

English in the Social Sciences¹

Abram de Swaan*

Introduction

Let us first praise English, not for its intrinsic virtues, but for the simple fact that it has become the true world language of science, technology, media and business. There now is a language that allows to reach each and everyone who counts in the field of the natural sciences, advanced technology, mass entertainment and corporate affairs. Of course, it would have been nice if this global language had been Latin, or Chinese, or French, or for that matter Dutch. But it is not. It happens to be English.

None of this has anything to do with the immanent qualities of English. Linguists — for lack of any adequate criterion — consider all languages equally worthy by default. Some sociolinguists believe that the present hegemony of English is the result of a determined conspiracy by the British Council or a host of US foundations and agencies to goad people especially in the Third World into learning English, even if it might go squarely against their wishes or their interests.² Of course, English language publishers, language institutes and other peddlers of English have made a strenuous

* Abram de Swaan is University Professor in Social Sciences at the University of Amsterdam.

¹ This article appeared earlier in: Ulrich Ammon (Ed.)(2001). *The dominance of English as a language of science; Effects on other languages and language communities* (pp. 71-84). Berlin etc.: Mouton De Gruyter.

² This view is usually associated with Phillipson (1990). However, the definitions of his main concepts are more circumspect. He defines 'English linguistic imperialism' as: "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of *structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages*." (p. 41, italics in the original), this, the author continues, is a special case of 'LINGUICISM', which is defined as "ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (*Ibidum*). The problem with these statements is not the contention that between English speakers and other language groups unequal relations of power and prestige prevail, but the notion that this is a consequence of linguistic practices and relations *per se*, and that it is the outcome of concerted and purposive action. In fact, it is a concomitant of unequal political and economic relations. It may be somewhat intensified at most by organized interventions. Although the definition quoted strongly suggests that the outcome is undesirable, in fact, its consequences are manifold, mixed and diverse for different categories of people. Finally, the approach ignores the demand side of the language market: the masses of avid students of English throughout the world.

effort to sell their wares.³ So have their peers who offer French courses and books in the former French possessions⁴ or German publishers and language institutes that operated in East and Central European markets (Ammon, 1998; Chaudenson, 1991; Djité, 1990; *État de la francophonie (...)* 1989).

Students take English courses and study English textbooks because they (and their parents) believe it will profit them, in an intellectual sense, but also, and even more so, in the job market. In the overwhelming majority of cases, they are right. In general, fluency in the standard version of the first foreign language is a key to the higher echelons of employment in any country. Nowadays, only computer courses may be an equally profitable learning investment. So, in most countries in the periphery, the semi-periphery and the core of the world system, parents insist that their children learn English, and on this one issue the children agree with their parents. Nevertheless, people in the (semi-) periphery, even when they have mastered English or another world language, still participate in transnational communication on unequal terms: they are not nearly as proficient as post-native speakers of English or the other 'supercentral' languages. Moreover, usually they have been socialized in a variety and an accent that betray their marginal status. In their own society, on the other hand, educated, literate and competent in the formal, written standard of the dominant foreign language as they are, they count among the privileged few in comparison with the vast majority who lack these qualifications.⁵ Their linguistic competence serves to underline, to demarcate the prevailing class distinctions and helps to perpetuate them.

In the more developed countries of the world, linguistic competence equally serves as a class marker, as Basil Bernstein (1975) and Pierre Bourdieu (1982; 1984) among many others have argued. Fluency in one or more foreign languages adds to the speakers' linguistic and cultural capital and hence increases their prestige. But in those countries, elementary schooling is well nigh universal, and as a result, so is literacy. In principle,

³ Cf. Pennycook (1994, p. 155), for a survey of private expenditure on English language learning: 6.25 billion pound in 1988, half of which was spent in Britain and North America, the other half in Europe, Australasia, and the Far East.

⁴ Chaudenson, 1991; Djité, 1990, *État de la Francophonie dans le Monde*, 1989.

⁵ Pierre Manessy (1984, p. 201-2) quotes a *cri de coeur* from J.-P. Makouta Mboukou, in his case with respect to French in former colonial societies: 'L'unique solution humaine est de 'vulgariser', de 'populariser', c'est à dire de repandre l'art de parler, de lire et d'écrire le français, c'est par-ce que celui-ci n'est encore l'apanage que de quelques bienheureux. Mais le jour où la population sachant lire et écrire le français passera de 10% à 90%, le courant sera inversé. Et qui sait si nous n'assisterons pas à une métamorphose désagréable d'où les coqs majestueux d'au-jour'd'hui sortiront roitelets malingres et transis'.

this allows anyone who so desires to learn their own or a foreign language in the standard version. On the contrary, the illiterates in the (semi)peripheral societies, numerous as they are, find themselves effectively excluded from that option. As a result, the educated elites in these (semi)peripheral societies enjoy a group monopoly on the standard language, allowing them to reserve the better jobs for their own kind. It also means that the standard language in these countries can not be considered as a collective good with respect to the population in its entirety, since the necessary condition of non-excludability does not apply in these cases (de Swaan, 1998a).

However, if people have access to education and have the opportunity to acquire literacy, they are in a position to master the prevailing language for transnational communication, and it usually is in their interest to do so. Yet, the aggregate individual choices of so many foreign language students may in the long run erode the vitality of the indigenous language and devalue the collective cultural capital embedded in that shared language. After all, by the time almost everyone uses the foreign language alongside with the indigenous language, the latter no longer affords communication opportunities which the former can not also provide. People may begin to neglect their original language, even fail to pass it on to their children. As a result, the texts that were recorded or memorized in the indigenous language become unintelligible and inaccessible. The aggregate cultural capital embedded in the abandoned language is lost for future generations (de Swaan, 1998b). Even if the indigenous language is not discarded completely, it may still be spurned in settings of 'high' or 'modern' communication and no longer considered worthwhile to develop for such usage. Apparently, the sizable advantages of English as a world language go together with major disadvantages for the indigenous language as a means of wider and advanced communication.

English as the language of the sciences

When it comes to English as a language of science, its advantages for global communication are even more striking than in other domains. Practically the entire scholarly community in the natural sciences reads English, and the vast majority publishes articles in that language. This phenomenon, however, is completely independent of the intrinsic qualities of English, and results from the economic, political and also scientific predominance of the British empire during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, and

since the First World War increasingly the USA. Surprisingly, the technological and scientific vocabulary of English (and the other 'modern' European languages) consists in large part of loan-words from Latin and Greek, with a perverse predilection for bastard formations from both at once: *sociology*, *television* or *automobile*. It is a sign of the popularity of personal computers and the internet that the accompanying neologisms are taken from everyday English (e.g. *file*, *net*, *save*, *site*). In order to demystify these new information technologies it might be useful to adopt equally mundane, indigenous equivalents in other languages.

But, or so the argument runs, if foreign terms are introduced wholesale, people may learn the words without ever understanding their - deeper - meaning. In fact, even in countries with a high level of education, the vast majority has only a practical grasp of these terms, and no more than the faintest idea of whatever else notions such as 'gravity' or 'significance' may denote. Seeking indigenous alternatives for such concepts in no way improves understanding.⁶ Nor does the adoption of large quantities of loan-words harm the language in any way.⁷ In other words, the vocabulary may change, but the morphology - grammar, syntax and pronunciation - remain mostly unaffected.⁸ In everyday speech, the strong jaws of morphology chew the loan-words with surprising ease into well-formed sentences.⁹

⁶ It so happens that The Netherlands is one of the rare countries where a scientific and philosophical vocabulary was introduced - in the sixteenth century! - constructed entirely from indigenous elements; e.g. *wijsbegeerte* for 'philosophy' (*filosofie*) or *aardrijkskunde* for 'geography' (*geografie*). The Dutch terms are still in use, more frequently in the lower rungs of the school system, whereas the 'classical' constructs are more current in higher education. Even though the Dutch terms have been completely incorporated into common usage, on the face of it there appears to be no evidence whatsoever that the understanding of Dutch pupils and students is any more profound than it would have been without the Dutch indigenisms.

⁷ This is a favorite fear of language lovers, who tend to be stronger on vigilance than on understanding. Cf. the discussion between Étiemble and Hagège (cf. Flaitz, 1988, p. 106-107; Étiemble, 1973; Hagège, 1986).

⁸ Compare, however, Gopal (1966, p. 202): 'In commending the use of international terminology, the Language Commission has observed: "In the field of higher sciences, research workers of different countries work as a close fraternity in continuous communion with each other. It is an obvious advantage that in such fields they should be speaking in an identical language; and, in any case since the terms used in these fields do not affect the general language issue, it appears to be manifestly desirable to adopt the terms current in international terminology". English is commonly understood in most countries today, and has facilitated the spread of international terminology'.

⁹ A telling example: The Dutch sentence *Ik heb de file geseefd* [I saved the file] contains two loan-words from English: *file* and *save*. The verb is conjugated (and pronounced) analogously to the aurally most similar Dutch verb *zeven* [to sieve], with the past participle *gezeefd*. Moreover, the syntax is Dutch, putting the object before the verb, rather than after it, as in English, and so is the choice of tense, the perfect tense rather than the English imperfect (one of the finer points of English grammar that Dutch students find very difficult, but apparently cope with without fault in practice). As to

Hence, nations with few resources would do better not to waste their time on this aspect of corpus planning or on the development of indigenous terminology, and simply adopt the international terminology constructed from the remnants of long dead languages.¹⁰ The one deficit of the less equipped languages that is mentioned most often - their lack of a science and technology vocabulary of their own - may not be a handicap at all.

In teaching the natural sciences, English as the language of instruction carries with it the risk of widening the cultural rift between the rational world of scientific method and technological procedure on the one side and on the other side everyday life with its common sense notions as well as its magical ideas. A divide that may be even wider in developing countries, but certainly has not disappeared in the West. Scientists and engineers may find it harder to explain concepts and provide instructions to collaborators who have not learned English, thus perpetuating their exclusion from the realm of science and technology, relegating them to practical, routine tasks. This risk is much less in those countries where well-nigh everybody has learned some English in school and the language no longer holds much magic for most. But in many developing countries, fluency in formal English (or French for that matter) is attainable only through extended education and provides exclusive access to the higher echelons of the labor market to a tiny elite, while the vast majority remains excluded.

In such countries, a 'second class English' has emerged and spread; a pidgin (or Creole), based more often than not, on an English vocabulary, and serving to link speakers with different mother tongues. But their pidgins, too, function within a linguistic class system and constitute a 'sociolect' that is distinctly 'lower' than standard English (and the same goes for French). Nevertheless, these languages may be quite suitable for teaching the sciences, using loan-words from English (that is neologisms from Latin and Greek) when technical terms are required. Teaching 'high knowledge' in low languages would help to erode class barriers and that is why it will not happen soon.

orthography, sentences like these are very rarely written down, they are accepted only in spoken language.

¹⁰ Sridhar (1987, p. 307) quotes Raghuvira, a defender of the Hindi purity movement: "Shall we be anglicized, shall we be turned into Greeks and Latins and shall we then alone pick up the few crumbs thrown to us as refuse (...) by the West? We shall have again our own words... When this is done, Indians will be free of the thralldom of the European languages (...).But, Sridhar comments: "Some of the newly coined terms are ridiculed in the non-Hindi areas, and instead of strengthening Hindi and making it more acceptable, have provided more grist to the opposition".

English has come to serve a number of linking functions, in fact almost all of them and almost everywhere. This is not the result of a grand scheme, although some seem to think so. Nor did it take much persuasion, let alone coercion, to bring people all over the world to learn and use English. The advantages are too obvious. If English is indeed forced upon the world, it is absorbed more avidly than it could ever be imposed.¹¹

English as the language of the social sciences

Things, however, are much more problematical when it comes to English as the language of the social sciences and the humanities. First of all, these disciplines are much more strongly bound to language. The exactitude that prevails in the natural sciences through the use of formal and quantitative terms and the availability of precise measurements must be achieved in the social sciences and the humanities through meticulous precision in the use of the natural language. In these fields, technical terms are often very close to terms in everyday usage (*e.g.* role, class, civilization) and it is the continual rubbing together of these different spheres of meaning that conveys to social science writing at once its ambiguity and its richness of meaning.

To give an example: In the early eighties, I set out to write a book on the comparative historical sociology of poor relief, education and health care. In Dutch its working title was, *Verstatelijking van de verzorging*, which can be rendered quite adequately in German as *Verstaatslichung der Fürsorge*. Even in French an equivalent title was available: *l'Étatisation du soin*. The latter term, *soin*, is already somewhat precarious in this context, but *étatisation* and even *désétatisation* belong to the accepted vocabulary of political discourse. However, when it comes to translating the title into English, neither *verstatelijking* nor *verzorging* can be rendered satisfactorily. There is no such word as *statalization* or *statification* in English (although the analogous formation *stratification* is accepted sociological usage). The Oxford English Dictionary (Compact Edition) does indeed mention a nineteenth century use of the term *statal* in the U.S. for 'pertaining to the states' as opposed to *national*, but it is obsolete. At present, after a millennium of English, a billion speakers apparently can do perfectly well

¹¹ For recent figures of English learning, see Crystal (1998, p. 53-63): a rough but reasoned estimate yields about 1.3 billion more or less fluent speakers of English. The great majority are non-native speakers.

without a coinage from the root *state* and without an expression for the penetration of society by the state apparatus.

As a matter of fact, German and Dutch, and the Romance languages also, can more easily convey an increase, a process: e.g. *Verhöflichung der Krieger*, as in Herbert Elias's original German version of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, is awkwardly translated by *courtisation* (Elias 1983, p. 214). This is not to say that the much criticized unhistorical and static nature of much of contemporary American and English social science is due to this scarcity of process words, after all American historians excel in their trade, but nevertheless, English lends itself more readily to a 'hodie-centric' perspective on society.

In the natural sciences, most of what can be said in English can also be phrased in mathematics and in formal schemes. But what the social sciences have to say about the social world can only rarely be rendered in mathematical symbols or in diagrams. As a matter of fact, even the translation from one natural language to another presents many difficulties in the social sciences. These translation problems arise at different levels. To begin with, the language of informants and respondents must be transposed into the linguistic register of scholarly articles and professorial courses. Next, the text often is to be translated into an international language of academic discourse, usually English. This requires that the terms for the traditions, mentalities, institutions of a particular society under study be rendered by some English equivalent. How to translate *vrijgemaakt Gereformeerd* (a 'liberated' Reformed church), or what to make of *verzuiling* (which finally became famous enough to be internationalized as *pillarization* in the writings of Lijphart (1968)? How to render *afwerkplek* (a sheltered area, provided by the authorities, where prostitutes provide their services)?

Indeed, much is lost in translation. But without translation nothing is gained at all. One must not be too sentimental about linguistic obstacles. It is a sobering and productive exercise to explain the peculiarities of one society in terms of another. All comparative social science presupposes the intelligibility of patterns from one culture to scholars living in another. Without comparative social science, and thus without social science translation, regional and national exceptionalism will take the place of social theory.

The social sciences study human beings in the social arrangements they constitute with one another. Since their interaction proceeds mainly through linguistic exchange, the vast majority of social science observations concerns human utterances, mostly spoken, sometimes written. This immediately

confronts social scientists with the problems of understanding and interpreting statements, of transposing spoken language into its nearest, written equivalent, and of condensing and converting the material into the editorial format and the linguistic register appropriate for professional, academic publications. Social scientists therefore must deal from the outset with language more intensely and more intimately than natural scientists, whose objects of inquiry do not speak. When moreover, as happens more and more in countries where English is not the first language, the findings are next published in English, an additional layer of linguistic transformation is introduced, with all the problems that go with it.

The social sciences, the human sciences in general, are so closely and intensely tied to language because human beings are their subjects. But for the social sciences (and quite often the humanities, too) language problems manifest themselves in still another respect, as a central preoccupation. In contrast with most natural sciences, the social sciences are not experimental. Only small-scale and short-lasting human interactions can be reproduced in the laboratory, larger and more protracted events are very difficult to stage under controlled conditions. Since the social sciences can not be experimental, they must be comparative and historical. And here, problems of translation manifest themselves once again and to their full extent in the heart of the social science enterprise. In order to elucidate the origins and the working of social phenomena, their development over time must be traced and the differences and similarities with comparable events elsewhere must be assessed. Comparison (both over time and across distances) implies translation, if not between distinct languages, then at the very least between registers, dialects and varieties. Thus not only in collecting and processing the empirical material, but also in situating it in the wider spatial and temporal context, problems of language are central to the task of the social sciences.

This analysis has its consequences for the teaching of the social sciences and even more so for the professional training of social scientists. In the first place, it implies that students must be sensitized to problems of interpretation and translation, as essential constituents of the crafts of their trade: observation and comparison. Secondly, it implies that students can not effectively be taught the social sciences in one language only, whether it be their mother tongue or a foreign, world language, *e.g.* English. If they are to become adequate observers and interpreters of human interaction in its context, they must be intimately familiar with the language used in each particular setting. This may be some variety of their own mother tongue or

an entirely different language (as in much anthropological research). If, moreover, they are to be competent analysts and theorists, they must be capable of situating their own empirical material in the wider temporal and spatial framework of relevant social science findings and that task demands a broad grasp of a language in which all or almost all of these findings are published, *i.e.* English.

Thus the quasi totality of social science knowledge is contained in the English-language corpus of professional literature. A considerable part is also embedded in French, or German, Spanish or Italian texts, but the literature in these other languages is not nearly as complete as that in English. Hence, English has become the medium of choice for all trans-cultural comparison and classification in the social sciences. This facilitates comparative analyses that in principle can cover the entirety of human experience and history. It provides a universal corpus and standard of comparison. English as the truly global language presents the social sciences with the opportunity of developing and testing universal models and theories of human societies.

At the same time, this unique and novel possibility of universality entails a risk: in stead of yielding the greatest possible variety of observed human interaction, as recorded in the global language of social scientists all over the world, the English language literature may single out and impose the experience of the English speaking societies, of the United States in the first place, as the standard of human interactions and the model of social institutions: the American experience presented as universal human destiny. This is a very real risk. Thus, almost without exception, economists nowadays publish in English. But this predominance of English is coupled with a predominance of American economic models and standards across the globe that does no justice to the variety of economics in the world and has led in many instances to policy recommendations that were *malapropos* at the very least, if not downright pernicious in some cases. Similar assessments can be made for other social science disciplines, albeit not with equally dramatic consequences. In other words, English may now be the universal medium of social science, it certainly is not a neutral medium - on the contrary, it favours American ideas, and American authors.

The hegemony of English in the social sciences (and in other fields) has yet another consequence, that is mostly ignored. Academics are required to publish regularly in 'international' and 'refereed' journals. In actual fact, these are almost without exception American and British periodicals. As a consequence, American and British editors and referees judge contributions

from scholars all over the world and in so doing - without ever having intended to - exert a major impact on the selection and promotion of academics in other countries who depend on these publications for their career advancement.

Should the scholarly community therefore abandon English and renounce the use of a single, global lingua franca? The point is moot, since there is no global social science community that could adopt and enforce such a decision. Individual scholars would see a personal advantage in aiming for the widest possible audience and might well continue to publish in English, just as they do today. Clearly, the advantages of English as a world language of social science¹² are much too precious, both for individual scholars and for the social science community in its entirety, to relinquish. There now is a coherent worldwide forum where the validity of social science claims to knowledge can be judged. The question is how the bias of this medium in favor of Anglo-Saxon content can be mitigated.

"Il faut désangliciser l'anglais", Pierre Bourdieu once exclaimed: "English should be released from the English. For Salman Rushdie, speaking from the Indian experience, this is already an accomplished fact: "The English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago". (Crystal, 1997, p. 130). English should be taught in a critical vein, emphasizing that the adoption of English need not at all entail the acceptance of American or British conceptions and practices. On the contrary: "The spread of English, if dealt with critically, may offer chances for cultural renewal and exchange around the world" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 325). And indeed, English has proven itself time and again to be a most suitable medium for the critique of Anglo-American institutions and ideas.

But in order to better dissociate the English medium from its bias towards American content, more than mere good intentions are required. International journals should appoint editors and referees that are accomplished but not native speakers of English, so that they may bring their cultural background to bear in their selection and evaluation of contributions. As a matter of fact, the European Union, which tacitly has adopted English as its lingua franca, should set up language academies where all European languages are studied and English is taught by non-native speakers. Gradually, an educated, cosmopolitan variety of English is emerging, sometimes called 'Mid-Atlantic'. One might envisage a kindred variety, Euro-English, supported by the European Union and as autonomous in its development as contemporary

¹² Cf. the debate *Quelle langue(s) pour l'Europe* [which language(s) for Europe] with Pierre Bourdieu, Marc Fumarolli, Claude Hagège, Immanuel Wallerstein and Abram de Swaan, Paris, 18 June 1998.

Indian English is (Kachru, 1992, p. 355-8). De-anglicizing English of course does not mean taking English away from the English, rather it should mean sharing English between native and non-native speakers on more equal terms.

English is a most suitable and by now indispensable vehicular language for the social sciences and advanced students must learn to use it as the global medium of their discipline. The worldwide availability of English provides the social science community with a single, universal forum. This is a great and precious prize indeed, and it must be used with much circumspection.

References

- Ammon, U. (1998). *Ist Deutsch noch internationale Wissenschaftssprache? Englisch auch für die Lehre an den deutschsprachigen Hochschulen*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter
- Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class and pedagogies: Invisible and Visible*. Paris: OECD.
- Bourdieu, P. (1982). *Ce que parler veut dire*. Paris: Fayard.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). Capital et marché linguistiques. *Linguistische Berichte* 90, 3-24.
- Chaudenson, R. (1991). *La francophonie: représentations, réalités, perspectives*. Paris: Didier.
- Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Swaan, A. (1998a). A political sociology of the world language system (1): The dynamics of language spread. *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 22, 63-75.
- De Swaan, A. (1998b). A political sociology of the world language system (2): The unequal exchange of texts. *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 22, 109-128.
- Djité, P.G. (1990). The place of African languages in the revival of the francophonie movement. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 86, 87-102.
- Elias, N. ([1983] 2000). *The civilizing process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Étiemble, R. (1973). *Parlez-vous français?* Paris: Gallimard.

- Flaitz, J. (1988). *The ideology of English. French perceptions of English as a world language* (Contributions to the Sociology of Language 49). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Gopal, R. (1966). *Linguistic affairs of India*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Hagège, C. (1987). *Le Français et les siècles*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Haut Conseil de la Francophonie (ed.) (1989). *État de la Francophonie dans le monde*. Paris: Documentation Française.
- Kachru, B. (ed.) ([1982] 1992). *The other tongue. English across cultures*. Urbana / Chicago / London: University of Urbana Press.
- Lijphart, A. (1968). *The politics of accomodation: Pluralism and democracy in The Netherlands*. Berkeley, CA etc.: University of California Press.
- Manessy, J. (1984). *Le français en Afrique noire, tel qu'on le parle, tel qu'on le dit*. Paris: l'Harmattan-IDERIC.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London/New York: Longman.
- Phillipson, R. (1990). *English language teaching and imperialism*. (Diss. University of Amsterdam). Tronninge: Transcultura.
- Sridhar, S.N. (1987). Language variation, attitudes and rivalry: The spread of Hindi in India. In Lowenberg, P.H. (ed). *Language spread and language policy: Issues, implications and case studies*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 300-319.