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# From the Fall of Babel Tower to the Global Rise of English: Language and Diachronic Transformations

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on English as the primary *lingua franca* of the globalised world, characterised by the interconnectedness and interdependence of people, nations, and cultures. It seeks to present linguistic transformation from various perspectives and to better understand the current challenges and threats to this transformation process as well as opportunities for its development. The aim of the paper is threefold: (a) to outline the atemporal theme of language as mankind's greatest boon, recurring in various mythologies and religions; (b) to trace the spread of English across the world and to demonstrate its path to global linguistic hegemony; and (c) to shed light on how English is utilised in cooperation and collective action and on how it can be used for manipulation, deception, and control by knowledge-based societies today.

KEYWORDS: linguistics, English, *lingua franca*, transformations

STRESZCZENIE

Od upadku Babel do globalnej dominacji angielszczyzny: język a przemiany w ujęciu diachronicznym

Artykuł traktuje o angielszczyźnie jako pierwszej *lingua franca* świata zglobalizowanego, w którym istnieją wzajemne powiązania i zależności ludzi, krajów i kultur. Zagadnienie języka przedstawione jest w świetle wielorakich przeobrażeń, jakim podlega, w celu zrozumienia związanych z nimi wyzwań, możliwości i zagrożeń. Artykuł ma trzy zasadnicze cele: (a) zarysowanie ponadczasowego motywu języka jako największego błogosławieństwa ludzkości, obecnego w różnych mitologiach i religiach, (b) prześledzenie rozprzestrzeniania się angielskiego w świecie i opisanie jego drogi do globalnej hegemonii językowej, oraz (c) zasygnalizowanie, że angielski jako narzędzie komunikacji z jednej strony może być wykorzystywany do współpracy, a z drugiej – do manipulacji, oszustwa i kontroli we współczesnych społeczeństwach wiedzy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: językoznawstwo, angielski, *lingua franca*, przeobrażenia

## Introduction

The twenty-first century has been marked by profound transformations driven by technological advancements, globalisation, and changing societal values. Moreover, the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, political shifts, and the previously inconceivable notion of a war taking place in Europe, in Ukraine, as well as the hitherto fruitless efforts to stop the climate change have not only led to persistent anxiety but also to recapture perennial dilemmas. However, understanding past conditions affecting our today can help us guide ourselves towards progress (Le Goff, 1995, p. ix).

Looking through the lens of our history, such recurring motifs provide a sense of continuity. Regardless of era and geography, humans have always faced transformations and addressed the associated challenges. One of the key drivers of transformation and change in societies is language – the cognitive tool which contributes to our mastery of the world (Everett, 2013, p. 3). An overwhelming need for a universal language that would lift communication barriers has been atemporal across epochs and cultures, since effective communication not only fuels progress but, most importantly, helps develop understanding, encourage cooperation, and therefore find peace. Regrettably, humans, lured by their vanity, usually make use of their greatest communication tool for their own purposes and renown.

This paper focuses on the enduring issue of English as a *lingua franca* and the diachronic change in human communication which has occurred gradually over time and altered its nature abruptly in recent decades. Despite the fact that various languages did achieve such status in history, spectacular progress began with the 1950s and has continued. A combination of historical, political, social, economic, and cultural factors contributed to the status of English as the twentieth-century international tool of communication. This, in turn, has coincided with the birth of globalisation, with its multifaceted processes enhancing interconnectedness and interdependence of people, countries, and cultures across the world.

What is more, that change has continued into the twenty-first century, propelling the flow of information, ideas, and technology on a global scale. As stressed by Behera and Panda (2012, p. 43), "English as a global language is not merely an international language … Global English even as an international language represents a totally new phenomenon in human history."

Identifying key drivers of each change seems vital for understanding and predicting its outcomes. Therefore, this paper seeks to embrace the linguistic transformation from various perspectives and to better understand not only the existing challenges and threats but also unique opportunities

to be seized. The aim of the paper is threefold: (a) firstly, to outline an atemporal theme of language being mankind's greatest boon, recurring in various mythologies and religions; (b) secondly, to trace the spread of English across the world and to demonstrate how it has achieved global linguistic hegemony; and (c) thirdly, to shed light both on how English is employed in cooperation and collective action, and, on how it can be used for manipulation, deception, and control by knowledge-based societies today.

## 1. The striking parallels between different mythologies and religions

Currently, there is no single theory that fully explains the origin of language (cf. Everett, 2013). Nevertheless, language was indubitably the most critical and impactful force that has enabled humans to commune, to cooperate on a large scale, to create shared belief systems, and, consequently, to develop complex societies. When analysing cultural texts from most religions or mythologies, there emerges a divine source who provides humans with language (Jurkowski, 1986) and it is language that is meant to be mankind's greatest boon. This belief is reflected in folk narratives, myths, and religions, and it encompasses much more than just the communicative aspect. A universal language breaks down all barriers and is meant to bring peace and happiness to humanity, while its absence results in turmoil and the disharmony.

In various belief systems, gods did not always allow humanity to enjoy linguistic unity. The confusion of tongues sent upon people served as a punishment for their hubris. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, "the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech." According to the Book of Genesis (11:1–9), as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and decided to build a city and a tower whose top would reach the heavens to make a name for themselves:

> And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, … now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.

A similar motif is also present in a non-Quranic version of the oral Islamic tradition which assigns the confusion of tongues and the origin of nations to the sacred time or Creation and the earthly life of the first human

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generation. Lozanova (2007, p. 11) points to the family conflict between Adam and his sons who turned against their father and planned to kill him: "In order to prevent the fulfilment of the sinful scheme, God confuses their languages and disperses them and their progeny all over the world."

Meanwhile, Doane (1882, pp. 34–37) scrutinises Biblical myths and their parallels in other cultures. The author argues that in the pre-Christian Armenian tradition, the world was inhabited by proud and envious giants who "formed a godless resolve to build a high tower," but "whilst they were engaged on the undertaking, a fearful wind overthrew it, which the wrath of God had sent against it. Unknown words were at the same time blown about among men, wherefore arose strife and confusion."

Correspondingly, a Hindu legend revolves around the very same theme. In it, the giant Tree of Knowledge decides to hold its head in heaven and spread its branches all over the world in order to gather all men under its shadow, protect them, and prevent them from separating:

> But Brahma, to punish the pride of the tree, cut off its branches and cast them down on the earth, when they sprang up as Wata trees, and made differences of belief, and speech, and customs, to prevail on the earth, to disperse men over its surface (Doane, 1882, p. 35–36).

According to the author, similar themes are to be found among the Tharu ethnic group from northern India as well as in Estonian or Aborigine myths. Allegedly, the most striking parallel can be drawn between the Judeo-Christian Tower of Babel and Tlachihualtepetl, the Great Pyramid of Cholula in Mexico. Aztec mythology contains a narrative of a deluge which destroyed all mankind and of a few saved in an ark, including Xelhua, one of the seven giants. They decided to build a tower which would reach to the skies to find refuge in the case of another deluge. In consequence, the infuriated gods cast fire from heaven upon the pyramid and killed many of the workmen. As Doane (1882, pp. 35–36) summarises, "[T]he work was then discontinued, as each family interested in the building of the tower, received a language of their own and the builders could not understand each other."

## 2. Communication across time and cultures

As stated above, the need for a universal language has been felt and expressed throughout history and across cultures. Such a tool could develop mutual understanding and help humans find peace. This concept has been traditionally identified with the term *lingua franca*, which Mufwene

(2023) defines as a "language used as a means of communication between populations speaking vernaculars that are not mutually intelligible." The scholar underlines that, historically, many empires and major trade centres have had *linguae francae* bringing together diverse groups of people. For instance, Aramaic played this role in Southwest Asia (from the seventh century BC to approximately AD 650), while Portuguese served as a diplomatic and trade language in coastal Africa and in Asian coastal areas from the Indian Ocean to Japan during the era of European exploration from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries (Mufwene, 2023). Baudouin de Courtenay (1908, p. 2) refers to the so-called "unifying languages", among which he lists Hebrew, Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, Greek, Latin, and Church Slavonic. Furthermore, Sapir (1921, p. 98) examines the languages which occupied a pivotal role in the dissemination of culture: classical Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek, and Latin. These were often sacred in nature, and they would not only serve as carriers of culture and art, or science and education, but also often formed the basis for administrative and commercial communication.

For the above-mentioned languages, the political-military aspect was key to achieving the status of the *lingua franca* of their times: "A language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power" (Crystal 2003, p. 9). Therefore, the spread of selected *linguae francae* was associated with conquests and the imposition of different religions on tribes and nations. In the European context, the flagship example is the Roman hegemony, when military dominance, and later territorial control, enabled the spread of Latin (cf. Cierpich, 2019).

Numerous prototypes of universal languages, known as artificial languages, demonstrate the strength of the desire to overcome communication barriers. While Zamenhof's Esperanto is widely known, it is worth noting that attempts to introduce such languages were regularly made. European Novial (1928), devised by Otto Jespersen, or American Interlingua, developed by the American International Auxiliary Language Association (1937–1951), are just two of several less known examples of such auxiliary languages, yet presumably Schleyer's Volapük (1879–1880) was literally doomed to fall into oblivion, considering its former reach. Volapük enjoyed a hundred years of popularity, gathering 210,000 members affiliated with 225 societies, organising international congresses, and publishing thirty journals, among others (Jurkowski, 1986, pp. 44–45).

### 3. The path of English to global linguistic hegemony

Although Esperanto and Volapük as well as a few other artificial languages fired the imagination of linguaphiles around the world, they failed to take on the role of an international communication tool of the twentieth century that would be immersed deeply in daily life, culture, or social affairs. The lofty assumptions of their creators and high expectations of millions of their speakers ultimately found no fertile ground for further spread for one chief reason: the remarkable transformations shaping post-World War II reality. Due to the evolving process of globalisation driven by advances in technology, international cooperation, emerging social movements, and cultural fusion, artificial languages were doomed to failure. They have not been able to keep up with the rapid pace of the development of the globalising world, and with the naming of new objects, technologies, or phenomena.

Conversely, the natural languages of international communication discussed above were unique for their respective periods. Nevertheless, none of them could claim to be truly global:

> The prospect that a *lingua franca* might be needed for the whole world is something which has emerged strongly only in the twentieth century, and since the 1950s in particular (Crystal, 2003, p. 12).

In the section below, the path of English towards this distinctive type of linguistic hegemony is briefly delineated.

### 3.1. English: an inconspicuous outset and a global rise

Over the course of merely three hundred years, English developed from a regional language into a global tool of communication:

> In the period between the end of reign of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 and the later years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II at the start of the twenty-first century, the number of speakers of English increased from a mere five to seven million to possibly as many as two billion. Whereas the English language was spoken in the mid-sixteenth century by a relatively small group of mother-tongue speakers born and bred within the shores of the British Isles, it is now spoken in almost every country of the world (Jenkins, 2009, p. 2).

The extensive imperial activities of the British Empire were the underlying cause of the later far-reaching spread of English which remained

indispensable in the former colonies even after their independence and often in spite of their outright hostility to the British political and cultural values (Baugh & Cable, 2013, p. 4). The expansion consisted of two main phases, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, and gradually impeded in the twentieth century. Firstly, a mass scale of migrations of English speakers from the British Isles to North America was mainly associated with the search for a better life and escape from religious persecution. Meanwhile, Australia turned into the chief destination for shiploads of convicts since British prisons were overcrowded. This stage resulted in a gradual progress of English dialects of migrants from the British Isles into the mother tongue varieties of English: American English and Australian English. Secondly, substantial political and economic gains encouraged British policymakers to expand the Empire's territories in Asia and Africa. In distant British colonies, e.g. in India, Singapore, Nigeria or Vanuatu, English was introduced as the official language of the respective countries and incorporated as a medium of communication in such domains as the government, courts of law, the media, and the educational system. Consequently, there appeared the so-called second language varieties of English, identified as complementary to their speakers' mother tongues (Crystal, 2003, p. 4).

The expansion of the British Empire facilitated a global linguistic hegemony. The country flourished due to political and economic dominance, exploiting its colonies and becoming world's first trading nation. This accelerated technological advancements and created a favourable environment for the rapid industrialisation of Great Britain. As a result, the Industrial Revolution broke out in Britain during the eighteenth century and spread to other parts of the world, together with new English terminology of technological and scientific advance.

The international diplomatic stage of the Western world, formerly dominated by French, officially accepted English in 1920 for the first time. The League of Nations, an intergovernmental body established after World War I with the goal of promoting peace and cooperation among nations, used both English and French in all its meetings and official documents. At the same time, the dissemination of English was fuelled by the emergence of the United States as the world power. After World War II, that country, supported by its allies, reorganised the global map through the creation of the United Nations, with English being then one of the four official languages within the organisation (United Nations, 2023). Furthermore, English now occupies an official or working role in the proceedings of most other major international political gatherings in all parts of the world, such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Crystal, 2003, p. 87).

In the twentieth century, technology and business became more intertwined with science than ever before. Since the growth or decline of science is subject to the economic state of a country, after the world wars, the formerly dominant French and German languages diminished within the scientific community, and they were replaced by English. Northrup (2013, p. 116) argues that the United States was the only major country to emerge victoriously from World War II with its academic research which helped attract foreign scientists and foreign students. As a result, Anglo-American dominance in science grew rapidly and this trend continued in the postwar decades. Montgomery (2013, p. 3) perceives the evolution of a common language as an atemporal process coming to full circle over time:

> What if, in our own time, a worthy alternative to Babel has emerged, lacking in arrogance, extending not merely to the empyreal realm but deep into the atom and as far as the distant galaxies? … For the first time in history, science – humanity's great tower of knowledge – has a global tongue.

By the 1990s, above 85 percent of all scientific publications were written in English and at present, the international literature indicates such a dominant trend. These patterns are echoed by the growing preference for English as the main foreign language in primary and secondary education worldwide (Montgomery, 2013, p. 90).

Last but not least, the supremacy of English was established by American high and popular culture. In recent decades, it has been reinforced by the Internet, largely expanded in the United States and utilised as the initial language applied for programming, creating websites or digital platforms. In the twenty-first century, it has remained the basic tool in the Silicon Valley, the leading centre for high technology, innovation, and social media.

### 3.2. World "Englishes" and the linguistic map of the world

Nowadays, English is spoken by approximately 1.5 billion people around the world, which makes it the most widely implemented tool of communication, followed by Mandarin Chinese (ca. 1.1 billion), Hindi (ca. 610 million), and Spanish (ca. 560 million) (Statista, 2023). Statistically, the most unique facet of the use of English is that its non-native speakers outnumber its native speakers, whose number totals ca. 380 million. This stems directly from the aforementioned "power of its people" (Crystal, 2003, p. 9), conditioned historically and developed military, politically,

economically, and culturally from one standpoint and still effectively exercised today, despite the shifts in global power dynamics. Considering "the sheer magnitude of the spread of English, the variety of global contexts in which English is used and the varied motivations for its acquisition and use" (Kachru, 1985, p. 11; cf. Quirk & Widdowson, 1985), the singular "English" has no longer reflected the linguistic reality. The most distinguished model of the spread of English, "The Three Circle Model of World Englishes" was designed by Kachru (1985, pp. 12–15). It incorporates the major stratification of the use of English due to its internationalisation, encapsulating three concentric circles that represent not only the types of its spread but also the patterns of its acquisition and the functional domains in which it is employed across cultures and languages: (a) the inner circle, including the mother-tongue varieties, where English acts as a first language (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand); (b) the outer circle, based on the institutionalised second-language varieties in non-native contexts in the post-colonial countries (e.g. India, Singapore, Malaysia, or Nigeria); and the expanding circle, considering all the areas where English is learnt as a foreign language (e.g. Poland, Brazil, or South Korea). The new varieties of English are commonly referred to as the "New Englishes" (Graddol, 1997, p. 11).

## 4. Language and globalisation

The primeval concept of a common language constitutes an essential part of the human journey through time. Coincidently, in distinct religions, mythologies and in cultural contexts, the confusion of tongues sent upon people was a punishment for their hubris as the most severe sanction disrupting harmony and leading to all-encompassing disorder. Across time and throughout distant geographical regions, people would confront the linguistic mayhem, introducing the *linguae francae* of their times or constructing approximate ones. Nevertheless, these endeavours rarely helped them establish common ground.

The new *lingua franca* of English represents a landmark in world history due to the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of globalisation, marked not only by the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of countries and people but also by innovative technologies through which time is accelerated and space is compressed. Despite all its merits, globalisation instigates both divisions and consolidations (cf. Bauman, 1998). It has brought about a dramatic growth in economic and social inequalities, generating immense wealth for some and immense misery for others (Hobsbawm, 2007, p. 3). As a hegemonic language, English constitutes

a powerful tool of globalisation, following its trends, offering opportunities, and posing formerly unknown threats: "[T]he diffusion of English, its acculturation, its international functional range, and the diverse forms of literary creativity it is accommodating are historically unprecedented" (Kachru, 1985, p. 29). The burning question, however, is whether this time the potential of the *lingua franca* will be exploited or squandered.

## 4.1. Global *lingua franca*: opportunities

Present-day societies are classified as either knowledge societies or information societies, the two terms being synonymous (Bell, 1973, p. 37; Żelazny, 2015, p. 9). They have been shaped by the digital revolution, characterised by the progression of information technology and modern technologies as well as knowledge that has recently become a strategic resource instead of capital and labour focus (Balcewicz, 2019). According to Machlup (1962, p. 3–4, cited in Żelazny, 2015, p. 9), knowledge operationalisation refers to education, research and development, communication, and information. English as a global *lingua franca* serves as the basic tool to facilitate international partnership and knowledge dissemination, through the widely understood scientific, business, and cultural exchange. As Gaitán-Duarte (2015) asserts, an open access to knowledge is a new right created by globalisation. Considering the evolutionary process of the global rise of English, its functional range as well as the raw statistics, a reasonable conclusion can be drawn that globalisation established a unique right to an open access to knowledge to be gained via a command of English.

The dominance of English offers the potential for an improvement in quality of life[1] through coordinated pro-social, pro-environmental, or pro-educational activities worldwide. Recently, the joint actions for societies boosted by the *lingua franca* have included health collaboration and advances during the COVID-19 pandemic, the international struggle for climate change awareness, access to and distribution of goods, and supranational social movements pushing for inclusivity and justice, advocating for civil rights, gender equality, or LGBTQ+ rights. Using English by the speakers within all the Kachruvian circles (Kachru, 1985) facilitates the comprehensive development and increased adaptability to the complex and interconnected nature of the modern world, significantly improving their quality of life.

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1   Academic discourse does scrutinise English also as a trap, considering language bias and linguistic homogenisation (cf. Swales, 1997; Van Parijs, 2011). This issue, however, does not fit within the scope of the paper due to the formal constraints.

## 4.2. Global *lingua franca*: challenges

In the course of history, languages were utilised for deception, manipulation, and control. This was notably true for the *linguae francae* whose operational scope was not limited to particular ethnic groups, peoples or societies. In the times of globalisation, this phenomenon has reached its greatest extent, largely by means of the present *lingua franca*. Due to technological advancements, English has fostered connectivity and stimulated disseminating information in an uncontrollable way. Balcewicz (2019) emphasises that its constant influx and exchange displaced the need for fact-checking. The awareness of what is true or false has been disrupted, and more significantly it seems irrelevant. Thereby, English has become the world's mass medium of post-truth – a biased version of events that distorts reality and influences emotions. Recent years have proved that a personal, emotionally charged account of any Internet user recurrently holds greater significance than true facts, shaping opinions and preferences, belief systems, or political views. The increased spread of misinformation and pseudoscience was strikingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors only made the phenomenon of the "filter bubbles" surrounding Internet users only with information that aligns with their beliefs and profiles and is devoid of inconvenient news, conflicting with their value system more visible (ibid.) Their detrimental effects have become a research subject (cf. Kopecka-Piech & Łódzki, 2022), yet they still seem unscalable.

Undoubtedly, the present *lingua franca* nurtures modern forms of deception accelerated by AI such as globally distributed fake news and cyber propaganda or deepfakes, thus creating alternative realities and distorting decent societal norms. They may manipulate and polarise not only their individual consumers, but also some groups of citizens or decision-makers to be harmed in manifold ways, negatively impacting businesses, industries, or even (inter)national politics. This paradox appears disturbing especially in the light of the novel insights presented by Muda, Pennycook et al. (2021) whose research proved that people are less able to discern true from fake news while using a foreign language. During the study, it turned out that when using a foreign vs native language, true news headlines were judged as equally or less believable while false news was judged as more believable due to both decreased believability of true and increased believability of false news. If further studies confirm the phenomenon investigated by Muda, Pennycook et al. (2021), there seems to emerge a new field for scholarly action, embracing more than 1.1 billion non-native speakers of English, subject to threats such as the internet-mediated hate speech, the language fuelling the rise of populism or

internationally supported and promoted neofascist and extremist move-ments as well as cyber propaganda generating geopolitical tensions.

## Conclusion

The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, a great structure erected to reach the heavens, presented "the vision of a unified humanity, harmony on a planetary scale" (Montgomery, 2013, p. 3). In that parable, and in other mythological tales, supernatural powers shattered the once-universal lan-guage and ruined the plan for humanity's most extraordinary achieve-ment. In the present version, however, mankind for the first time has been offered a prospect of a universal language mastered on a global scale.

Disregarding national languages, religions, geographical distances, political or economic situations, cultural aspects, and others, people are able to both communicate by means of digital technologies in real-time instances and cooperate across the world. English as a *lingua franca* does serve as a building block of the contemporary Tower of Babel. It grants its users a privilege to become collective architects of the Tower, being raised out of our civilisational accomplishments. Consequently, in today's nar-rative, it is the modern individual's decision whether by exploiting this unique linguistic tool, they choose to strive for more; to build their own glory; to sow destruction; to take advantage of the weak, the less edu-cated, less resourced, and less privileged; or whether they grasp this golden opportunity to shape their promising future.

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