-depth examination of the mechanisms of its enforcement. Neither does Platt look into the power maneuvers that have to be in place before English is "adopted" and "accepted" into the existing social system as a vital element. After reading Platt's report, we are left with no clear notion of why and how English-mediated education is put into practice at that particular historical conjuncture. Likewise, there is no evaluation of the impact of this policy upon local

residents—how it affects, in practical and human terms, the lives of the people, and how it operates to maintain or transform local power structure.

If Platt seems to take the invasion of the English language as natural and rational, he also takes lightly its recession from the power scene. Let us take a closer look at how Platt describes a change in language policy in Malaysia:

> The National language Policy of Malaysia has also been steadily implemented in other spheres of life—government service, radio, television, and the universities. Thus, the functions of English are rapidly decreasing in Malaysia, although it is recognized as an important international language for commerce and communication and the language in which much important scientific and technical literature is written. In fact, in some quarters, there has been a trend toward emphasis on reading ability rather than overall competence in English (390).

While this passage may have accurately stated the bare facts about the changing functions of the English language in Malaysia, it has left many questions unanswered. For example, what was the real significance of the National Language Policy of Malaysia? What were the bases of that decision? (Who were involved in the decision-making process? What were their concerns and considerations in the decision-making process? How did these factors affect the final layout of the policy?) How did the policy change or tilt the distribution of power? (When the government instituted policies to limit the function of English, how did that affect the power of the people who depended upon English for their privileged positions? What other languages now replace English and how does that affect the status of their speakers?) What social, historical, or political factors have prompted the government to adopt the new policy at that particular moment? Why is there a new emphasis on reading ability rather than overall competence in English? None of these questions find answers in Platt's research.

Some may argue that answers to such questions lie outside the realm of sociolinguistics. After all, sociolinguistics is not politics, they say. Yet from the vantage point of the third world, which usually finds itself on the receiving end of language spread, what is social cannot be detached from what is political, economical, cultural, etc. . The artificial demarcations between academic disciplines are of no concern to the third world. In fact, knowing how widely English has spread does not help people see how it is changing their condition and their culture. What would really benefit people of the third world is to know how power maneuvers underlying the spread of English have functioned and are functioning to shape their world.

The Purely Empirical Approach

While the first group of sociolinguists refrain from looking into the intricate workings that make the spread of English possible, a second group of researchers, including such leading scholars as Joshua A. Fishman, Robert L. Cooper, Andrew W. Conrad, and Braj B. Kachru, seek to describe the various historical contexts and processes through which English is spread to the four corners of the world. Some of them look to the "hard facts of reality" to explain how one language (in this case English) takes precedence over other languages in becoming a "language of wider communications." Thus, Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable attribute the popularity of the English tongue to "the importance of the people who speak it" (4). Fishman, on the other hand, explains the choice as "the language of greater power being acquired and used much more frequently than that of lesser power" ("The Spread of English as a New Perspective" 115). Here the terms "importance" and "power," or even the more popular term of "prestige," are all abstractions and need further exploration.

Baugh and Cable's further substantiation of the term "importance" is quite solid and fits perfectly with our intuitive sense concerning the question of the spread of English:

> The importance of a language is inevitably associated in the mind of the world with the political role played by the nations using it and with their influence in international affairs; with the extent of their business enterprise and the international scope of their commerce; with the conditions of life under which the great mass of their people live; and with the part played by them in art and literature and music, in science and invention, in exploration and discovery—in short, with their contribution to the material and spiritual progress of the world. *English is the mother tongue of nations whose combined political influence, economic soundness, commercial activity, social well-being, and scientific and cultural contributions to civilization give impressive support to its numerical precedence* (4, emphasis added).

Within such an explanatin, language spread is a matter of rational choice. In other words, English has been adopted as the most important language because the whole world can plainly see that nations which speak English are better developed and well-established in the aspects of politics, economics, and culture in general. Baugh and Cable then jump to the adhoc conclusion that the "soundness," "well-being," and cultural sophistication of English-speaking nations must be somehow mysteriously correlated with the following "qualifications" of the English language itself: its cosmopolitan vocabulary (9–10), its inflectional simplicity (10), and its natural gender system (10–11). Such favorable correlations compel us to accept the notion that it

is only natural and rational for English to ascend to the prestigious place it now holds. In fact, in Baugh and Cable's conception, language choice is a matter very much like smart shopping: we simply choose the most worthy product on the market. (This market is of course presumably a "free enterprise system" in which whatever wins must be the best and the fittest because all decision-making processes are supposedly "rational.")

Other sociolinguists in the second group are not satisfied with the somewhat vague picture that Baugh and Cable paint of a peaceful competition in which English wins by the sheer merits of its own nature and those of its speakers. In fact, the ultimate objective for these latter sociolinguists—and here is something that manifests the limitation and domination of certain kinds of empirical research—is to explain the rise of English as an international medium of communication in such empirical terms that the researchers would then be able to predict the direction and the extent of language spread. Their key method then focuses on (1) abstracting factors which may have contributed to a language's reception by a population, and (2) constructing a theoretical model that could predict the optimal conditions for the adoption of a specific language in regions where the language has not yet reached that favorable status.

This research objective preemptively circumscribes the method that researchers use. Instead of looking into the actual history of each individual geographical area or nation in which English has spread and then studying the *actual* historical process through which English enters the respective social structures, researchers are more interested in flattening out the differences among these societies and correlating common factors that might have contributed to language spread. For example, Fishman, Cooper, and Rosenbaum hypothesize that there may be nine relevant factors that have affected the fate of the English language: military imposition, duration of authority, linguistic diversity, material advantages, urbanization, economic development, educational development, religious composition, and political affiliation (105). Then, with a sample size of 102 nations, Fishman and others set out to figure out the correlations.

They first establish quantifications for certain adhoc criterion variables, such as the use of English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, the percentage of the population enrolled in English classes in primary and secondary schools, etc.. These figures are supposed to accurately reflect the extent of English usage in those countries. The resulting figures are then correlated with another set of figures which quantify the nine so-called "predictor variables" listed above. (Significantly, Fishman et al. never explain how they come up with the criterion variables or the predictor variables in the first place. Both groups of variables seem to be equally unjustifiably chosen.) At the end of the computation, out of the nine predictor variables examined

—all except political affiliation—eight are shown to be positively correlated to the expansion of English. That is to say, these eight factors could serve as indices to predict the extent of the adoption of English in a specific area.

What is striking about Fishman et al.'s method, which can be said to be typical of the practices of much social science research in the United States, is the tendency to rely upon quantification and statistical analyses. Under such a premise, all social phenomena are to be stripped of their actualities and complexities, and then turned into discrete factors with no apparent linkage with one another. Even the actual histories have to be converted into numbers and run through zero-order correlations and multiple regression analyses before their validity is established. The historical, social, and political dimensions of the phenomenon of the spread of English—with all the complexities of individual and collective human experience and the vast differences among national and regional contexts—are collapsed into one set of statistical figures which pretend to demonstrate the intricacies of historical human action.

As a result of this reductionist tendency, the most that can be made of these research results is that the presence and extent of certain (randomly assigned) factors will necessarily coexist with another group of (randomly chosen) factors. As to the dynamics of the imposition or adoption of English by widely different individuals and societies, empirical research has little to say. (In fact, the question needs to be asked as to why we want to predict language spread at all. Are we gauging a market to determine how well we could sell a product?)

Fishman and others are not totally blind to the limitations of their research. That is why at the end of their report, they issue forth a series of questions for further research:

> Why do particular individuals in particular contexts want to learn English? How do they go about learning it? What are the circumstances in which they use it once they have learned it? What effect does their knowledge of English have upon their knowledge and usage of other languages? (100)

The persistence and urgency of such significant questions attest to the fact that purely empirically-oriented sociolinguistic research can offer little insight into the dynamics of language spread, not to mention the undercurrents that powered the spread.

The Socio-Political Approach

What we have seen so far is that sociolinguistics has devoted much effort and resources to descriptive and empirical research in language spread. Yet the mode in which such research is conducted precludes any attention to the actual historical

process in which a language rises to its privileged status. In fact, such research creates the impression that language choice is a natural and peaceful process in which individuals or societies made a rational choice to adopt English as a vital part of their functioning.

Likewise, mere sweeping statements or generalizations help little in clearing up the question. Otto Jespersen may have attributed the spread of English to the "political ascendancy" of its speakers (233). Conrad and Fishman may have described the growth of English in non-English-mother-tongue countries as closely related to "the political and economic hegemony, past and present, of the English-speaking powers" (55). Yet none of them define their terms nor examine how that ascendancy/hegemony is actually achieved, enforced, and maintained. Their use of abstract concepts to describe the phenomenon only creates the impression that language spread is something static, something that is a fact, rather than something that is a process of struggle and a process that is still going on today.

Such approaches, while having limited significance, say little about the language situation in which third world peoples find themselves. For, if English is "by reason" more desirable (advantageous) than other languages, if English-speaking cultures or nations are "by reason" more prestigious (superior) than other cultures or other nations, then the people in the third world have only themselves to blame for getting into and remaining in the disadvantageous conditions in which they find themselves. The acceptance of such a view by the third world overlooks the important factors of power maneuvers and power coercion that may have played significant roles even in the creation of the third world itself.

Fortunately, a small group of sociolinguists are alerted to the historical, social, and political dimensions of the issue of language spread and language choice. For scholars in this group, language adoption and spread is not a natural process, nor is it, as Brumfit calls it, an "historical accident" ("English as an International Language II" 13), but always involves the intricacies of the political maneuvers and power struggles. Viewed in this light, language is no longer an ideologically innocent means of communication, but always an interest-laden human action.

Thus when most scholars stop at general observations, others take a further step to pinpoint specific historical situations in which English gained in stature through power maneuvers. There is no dispute that the predominance of English is mainly the result of British imperialism in the 19th century and the economic influence of the United States in the 20th century (Brumfit, "English as an International Language I" 1; Kachru, *The Alchemy of English* 5 & 143). Yet the specific occasions and strategies need to be analyzed through which the stature of English had been significantly promoted. Armed with such a reflection, third world peoples can be more aware of how they come to be in the dependent situation that they now find them-

selves. Such awareness may be the first step to autonomy and self-esteem.

Let us then examine some of the occasions and strategies. One noted case happened at the Versailles Peace Conference after world War 1. France had insisted that French be the sole language for the Covenant. Yet according to Brian Weistein (163) and Stanley Lieberman (42), French effort was greatly circumscribed by American President Woodrow Wilson's show of support for British Prime Minister Lloyd George's demand that the Covenant be written in English. Eventually both languages are adopted for the Covenant, thus marking the passing of French as the chief and only medium of diplomatic intercourse as well as the ascendancy of English to international stature. It is doubtful that Wilson's influence derived from his personal charm or charisma. The real answer may lie in the fact that at the end of World War I the United States had become the world's biggest creditor with both France and Great Britain owing it hundreds of millions of dollars in war debt. The presence and support of Wilson thus carried all the weight of an economic bondage and played a significant role in affecting the outcome of the tug of war over language use.

The spread of English is associated with exercise of power not only in international politics but also in domestic politics, especially when English language skills are unevenly distributed. And when such uneven distribution is associated — by an act of state policy—with differences in social reward, the impact is quite significant. As a matter of fact, language policies often carry consequences which may very well have shaped the policies in the first place. For example, the Act of Union in 1707 decreed that Scotland's laws and administrative operations were to be determined in London and conducted in English (Leith 160). This decision was certainly not a simple matter of rational language choice but of a means of consolidation of political domination.

Furthermore, Great Britain introduced English into India as a medium of instruction in 1835 at the height of colonialism. The purpose for this introduction, in the words of its great proponent, Thomas B. Macauley, was to create "a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and intellect" (qtd. in Kachru, "South Asian English" 355). Such a policy necessarily benefited the Pro-British middle class in urban areas who had much contact with the British and to whom English was readily accessible (Weinstein 164). In other words, the policy aimed to create an Indian elite group that would facilitate the imperial rule. Yet, cast in the perspective of researcher Braj B. Kachru, the imposition is characterized as a British effort to meet a "local demand" by Indian scholars who worked to "persuade the East India Company to give instruction in English ... [to] allow young Indians access to the scientific knowledge or West" ("South Asian English" 353—54). Kachru's observation may have some truth to it — it may very well be the subjective wish of

Indian youths to learn the English language in order to become educated. Yet hidden from sight in the notion of "the local demand for English" as an innocent and objective pursuit for scientific knowledge is the whole colonialization process through which conditions had been created in the first place so that Indian youths found it necessary to learn English just to be knowledgeable. The distance between Macauley's and Kachru's perspectives dramatizes the objectivist assumptions of the sociolinguistic researcher.

Weinstein puts it well: "The main nonlinguistic purpose of choice is to alter boundaries between people or to maintain or alter patterns of access to power, wealth, and prestige within a society" (11–12). Thus, the ebb and flow of language spread often reflect vicissitudes in power distribution. In 1855 following the great trans-atlantic migration from Ireland, Germany, Italy and eastern Europe, Connecticut adopted a resolution legislating literacy tests as a prerequisite to voting. It is now obvious that the measure was adopted as a way to protect the incumbent politicians whose political careers where threatened by the change in their constituency (Weinstein 88). It is conceivable that the 1986 California amendment to adopt English as the official language of the state is motivated by a similar threat. (Since that date, similar official language policies have been instituted in quite a few other states.)

Besides political membership, language policies can be erected to affect other aspects of human life. A 1956 law in Arizona decreed that to obtain a certificate for employment, a child under the age of 16 had to be literate in English. The measure clearly discriminated against Mexican-American youths in the region who were growing in number (Weinstein 90). In the area of legal services, Tanzania's decision in 1961 to replace English with Swahili as the language used in the whole judicial system, excluding the high court or supreme court, enhanced the ordinary citizen's chances to understand court proceedings and court decisions, a move that has since greatly altered the power distribution between English speakers and Swahili speakers in the area (Weinstein 93). In the above cases, it is clear that a decision to adopt or drop English is never an innocent or natural move but always involves deliberation and socio-politico-economical consequences, consequences which may have motivated the institution of those policies in the first place. Maintaining blind eyes to such implications does little to enhance third world's perception of its own status.

In linguistically diverse areas, English is further promoted as a means to depress ethnic identity and local autonomy. In the case of Singapore, bilingual primary and secondary education includes English as one of the necessary languages of instruction. As Singapore wishes to maintain its sovereignty against strong influence from neighboring Malaysia and China (with whom most of the Singapore residents are ethnically affiliated), the government chooses English not only because of its international status but more importantly to promote inter-ethnic unity. It is the hope of the

government that "through the utilitarian value of English, instrumental attachments will eventually strengthen legitimacy of the state and further sentimental attachments, thus facilitating the emergency of a supra-ethnic national identity" (qtd. in Platt 389). For the newly independent states in Africa where language diversity is a serious problem for the centralization of power, a certain "neutral" language may be chosen to "establish cultural homogeneity and a common sense of identity among the members of diverse races and cultures who find themselves members of one state as a result of a series of historical accidents" (Le Page 23). As the formation of a state is never a matter of historical accident, Platt is right in pointing out the role English has played in holding quite a few African states together. Yet as to the benefits English speakers inherited from previous colonial rule, Le Page has nothing to say.

Power coercion or maneuvers in the area of language choice may not always take such ostensible forms. On the contrary, in most cases the power context appears as a situation in which the choice is laid wide open for people's discretion and they "rationally and wisely" choose English to be the language most effective in pulling the third world out of its difficulties. Le Page describes the situation in Africa thus:

> Agricultural and economic expansion, the diversification of activities, the industrialization of what have hitherto been plantation or peasant communities, the creation of a technologically-minded and trained middle class, are all urgent tasks. It is necessary that the clever children of the community should learn as much as possible about the sciences that can help to transform their country in as short a time as possible; and the language of these sciences is usually one of the major international languages, with English well in the lead as vehicle (Baugh and Cable 24).

The choice seems innocent enough. English can be the bridge to national progress, a means to advancement in science and technology (Mackey 18, Omar 204), so the choice is just a pragmatic move, nothing coercive about it. In fact, in many regions of the world, English is widely promoted because of the great hopes it holds out. And these prospects are often used to justify government policies concerning language choice. (Whether those hopes materialize or not is a totally different matter.)

The discussion so far may have created the impression that official language policies are what made English so pervasive in the world today, that the spread of English involves state conspiracy. Consequently, many people may argue: "What you say is not true. A lot of times, we learn English not because the state has decreed that we do so, but because we like it, we think it would be useful. Or at least, English is fashionable." In these cases, the adoption of English seems to be a matter of personal choice which has little to do with state policy. Yet, if we look further, we find that the desirability of learning English is promoted by a host of other factors.

The art of Teaching English as a second language has been steadily perfected so that support groups are available if they are needed. (English is probably the only language around which a whole academic discipline has been developed for its teaching. That is certainly an intriguing phenomenon which warrants our further attention and analyses.) The readily accessible flow of English teaching materials, textbooks, teachers, etc. puts English in a very favorable light when it comes to time of choosing. In fact, sometimes even US aid comes in the form of educational support for the teaching of English. In addition to the educational institutions, the media also play a major role in improving the accessibility of English (Algeo 57−64). The BBC and Voice of America have all sorts of English programs beamed at various areas of the globe virtually 24 hours each day (Nadel & Fishman 149). American popular songs and MTVs are heard and seen all over the world and are often even used in teaching English to second language learners. American-made films and television programs (mostly manufactured by the dream factories in Hollywood) are shown in many countries in their original sound-track but with subtitles added. All these forms of popular culture present the English language to the world population in a wide variety of forms and through a network of channels unmatched by any other language (Mackey 20).

It may be argued that there is nothing coercive about learning English as an additional language or about listening to or watching English-based programs, considering their ready accessibility. What's wrong with using what is made available, anyway?

The fact of the matter is that all of these facilities have to be supported or at least approved by government agencies, agencies that certainly do not treat it as a simple matter of linguistic pursuit. This affiliation between the accessibility of a language and the institutions that make it possible is all the more significant when it comes to the spread of English among third world countries. As a matter of fact, a US Comtroller's report in 1980 urged the government to allocate more funds for the use of the International Communication Agency because, as the report says, more effort to teach English "helps spread American values, provides access to people, facilitates other technical training programs, helps business, and 'offers an entering wedge into closed societies' " (qtd. in Weinstein 179). This document clearly demonstrates the ideological nature of these channels of accessibility and the power situation that underlies it. Accepted along with the language would be not only corrosion of local autonomy but also a whole new way of life. Thus while it may appear that we have a free choice situation here, the extent of that freedom has been preemptively circumscribed and shaped.

Others may claim that learning English is nothing but a personal choice to better a person's chances of employment or to be able to master a language of prestige. While this may appear to be valid on the surface, the apparent innocence, upon close exami-

nation, again turns out to be suspect. For what institutional and ideological systems of rewards are already present in the social structure which directly or indirectly encourage the learning of English? What favorable effect does knowing English have on a person's position and function in his/her specific society? What conditions make English so readily available that to pick up English is seen as something natural? Seen in this light, the so-called "personal choice" is actually propped up by a whole array of institutional and social arrangements.

In short, the pragmatically desirable and attitudinally prestigious English language appears to need no imposition for its wide adoption. But that is exactly where power has done its work of disguise. That is, what is imposed is not the favorable attitudes, but exactly the context in which those attitudes are taken as natural, the context in which English is seen as prestigious and desirable. Once the terms of possibility for the wide spread of English are exposed, we see that there is nothing "natural" about the phenomenon.

Scholars of the third group may be labeled as partisan, ideological, or non-objective; but are the scholars of the first two groups, in all their descriptive, empirical, objective research, free from ideological presuppositions? For the people of the third world, the presentation of the issue of the spread of English as a matter of fact, as the result of a peaceful but rational competition, as a phenomenon insulated from human life and social dynamics, hides from view the turbulent undercurrent of political struggles and power maneuvers in which we are all involved, whether we realize it or not. Thus in disguising the partisan nature of the phenomenon of the spread of English, the researchers have willingly or unwittingly played out their role in maintaining the third world status of the third world.

What this discussion has shown is that the spread of English is never a natural historical process or a rational choice, but is possible only because a network of intra-state and inter-state power arrangements are in place to guarantee its realization. It is important for the third world to be aware of these arrangements, for they may be the mechanisms that have created and perpetuated third world's dependency. This does not mean that we should never study English for fear it may corrupt our culture and status. The world has already developed into such a state that learning English is a must if the third world wants to pull itself out of its unfavorable conditions. Yet the key thing here is that we acquire the language with an eye to its possible impact on our lives so as to use the language to further the autonomy of the third world rather than deepening its dependency. As Taiwan becomes inundated with English language schools for children starting at age two, this is one area of consideration that we cannot afford to slight.

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