

HARTMUT HABERLAND

Roskilde University

hartmut@ruc.dk

ENGLISH AS A WORLD LANGUAGE IN SCANDINAVIA AND ELSEWHERE (PART 1)¹

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Abstract

This is a paper in two parts, both dealing with the localization of the concept of English as a “world” or “global language”. In the first part, a number of general notions like “globalization” are discussed, and a plea is made for studying the role of any language in a given context ecologically, i.e. in relationship to, and in interaction with, other languages.

1. What is global English?

In 2012, Tsedal Neeley published a paper in the *Harvard Business Review* with the title “Global Business speaks English”. In the same year, Francis Hult had a paper in *TESOL Quarterly* with an abstract starting “The globalization of English in Sweden ...”. What is interesting here is that the title of Neeley’s paper is ambiguous. It could mean ‘business speaks English globally’, but also ‘when business goes global, it speaks English’. That these are not necessarily the same things became clear to us in Denmark in the LInGCorp² project: even local businesses can be globalized and

¹ I would like to thank my colleagues in both the CALPIU (2007–2013) and LInGCorp (2013–2016) Projects, especially Bent Preisler, Anne Fabricius, Sonja Barfod, Dorte Lønsmann, Kamilla Kraft, Spencer Hazel, Janus Mortensen and Ole Nedergaard Thomsen, for inspiring discussions and data sharing. Thanks also to Sharon Millar and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas for helpful comments. The two papers are based on my Keynote given at *The Fourteenth International Conference on English and American Literature and Culture. New Perspectives in English and American Studies*, 20 April, 2017 at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

² Language and Interaction in the Globalized Corporation, see Part 2 of this article.

will then face language choice. But Hult's abstract points to another issue: globalization is also a local phenomenon and can look quite different in different places. This also applies to the role of the supposedly global language, English. The way English is globalized in Sweden can differ from the way it is globalized elsewhere.

2. What is globalization?

A colleague³ of mine was in Winnipeg, Manitoba on the evening of October 3, 1993, while the White House in Moscow was burning on October 4, 1993; CNN, several time zones behind, showed live pictures with the subline "Moscow live, tomorrow morning". This anecdote illustrates nicely one of the current definitions of the ongoing globalization processes, the "compression of social time-space", as articulated in 1990 by David Harvey.

But is this compression of time-space really only a feature of recent globalization? It could be as old as the "first modernization" at the end of the 19th century. In Theodor Fontane's novel *Der Stechlin* from 1899, the old Stechlin, a representative of the old, pre-modern world, says,

Und dabei diese merkwürdigen Verschiebungen in Zeit und Stunde. Beinahe komisch. Als anno siebzig die Pariser Septemberrevolution ausbrach, wußte man's in Amerika drüben um ein paar Stunden früher, als die Revolution überhaupt da war.⁴

There is considerable disagreement about when globalization as we know it started; Ulrich Beck (2000: 167) lists five widely divergent dates between the 15th and the 20th century for its onset. It may be useful to introduce a distinction that helps to disentangle several connected but distinct phenomena and processes: Beck distinguishes between *globalization* as a historical process, *globality* as a property phenomenon, and *globalism* as the ideology that, as Florian Coulmas (2005: 9) has described it, "turns former friends and enemies into competitors". Seen in this way, globalization is not a condition or state of the world, but an ongoing process. For a long time, globalization as a process has produced an ever increasing degree of globality for commodities and structures, and it is accompanied by its own ideology (the latter might be the truly new aspect of it).

3. English is not everywhere

It has been claimed that the present role of English in the world is a symptom of globalization, that English has become "the world's lingua franca" and that it is used

³ Thanks to Robin Cheesman for sharing his experience with me and correcting my memory about the place where it occurred.

⁴ 'And these strange dislocations in time and hour. Almost funny. When the Paris September revolution broke out in in the year of 70, they knew it in America a couple of hours before the revolution actually happened' (my translation).

“in every corner of the globe” (Hu 2008: 35). While one can hardly doubt the global spread and presence of English, i.e. the globality of the English language, which has been increasing in a possibly unprecedented manner, this can show itself in very different ways in different areas of the world. Even in the former British colony of Hong Kong, English is – as is said about well-brought up children – seen but not so much heard. The communicative value of English in Hong Kong is actually quite limited outside the commercial centre and certain shops, as many a tourist has realized when trying to communicate with a monolingual taxi driver or the staff in a 7–11 outfit or a small cafeteria.

In Tokyo Central Station a sign was displayed in 2006 at the Marunouchi South Entrance:

We are very sorry, there is not a English speaker here. So please go to the information counter. They can help you in English. (cf. Haberland 2011: 38)⁵

This both proves and disproves that “English is everywhere”. Undoubtedly, the sign *is* in English, but if English really were everywhere, the sign would not be necessary. The explicit message is contradicted by the message conveyed by its medium, but in a dialectic way: both messages are true and relevant.

Medieta, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (2006) point out – on the basis of figures from the *Index translationum* – that far more books are translated from English than into English. This is taken as a sign of the cultural dominance of English: literature written in English is considered more worthy of, and suitable for, translation than literature written in other languages. But it also underlines that the dominance is far from total: if it were, translation would be superfluous, because everybody could read English and there would be no market for these translations.

Phillipson’s ground-breaking work since 1992 on Linguistic Imperialism has taken the innocence away from our experience of the increasing globality of English. But Phillipson himself has warned against overgeneralizing attempts to attribute every aspect of this process in every country of the world mechanically to an imperialist scheme:

English is currently expanding in Europe in hegemonic ways, as a result of internal and external pressures, but in each western European country, whether this amounts to linguistic imperialism is an empirical question that probably would be answered in the negative. (Phillipson 1997: 238)

As I have argued in Haberland (2009), it is precisely the term “hegemonic” that is central here: not a conspiracy (as pointed out explicitly by Phillipson 1992: 63) but the propagation of hegemonic thinking which persuades people to accept the present global role of English as natural, as if it could not possibly be otherwise: according to Guha (1997: 23), hegemony occurs when persuasion outweighs coercion in the configuration of power.

⁵ The sign had been removed by 2013.

4. Ecology of English

We need an ecological approach: English is not to be considered in “splendid isolation” (Haberland, Mortensen 2012: 2), but in relationship with other languages with which it sometimes competes and always interacts. In this paper, the scope of the ecological is taken in a narrower sense than in Wendel’s definition: “The ecological approach to language considers the complex web of relationships that exist between the environment, languages, and their speakers” (Wendel 2005: 51), since I do not focus on the physical, including the biological environment. Instead I want to see English in its “complex web of relationships” with other languages in two local contexts: Scandinavia, especially Denmark, and in a glimpse also Japan.

In 1992, a team of Danish researchers published results from a survey of foreign language competence in Denmark (Bacher et al. 1992: 13–15). I have summarized their results in Table 1 (where answers “to a high degree” and “to some degree” are combined).

	in English	in German	in French
have an everyday conversation	57%	33%	3%
give directions	66%	46%	6%
read instructions	60%	42%	4%
follow a movie	64%	42%	4%
read a novel	43%	27%	3%
read a newspaper	46%	30%	3%
write a private letter	51%	30%	3%

Table 1. Danes’ self-reported competence in three selected foreign languages in the early 90s

These figures are based on self-reports, which are not always fully reliable, and in the literature it has been commented that it was likely that people overrated their own English and underrated their German and French (e.g. Holmen, Risager 2003: 94). Still, it is striking how close English and German are in the self-assessment of Danes and how far French lags behind. If we look at the historical development, this becomes even clearer. In the 1960s, Einar Haugen could still provide anecdotal evidence for the use of German between fellow Scandinavians when they did not understand each other’s languages: “A Norwegian school man said, ‘When I am in Copenhagen, I ask the waiters to speak German.’” (Haugen 1966: 296).⁶ Things have changed so much that today the Norwegian “school man” probably would choose English instead of German.

⁶ Quoted in Barfod (2018: 178).

Several surveys have been conducted over the years, and although they are not completely compatible and comparable, the tendencies are clear (see also Haberland 2014: 259):

	English	German
Gallup 1945 (quoted in Haastrup 1981)	9%	14%
Bacher et. al. (1992) (ability to conduct an everyday conversation)	57%	33%
Eurobarometer (2006) (figures from 2005)	86%	58%
Eurobarometer (2012)	86%	47%

Table 2. Ecology of English and German language proficiency in Denmark 1945–2012

From being the Danes' second foreign language in 1945, English has clearly established itself as the first, probably not just since the 1990s. But even more astonishing is the dramatic general increase in self-reported proficiency in *both English and German*, with German losing a bit of its momentum in the 2010s, but still scoring far better in Denmark than in the average of EU countries.

One thing is what people report they feel confident doing; something else is what they actually do. In a different context, François Grin (2003) has developed a model of language performance where capacity (be it self-perceived or objective) is only one of the relevant factors, while at least two other factors play a role as well: the opportunity and the desire to speak a language. One of the reasons why people report being able to use German but do not experience that they do so to the same degree as English may be that English quite often is chosen as the lowest common denominator in a multilingual constellation. Very often it is not the proficiency of the individual members but the overall linguistic composition of a group that counts. As a member of a multilingual team in a globalized corporation in Denmark tells us:

INF: ehm our project was very international
we had signs all over the place which said
here only English is spoken (0.4) and since in principle

INT: mhm

INF: actually all nationalities also almost were only represented
once or twice (0.4) we spoke in fact only English indeed
(0.8)

(Haberland, Nedergaard Thomsen 2016; my translation, original interview in German)

As the informant points out, in her working group practically no two members shared a first language. They had to find a common language and somebody decided on English – and apparently it worked.

This might explain why there is a slight dip in the number of Danes who feel confident in more than one foreign language, from 66% to 58% between 2005 and 2012. This is still far above the EU average of 25%, but has caused some concern (but hardly any action) in Denmark. The problem seems to be that proficiency in a language and opportunity to use it do not always match. A study of language use by the Danish members of the European Parliament showed that there were far more members that could speak German than French, but that those who could speak French made more use of it (Haberland, Henriksen 1991: 97). A language's ecology in any given system is a complex matter since it involves very heterogeneous factors, such as its speakers' capacity, opportunity, desire and need to use it. While capacity and desire might be construed as properties of the speakers, opportunity and need also depend on the capacities and desires of other speakers and can therefore never be considered in isolation for the individual speaker. Sweeping statements like "English is everywhere" and "English is the lingua franca of the world" are thus meaningless, even and especially in a global context where so many subsystems interact. Global indicators like de Swaan's (2001) "communicative potential" of a language (its "Q-value") and empirical generalizations like Van Parijs' (2004: 115) "maximin principle" (minimizing exclusion in a conversation by selecting the language best known by the member of the group who knows it least well) are therefore mostly interesting for the reasons why they fail to capture the complex ecology of any language, including English.

There is a wide-spread notion that English has become the "second language" of almost all Scandinavians, especially Danes. De Swaan (2001: 56) talks about Denmark (among others) "approaching a state of universal multilingualism and pervasive diglossia". Jenkins (2009: 20) refers to Graddol (1997: 11) for a list of "countries in transition from EFL to L2 status [viz. for English, HH]" that contains Denmark, Norway and Sweden (but not Finland). But this has to be taken with a grain of salt.

There is certainly something to it: in certain contexts one can indeed observe what sometimes has been called a "vernacularization" of English. In youth culture, English seems to be the most often used ploy for "doing being international" (Haberland, Preisler 2015: 20; see also Lønsmann 2009). In academic contexts, one could easily make the same observation as the one from Meshtrie for Germany quoted by Jenkins (2009: 20) that his Bavarian graduate students were "thoroughly at home in English". But this applies only to certain segments of the population and ignores the "English-have-nots" estimated as comprising 20% of the Danish population (Haberland, Preisler 2015: 18). Also, Jenkins suggests that the transition mentioned by Graddol creates an "increasingly grey area between the Outer and Expanding circles" (Jenkins 2009: 20). Placing Scandinavia on a trajectory from Expanding to Outer Circle would not only imply the existence of an "institutionalized variety" (Jenkins 2009: 45) of English in Scandinavia, but also that such a variety, or varieties, of English is or are turning from "norm-dependent" to "norm-developing" (in the sense of Kachru 1985: 16–17). This is clearly not the case, at least not at the present moment.

As my Japanese informant (quoted in Part 2 of this article) expresses it, "well in Scandinavia even cab drivers speak a hundred percent fluent English ... at least my ...

that was my experience. I was very surprised". This shows that the situation in Japan (where taxi drivers most often do not speak English) is quite different.⁷ The situation for English in Japan has been studied and described in the literature (e.g. Seargeant 2009), but never in contrast to Denmark. In the second part of this article, I will offer a few observations on that.

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⁷ But not quite as different as many people might assume. In spite of the supposed “pervasive diglossia”, emblematic use of English (cf. Hyde 2002) can increasingly also be observed in Denmark – something that should be investigated comparatively. A first step is the analysis of emblematic use of English in a Copenhagen restaurant menu in Haberland (2018: 113–115).

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