

The Role of Language in Cultural Transmission

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Linguistic Power and Cultural Exchange: The Global Impact of English

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Abstract

This paper explores the pivotal role of English in the transmission of culture across global contexts. As a dominant lingua franca, English functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a conduit for the dissemination of cultural values, ideologies, and practices. The study examines the historical spread of English through colonialism and globalisation, and analyses its current significance in education, media, technology, and digital communication. It highlights the dual nature of English—as a facilitator of intercultural exchange and as a force that can potentially marginalise indigenous languages and cultural identities. Additionally, the paper discusses the emergence of localised English varieties and the hybridisation of cultures resulting from English-language influence. Drawing on case studies and critical perspectives, this research underscores the complexities surrounding English as a vehicle for cultural transmission and calls for a balanced approach that embraces linguistic diversity while acknowledging the global utility of English.

Keywords: Cultural transmission, Globalization, Colonial legacy, Intercultural communication, Language and identity, and Indigenous languages.

Introduction

Culture, the shared beliefs, customs, values, practices, and social behaviour of a particular group or society, is not an innate human trait but one that is learned and passed on. The process through which these cultural elements are conveyed across generations or social groups is known as cultural transmission (Duranti, 1997). It is through cultural transmission that societies preserve their identity, continuity, and cohesion over time. Central to this process is language, which serves as the primary medium for encoding, preserving, and sharing cultural knowledge. Language does not merely reflect culture; it actively shapes it. It carries the meanings, symbols, and worldviews of a community and facilitates the exchange of traditions, rituals, stories, and norms (Sapir, 1921; Hall, 1959). In short, language is the vessel of culture, enabling individuals to access their heritage and contribute to its ongoing evolution.

In the contemporary world, English has emerged as a global lingua franca, a common language used by speakers of different native languages for international communication. Due to globalization, colonization, and the dominance of Western media, English is now widely used in academia, diplomacy, technology, and business. As a result, English has become not only a practical tool for communication but also a powerful vehicle for cross-cultural exchange and, at times, cultural dominance (Crystal, 2003). Its global spread influences how cultures are perceived, preserved, or even transformed, thereby making it a central point of discussion in studies of cultural transmission.

English plays a pivotal role in cultural transmission by functioning as a dominant medium through which ideas, values, beliefs, and practices are communicated across global boundaries. As a global lingua franca, English facilitates intercultural dialogue and access to knowledge in domains such as education,

international media, and digital culture (Crystal, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2011). Through its widespread use in academic discourse, entertainment industries, and online platforms, English not only enables the sharing of cultural identities but also contributes to their continuous reshaping in response to global influences (Pennycook, 2007; Kachru, 1992). However, while it serves as a bridge for global understanding, it also exerts pressure on local languages and cultural practices, often leading to cultural hybridization or even marginalization of indigenous voices (Phillipson, 1992). Thus, the role of English in cultural transmission is both enabling and complex, requiring a nuanced appreciation of its global impact and its implications for linguistic and cultural diversity.

The global prominence of English has deep historical roots, particularly in the expansion of the British Empire. As British colonialism extended across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, English was institutionalized through education systems, administration, and missionary work (Kachru, 1992). Later, the rise of the United States as a superpower further cemented English's influence in the 20th and 21st centuries. This legacy has made English not just a language of power but also of aspiration and opportunity in postcolonial societies (Phillipson, 1992).

With the acceleration of globalization, English has become the **lingua franca** of international discourse in diplomacy, commerce, science, and technology (Crystal, 2003). It enables real-time communication between people from diverse linguistic backgrounds and facilitates access to global networks. This transformation has repositioned English as a tool not just for survival in global systems but for active participation in shaping global culture (Seidlhofer, 2011).

English dominates the global media landscape—from international news outlets like the BBC and CNN to digital

entertainment giants such as Netflix and YouTube. This dominance shapes cultural narratives and makes English the gateway to popular global culture (Thussu, 2006). In education, English is increasingly the medium of instruction in higher education across non-native regions, giving it a powerful role in knowledge transmission and academic mobility (Altbach, 2004). While English enables intercultural communication, it also reshapes local cultures. This often results in **cultural hybridization**—a blending of global and local elements—and **identity reconfiguration**, especially among youth (Pennycook, 2007). However, this blending can also dilute traditional cultural forms and create tensions between global modernity and local authenticity.

It is concerned about **linguistic imperialism**, arguing that the spread of English often marginalizes indigenous languages and reinforces Western dominance in global discourse (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999). While English opens doors, it also risks becoming a gatekeeper, limiting the visibility and viability of local epistemologies and cultures.

Colonial Expansion and Language Spread

The spread of the English language is deeply rooted in the **British colonial expansion** of the 17th to 20th centuries. As the British Empire established colonies across Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, English was systematically introduced and often **imposed as the language of governance, law, trade, and education** (Pennycook, 1998). Colonized societies were encouraged or coerced into adopting English as a marker of power, modernity, and social mobility. Schools and missionary institutions played a key role in promoting English, often marginalizing or suppressing indigenous languages and knowledge systems (Phillipson, 1992). This linguistic shift was not just administrative but also **cultural**, embedding English into

the everyday lives of the colonized and reshaping their access to opportunities.

Post-colonial Continuities

Even after gaining independence, many former colonies **continued to use English** in critical domains such as **administration, judiciary, education, and mass media**. This continuity was often driven by practicality—English remained the most accessible means for interethnic communication in linguistically diverse nations like India, Nigeria, and Kenya (Kachru, 1986). Furthermore, English proficiency became synonymous with upward mobility and global connectivity. It is seen as a **neutral lingua franca** in multi-lingual postcolonial societies, despite its colonial legacy. This has led to a phenomenon where English is both a **legacy of oppression and a tool for empowerment**, as local populations adapt and transform the language into new localized forms like Indian English or Nigerian English (Bamgbose, 2000).

The Rise of American Influence

Following World War II, the **global influence of the United States** rapidly accelerated the reach of English through **media, technology, and consumer culture**. The global dominance of **Hollywood films, pop music, television, and fast-food chains** not only popularized American English but also projected American values and lifestyles worldwide (Crystal, 2003). With the advent of the **internet and digital communication**, largely developed and driven by U.S.-based companies (e.g., Google, Facebook, Microsoft), English became the dominant language of the digital age (Danet & Herring, 2007). Furthermore, **multinational corporations** and **international institutions** adopted English as their working language, reinforcing its global dominance and making it nearly indispensable in global commerce and diplomacy.

English as a Medium for Globalization

The role of English in globalization is multifaceted and far-reaching. It acts as the **linguistic infrastructure** supporting international communication, commerce, scientific collaboration, and multicultural integration. As globalization intensifies, English increasingly becomes the default medium for transnational interaction and cultural exchange.

Lingua Franca in International Communication

English functions as the **primary working language** in major international organizations such as the **United Nations (UN)**, the **European Union (EU)**, the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**, and the **World Trade Organization (WTO)**. This centrality enables effective coordination among linguistically diverse nations and ensures that diplomatic discourse, policy documents, and negotiations are conducted in a shared code (Seidlhofer, 2011). English's role as a **lingua franca** is not limited to formal institutions but extends to global academic conferences, multinational corporations, and international non-governmental organizations.

Economic and Technological Advancement

In the era of rapid globalization, **English catalyzes economic integration and technological innovation**. It is the dominant language of **international business, scientific research, aviation, information technology, and engineering** (Graddol, 2006). The global knowledge economy is heavily Anglophone, with major scientific journals, patents, and conferences published or conducted in English. As such, English proficiency is often viewed as a prerequisite for economic competitiveness and participation in high-tech industries.

Migration and Diaspora Communities

English also plays a crucial role in **multicultural integration and social cohesion** within increasingly diverse societies. In

countries with large **migrant and diaspora communities**—such as the United States, the UK, Canada, and Australia—English serves as a **bridge language**, facilitating communication among people from different linguistic backgrounds (Pennycook, 2007). It helps migrants navigate legal, educational, and health systems, and enables their participation in civic life. However, this role is complex, as English may also coexist with mother tongues in hybrid forms, contributing to the development of **transcultural identities** and **multilingual practices** in urban centers.

English in Education and Academia

In the context of globalization and internationalization, English has become deeply embedded in the **education systems and academic landscapes** of both Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries. While it offers expanded access to global knowledge and mobility, its widespread use also introduces cultural and epistemological challenges that affect the identity and autonomy of local education systems

English-Medium Instruction (EMI)

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the practice of teaching academic subjects in English in regions where English is not the native language. This trend is especially prominent in higher education institutions across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Driven by the desire to **internationalize education**, attract global students, and improve employability, EMI is often adopted as a symbol of modernity and competitiveness (Dearden, 2015). However, the shift to EMI can pose challenges, including language barriers for both students and instructors, reduced classroom interaction, and inequities in learning outcomes (Macaro et al., 2018).

Access to Knowledge

English dominates the global knowledge economy. It is the **primary language of publication** in academic journals,

especially in the sciences, engineering, and social sciences (Ammon, 2001). Prestigious journals such as *Nature*, *Science*, and *The Lancet* publish almost exclusively in English, making proficiency in the language essential for academic participation. Moreover, **Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)** and online learning platforms like Coursera, edX, and Khan Academy often use English as the default medium, further centralizing access to global knowledge around the language (Altbach, 2004). This dynamic creates a **linguistic gatekeeping effect**, limiting access for scholars and students who lack strong English proficiency.

Cultural Implications of English-Language Curricula

The **cultural content** embedded in English-language curricula often reflects **Western worldviews, epistemologies, and historical narratives**. As a result, English-dominated education systems may marginalize **local knowledge systems, indigenous histories, and regional perspectives** (Canagarajah, 1999). Students in former colonies or non-Western countries may internalize foreign cultural norms at the expense of their own cultural heritage. This raises concerns about **cultural homogenization** and **educational neo-colonialism**, where English becomes not just a language of instruction but a medium through which dominant ideologies are reproduced.

English and Cultural Products

English plays a powerful role in shaping **global cultural consumption**, serving as both the language and vehicle for mass-mediated cultural products. Its dominance in media, digital platforms, and popular culture allows it to transcend linguistic borders and influence identities, behaviors, and tastes across the world—especially among younger generations.

Media and Entertainment: Global Export of English-Language Culture

English-language media—particularly **Hollywood films, chart-topping music, best-selling novels, and global television series**—has long enjoyed international reach. The **export of English-language content** shapes global tastes and values, often presenting Western lifestyles, ideologies, and aesthetics as aspirational or normative (Thussu, 2006). American and British films dominate international box offices, English-language music leads global charts, and bestselling novels like those by J.K. Rowling or Stephen King circulate worldwide. This global distribution of cultural products in English contributes to what scholars term **“cultural globalization”**—the spread of standardized cultural expressions often at the cost of local diversity (Tomlinson, 1999).

Digital Culture and Social Media: English Online

In the digital era, **English dominates internet communication**, serving as the most commonly used language on websites, online forums, social media platforms, and search engines. English is the default language for major platforms such as **Google, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Reddit**, making it central to **meme culture, online activism, gaming communities**, and global conversations (Danet & Herring, 2007). This dominance extends to user-generated content where slang, abbreviations (e.g., “LOL,” “BRB”), and digital humor are often coined and spread in English. Although multilingual content is growing, English remains the **lingua franca of digital culture**, giving it disproportionate influence in shaping online identities and social interaction.

Pop Culture and Youth Identity: English as a Trendsetter

Among youth around the globe, English is closely tied to **modernity, coolness, and global citizenship**. It pervades

fashion, music tastes, online communication, video games, and youth slang. From K-pop bands incorporating English lyrics to youth in non-English-speaking countries using English idioms in WhatsApp messages or TikTok videos, English is seen as the **language of global youth culture** (Pennycook, 2007). It helps young people **construct hybrid identities**, blending local traditions with global influences. However, this trend can also contribute to the **erosion of local languages and cultural expressions**, as English becomes a dominant force in shaping how youth express themselves and relate to the world.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite its many advantages as a global lingua franca, the dominance of English has raised significant **linguistic, cultural, and ideological concerns**. Scholars and activists have criticized the **unequal power dynamics** embedded in the global spread of English, arguing that it can marginalize local voices, dilute cultural diversity, and reinforce hegemonic worldviews.

Linguistic Imperialism

Linguistic imperialism refers to the dominance of one language—often English—over others, in ways that establish **hierarchies of linguistic legitimacy and prestige**. Scholars argue that English often **displaces or devalues local languages**, particularly in former colonies, by becoming the sole or primary language of education, administration, and professional advancement (Phillipson, 1992). This process not only threatens the survival of minority languages but also **undermines linguistic diversity and erodes cultural autonomy**. Linguistic imperialism is often linked to broader patterns of **economic and political inequality**, where English becomes a gatekeeper to power, leaving non-English speakers disadvantaged.

Cultural Homogenization

The global spread of English has contributed to concerns about **cultural homogenization**, the process by which diverse cultures become increasingly **standardized or Westernized**. Through English-language media, education, and consumer products, a **Western-centric worldview** is often transmitted globally, promoting values, lifestyles, and ideologies rooted in Euro-American contexts (Tomlinson, 1999). This can lead to the **erosion of indigenous traditions, languages, and belief systems**, especially among younger generations who consume English-based media. Critics argue that while English promotes communication, it also acts as a vehicle for **cultural imperialism**, exporting dominant ideologies under the guise of neutrality and modernity (Pennycook, 1998).

Identity and Resistance

In response to the dominance of English, many communities actively engage in **linguistic and cultural resistance**. Strategies include the **revitalization of indigenous languages**, the incorporation of **local idioms into English**, and the development of **new hybrid linguistic forms** like Singlish, Chinglish, or Spanglish (Canagarajah, 1999; Schneider, 2007). These adaptations allow speakers to **assert their cultural identities** while navigating global communication networks. Additionally, movements advocating **multilingual education and language rights** challenge the supremacy of English, promoting a more inclusive approach to language and cultural policy. Such resistance demonstrates that the global spread of English is not always hegemonic but often involves **negotiation, adaptation, and creative appropriation**.

These challenges underscore the need to **critically evaluate the global role of English**, not just as a neutral tool of communication but as a language embedded in **power structures and cultural**

politics. A balanced approach should recognize the practical value of English while also supporting **linguistic justice, cultural preservation, and local agency** in shaping the future of global communication.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have explored the multifaceted role of **English as a powerful tool for cultural transmission** in a globalized world. Historically spread through **colonial expansion** and later reinforced by **American economic and media dominance**, English has become deeply embedded in **education, international institutions, media, and digital communication.** It functions as a **lingua franca** across continents, enabling the **exchange of ideas, cultural values, and knowledge.** Moreover, English is not only a transmitter of Western norms but also a language that is continuously reshaped through **local adaptations, cultural hybridization, and creative expression** in postcolonial and multilingual society.

The **global spread of English** offers undeniable benefits. It **facilitates intercultural dialogue**, improves access to **global knowledge and education**, and supports international **collaboration in science, technology, and diplomacy** (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). For many, proficiency in English provides a **gateway to socioeconomic mobility** and participation in the global economy. However, this dominance is not without its **drawbacks.** Critics argue that English often **marginalizes indigenous languages**, reinforces **global inequalities**, and promotes a form of **linguistic and cultural homogenization** that threatens **local identities and epistemologies** (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999). The use of English in education and media can also result in the **erasure or sidelining of local narratives**, leading to concerns about **cultural imperialism.**

Looking ahead, it is likely that **English will continue to serve as a central medium of global communication and cultural transmission**. However, its future must not come at the cost of **linguistic justice and cultural pluralism**. Scholars, educators, and policymakers must work to **promote multilingualism, support indigenous languages, and foster inclusive curricula** that reflect both global and local perspectives. In doing so, the global community can embrace the **practical advantages of English** while safeguarding the **rich tapestry of world cultures and languages** that define our shared humanity.

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