
English Is No Longer the Lingua Franca of Business on the Internet

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Abstract

Since the invention of the Internet, the free flow of information and ideas from various cultures throughout the world has increased. A common language for access to the information and ideas has been a significant issue that has greatly attracted the attention of policy makers from various sectors of the world economy. In the past decades, English has been considered a Lingua Franca due to wide usage by non-native speakers. Use of English has been so widespread that some minority languages have faced danger of extinction. A number of international companies have had to change languages of their websites from the native language to English in order to continue thriving in the world of business. However, with globalization, increased usage of Internet and impact of social media on business transactions in multicultural nations, the position held by English has been jeopardized. It is believed that in the next forty years, other great world languages such as Chinese, Spanish, French, and Arabic will gain complete dominance in world business transactions. The present research aims at evaluating evidence to determine whether English is losing ground as the Lingua Franca of business on the Internet.

Keywords: Internet technology, English, lingua franca, world business, multicultural languages.

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Stakeholders in major international companies have realized the role played by language in online customers' transactions. English language has for long

influenced the online conversations and behaviors and hence limiting accessible information. In all forms of business, language has proved to be a powerful enhancer of human connections. More trust is put in websites of the global markets that have customers' preferred languages, making these customers spend more money (Witt, 2018). Most global company leaders and directors have used this experience to diversify their communication methods including multicultural use of languages on their website with the main objective of reaching consumers across the world in their local languages. For the past decades, there has been dominant use of English, both as academic and business lingua franca (Jenkins & Leung, 2014). However, the rapid increase in access to the Internet all over the world is having an impact on the online content. According to Witt (2018), much growth to Internet access is occurring in emerging markets where English is either spoken as a secondary language or not used at all. The trend, according to Witt (2018), is significantly attributable to the adoption of mobile and smartphone technology in addition to emergence of social media. Consequently, other major languages are catching up leading up to a decline in English use. Rotaru (2011), for instance, established that from 2000 to 2010, the number of non-English websites including Arabic, Russian, Chinese as well as Spanish experienced a major rise. The decline in the percentage of English content, according to Witt (2018), is evidenced in social media with China and India presently leading in Internet use, particularly, in social media. The evolving linguistic landscape will have an impact on worldwide online businesses. With consumers preferring content in their local language, English is losing its position as Lingua Franca of business on the Internet.

The Evolution of English Lingua Franca

The traditional approach to English as Lingua Franca is illustrated with three common circles. The native language speakers, such as the inhabitants of the USA, Great Britain, and Australia were included in the innermost circle as individuals who employed English as their first language. The middle circle was comprised of speakers of English as second language, for example, former British Empire colony inhabitants. Countries such as Russia and China constitute the expanded circle. The approach has led to widespread international usage of

English (Gajšt, 2014). David Graddol points out that these borderlines are rapidly disappearing in the present globalized world (Graddol, 2006). Significant changes took place in numerous partner-countries due to the practice of embracing English and teaching it in the learning institutions as an official and compulsory language (Gajšt, 2014). Different countries incorporated it into their educational system where the teaching starts at a younger age. In China, for instance, despite Chinese language being among the top competitors in the international business, English as one of the core syllabus subjects is compulsory starting in year three of elementary school. The core objective has been for students to acquire it purposely for international usage (lingua franca). The knowledge of English constantly became a prerequisite for several foreign countries as it facilitated business (Gajšt, 2014).

One key reason that contributed to English online dominance and led to many international business companies revising their language is the invention of the Internet in the US in the 1970s (Dor, 2004). Creating a website required knowledge of coding, and thus English knowledge became a requirement, since it was used in the mainstream coding languages. A good example of a company that changed its website was Swedish “Skanska”. For English society to feel related to their name, in 1984, the company name was changed from “Skanska Cementgjuteriet” to simply Skansa. (Hansson, 2004). Many companies from non-English speaking countries did the same. When the Internet became a public domain, it was mostly accessible to the North-Americans and Europeans due to their low linguistic diversity, hence, the huge amount of Internet hosts. For instance, Africa had the least amount of hosts (Kende & Rose, 2015). Workforce migration to countries where knowledge of English is mandatory has as well proved to strengthened English dominance. For example, in 2003, for every foreign employee to get a job in Malaysia, basic level of English knowledge was a requirement (Szabóné, 2009).

Challenge from other Languages

Despite the aforementioned factors, there have been several potential languages that have both regionally and globally challenged English dominance (Dor, 2004). The languages that have been shown to gain importance due to demographic

reasons include Spanish, Chinese, French, Russian, German, Arabic, and Italian (Szabóné, 2009). In the US, the most rapidly growing ethnic group is the Chicano-Caribbean-Spanish language speakers. The growing Spanish language role forced Brazil in 2005 to pass an act that requires training of the Spanish language in every school as an alternative to English (García, 2005). According to Szabóné (2009), China is expected to be one of the leaders of the world's economies by 2050, and Chinese language is to be the most used. Due to the recent increased usage of the Internet by the highly populated China, the Chinese language is already among the top languages in international business transactions. The Chinese government has strived in helping the realization of learning of Chinese language by non-natives through the establishment of Confucius Institute, the first being opened in Seoul, South Korea. The forecasts approximated that about 100 million people would be studying Chinese as a foreign language worldwide (Szabóné, 2009). On the European regional level, significant languages including German, French, and Italian have been considered English competitors. Despite facing this competition, English language continues to play a key role in a multilingual and multicultural environment due to its already seated roots.

Generally, linguistic experts often differ in opinion when it comes to giving demographic language figures. The complex nature of language definitions and boundaries makes it difficult to reach a consensus. The estimation of the number of languages to have been created by humans is about 40,000 (Pimienta, Prado & Blanco, 2009). Among these, the ones that are still in use are estimated to be between 6,000 and 9,000. These figures vary depending on the source. The stipulation of some sources is that, every two months, approximately one language is lost. Linguistic diversity preservation in this context, therefore, becomes an important issue to be addressed. The arising question is whether the linguistic diversity has an impact on doing business online. With research indicating that the consumers prefer working with businesses that speak their language, it is paramount that research be carried out to determine the demographical languages in different regions. What is clear is that English dominance is waning and multinationals have to invest in more languages.

The early World Wide Web planners were generally American. Implicitly, they were only thinking of facilitating communication in English without the anticipation of the problems that might arise from the needs of other

language speakers (Danet & Herring, 2007). However, the use of the Web in business transactions and globalization created need for a common language across the globe. This early invention has proved to accelerate the spread of English worldwide at the expense of other indigenous languages to the extent of contributing to their extinction. However, the Internet has recently been considered as providing an effective medium for minority languages revitalization and preservation. According to Stern (2018), while a small fraction of the world's languages dominate the Internet, the medium provides a chance for rejuvenating local languages. According to Stern (2018), from the year 2000, progress has been made in diversifying content provided on the Internet. As opposed to 1990s when English was the only dominant language, at present Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic have taken a significant share. The implication of this is that companies conducting business online can reach a wider audience. Furthermore, residents of different countries where English is not the first language can learn in their local languages without being disadvantaged while doing business over the Internet.

The Impact of Globalization on English Business Lingua Franca

The Web is no longer monolingual where only one language dominates as it was in the past. Numerous indigenous languages around the world are today significantly represented and used largely over the platforms. Multilingualism is on the rise on the Internet and has become an important issue that has drawn the attention and efforts of stakeholders whose aim is ensuring it is accessible to all (Dor, 2004). The need for linguistic diversity around the globe is increasing. For instance, the UNESCO Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity was adopted on November 2001 to advance the course (Stoczkowski, 2009). The Internet started predominantly as monolingual, with English being the only language used. Its continuous growth has led to access to non-English speaking populations. According to Witt (2018), the explosion of non-English websites in the last two decades has seen other major world languages attempting to catch up with English language. For instance, Chinese, which stands second regarding usage throughout the world, increased by 2,227% between 2000 and 2010 (Rotaru, 2011). With Rotaru (2011) estimating that by 2023, nearly everyone in China will have access to social media, English dominance over the Internet will be under threat. The

implication of this in business will see companies diversify their online content and try to reach more clients using the language they can understand.

The diversification of Internet language has also been driven by concerns from policy makers of the need to avoid linguistic bias and extinction of local languages. For instance when the December 1995 Francophone Summit in Cotonou publicly quoted English presence as being above 90% (Pimienta, Prado, & Blanco, 2009), the figure generated sentiments of the Internet being inherently linguistically bias, triggering increased reactions to improve the situation. The result set off the idea for harnessing the power of search engines for research. Obtaining an approximate idea of English, Spanish and French's split on the Web was established as a first trial. The rough estimation of the culture-language association representation was made by weighing their presence in the web of important personalities of diverse categories before comparing them. The way was paved by the results for what became the only series of existing repeated and coherent measurements of the language-subset presence on the Web and other online spaces. The 12-year research period from 1996 to 2008 on English lingua franca continued to overstate the dominance of English as being 80%, despite the formidable speed of the evolution of Internet demographics that showed English-speaking users drop from 80% to 40% (Pimienta, Prado, & Blanco, 2009).

The broad perception throughout the several decades that the world has been globalized is the considerable stability of the English-Internet dominance. Consequently, the web has failed to give a true reflection of the real world's linguistic and cultural diversity. The obvious need for a coherent policy for web page creation in the various domestic languages for development of the contents seemed to be conspired against by this perception. A report published by UNESCO in 2005 that measured Internet linguistic diversity sought to provide the different academic and research overview of the diversity of languages on the Internet (UNESCO, 2006). A set of papers coordinated by Pimienta from researchers around the world, on the other hand, argued the English dominance to be only 50% (Pimienta, Prado & Blanco, 2009; Pimienta, 2008; Arunachalam, 2005). According to Witt (2018), the linguistic landscape is changing, and the English language is increasingly being adversely affected by the emergence of other languages. The ever-evolving linguistic landscape is likely to create a major impact on global online business. A survey carried out in 2006 by Common

Sense advisory, as quoted by Witt (2018), illustrates that people are likely to make purchases using their own language, with 73 percent of the participants agreeing to this in 2006 and the figure increasing to 75 percent eight years later. The 2014 survey demonstrated that 60 percent of people spend a majority of time in their own language as opposed to English. According to Witt (2018), the change in trend and moving away from the English language is not happening in emerging countries alone. Witt (2018) cites the European Commission's 2011 research on European online consumers which states that given a choice, 90 percent of the participants would choose their own language and not English, with 20% indicating they may not visit websites that are not available in their language. The implication of this is that English is losing ground as Lingua Franca of business with business being forced to communicate with clients in their preferred languages.

Being a major opportunity in the improvement of the free flow of information and ideas from the various diverse cultural communities throughout the world, the Internet has become a major subject of study. Particularly, the multinationals have been interested in communication channels provided by the web as they strive to reach communities across the globe in their preferred language with an aim of selling their products (Frey-Ridgway, 1997). UNESCO is aggressively committed in the efforts aimed at improving the diversity of culture and languages on the Internet as well as broadening the access to information for all (Montviloff, 2001). The International Year of Languages by UNESCO in 2008 has attracted the attention of policy-makers, including the relevance of strategic development of languages and linguistic policies in the larger section of public opinion (Vertovec, 2010). The Internet address Internationalized Domain Name (IDN) introduction has enabled web access in local script and languages (Pimienta, Prado,& Blanco, 2009).

Efforts to have more people access and use the Web through diversification of languages have been increasing over the years. Adopting an appropriate Internet linguistic policy is, therefore, an important role played by the various countries in preserving and utilization of their native communities' languages. The significant lesson learned is in the relationship between languages on the Internet, the diversity of languages in a given country, and the importance of these languages for the various company-product sales. Companies are using web channels to advertise

their products to different clientele and therefore language diversification improves the market reach. Specific details of the country's developed comprehensive linguistic policy are required to address the virtual world's linguistic diversity as well as the relevant figures that are based on the reliable situation quantifying indicators. UNESCO has been protecting the minority native languages from English dominance through the facilitation of the formulation of linguistic policies that are conducive to the worldwide diverse cultures and languages on the Internet (Pimienta, Prado, & Blanco, 2009). For instance, UNESCO helps nations in formulation of education policies that ensure some languages do not become extinct. Some of the policies include emphasizing providing school learning content in local languages, what is termed as mother-tongue instructions. Further, UNESCO advocates for multilingualism where people are able to communicate using different languages, ensuring their sustainability.

Multilingualism Perspectives

Internet technology has changed international business, both in the concept and method of employment. Many countries and companies have been forced to adopt changes and develop policies that are in tandem with the linguistic diversity, which accommodates multilingualism and not monolingualism (Martinez, 2007). Consequently, the position of English as the international language of business is weakening. Multilingualism has gained dominance in the recent past to the extent that multilingual coexistence is now a characteristic trait of an international company (Mettewie & Van Mensel, 2009). The representative union whose perspective has changed is the European Union. The context of multilingualism has greatly changed the Union's perspective in international business operations (Vez, 2009). The European Union has understood the importance of languages in building bridges among people, having a better understanding of each other as well opening access to different countries and their culture. Such benefits allow for movement of goods and people between countries. The linguistic behavior of companies has a relation to governmental changes in the same way it is also related to social changes (Martinez, 2007).

Commissioner Jan Figel in November 2005 presented the European Commission's official document that makes reference to multilingualism as a

significant value that requires promotion to all effects to the European Parliament. The emphasis of the document was the idea of linguistic diversity that needs to be developed in the policies that go past the 20 official languages (Martinez, 2007). With the shade of light on the benefits of multilingualism in the international economy, the EU's commitment was the promotion of the usage of approximately 60 of Europe's languages, including that of the immigrant communities (Vez, 2009).

The most interesting thing in the European Commission's (2015) official document is the focus on the linguistic question in the perspective of the world of business. Internet technology has had a significant impact on the linguistic scene, an obvious fact seen in the growing importance of the relationship between companies and multilingualism. The evidence of this has been witnessed since the early 20th century and has become more apparent in the past few years (Martinez, 2007). Strong emphasis is laid on the importance of workers' linguistic qualifications and the need for promoting and improving the companies' working services of translation and interpretation. The purpose behind these proposed actions is to analyze the market translation situation and European companies' linguistic needs and qualifications. In Commissioner Jan's document, a reference that promotes multilingualism in the European institutions themselves is also highlighted (Martinez, 2007). The 21st century is marked by a stateless revival of languages. The modern state rationalization has finally become a point of support for the defense of linguistic diversity without recuperating the dominant language's space, but rather seeking a way of sharing space.

Multilingualism is promoted in companies in various contexts with the main objective of accommodating the services of workers of diverse language groups and reaching all the language classes with their products (Frey-Ridgway, 1997). In the context of business, there are regulations obliging the use of certain languages, especially in consumer or customer information-related aspects (Martinez, 2007). Companies are, therefore, in many instances, obliged to use more than one language in communicating with the customers or consumers. The internalization of the markets through online business has therefore, added more complexity to the uses of diverse languages, which could not have been achieved through English lingua franca only.

The methods used in the translation sector to promote multilingualism have

been revolutionized by the new information and communications technologies (ICT). ICT development and the information storage capacity means that various linguistic versions can be offered by the same product at the same time, contrary to the early monolingual dominance in the usage of only English in the description of the products. Computer programs have also been affected by this flexibility, simultaneous translation applications, and information management. Many companies have adopted the use of applications that can simultaneously operate in dozens of languages (Martinez, 2007). Examples of these international companies include Sun Microsystems, Microsoft, Philips, Apple and Samsung. These technologies allow the creation of global products, standard software that is sold in every market all over the world, with the addition of localization data. The concept defines the product's adaptation process to the local needs, meaning the final product becomes multilingual. Hence, this limits the dominance of one language in the market.

The Internet has had a great influence in the change and acceleration of translation processes to the extent of creating a great figure of both the profitable and non-profitable initiatives, taking advantage of the Internet's capacity in involving several individuals in the similar scheme and in the generation of fast product translations. Softcatalà, is a perfect example of the translation of computer programs into a language such as Catalan that is not always readily available on the market. In the era of multilingualism, the Internet has undoubtedly greatly influenced these technological changes (Martinez, 2007).

Multilingualism is not exclusively for computer programs and the applications of digital media but extends also into other markets. New linguistic needs have been brought about by the internalization of companies. This has been manifested in the need for communication with both the customers and the internal structure as well (Riley, 2017). Through the combination of the staff, managers or by the merging of companies from diverse parts of the world, organizations have become more plurilingual. The new technologies of the Internet, in essence, have changed the method and concept of employment. The changes in the companies' dynamism have not only been due to the incorporation of new methods of working but because of the changes in the relationship to languages.

Linguistic planning and management have entered companies and are no longer limited to government bodies. This transition to linguistic diversity is

favored by various factors that include internalization and the introduction of ICT into translation services. Multinational companies have also adopted social responsibility criteria that include giving attention to local languages and the diversity of culture (Martinez, 2007). Indeed, through this advancement in the diversion of attention from monolingualism to multilingualism, English has lost its prestigious status of being the international language of business.

Suggestions for Global Competitiveness of Companies

The World Wide Web has had a great impact on the world of business, where anyone can easily access any trending information originating from any corner of the world. English, which has for many years been considered as the lingua franca of the world business, still appears at the top ranking according to the Internet World Stats (de Argaez, 2011). However, compared to the online growth of other major languages that include Spanish, Chinese, Russian and Arabic, English dominance is declining (de Argaez, 2011). International companies such as YouTube and Facebook have grown very fast due to the provided opportunity that has enabled marketing and purchase of online products in consumers' preferred choice of language. The increased understanding of cultures helps in the social integration of the world's population. It becomes easier for people to conduct business transactions given that they will understand each other better than before.

Conclusion

Language is very critical in shaping the culture of people and businesses. The language used in business is important as it determines the level of understanding by both parties. The invention of Internet technology has made it possible for the free flow of information and ideas from various cultures throughout the world. As a result of the invention of the Internet emanating in the US, English has for many years been considered the common language in the world of business. With the globalization and the rapid growth in the Web usage by other native language speakers, significant changes have occurred in the world market. Most global companies have used this experience to diversify their methods of operations that include the multicultural use of languages on their website with the main objective

of reaching consumers across the world in their local languages. The attention of policymakers from various countries has been enticed to create room for accommodation and promotion of multilingualism for the purposes of economic prosperity.

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