The Origins of English as a Global Language

How far back do we have to go in order to find the origins of global English? In a sense, the language has always been on the move. As soon as it arrived in England from northern Europe, in the fifth century, it began to spread around the British Isles. It entered parts of Wales, Cornwall, Cumbria and southern Scotland, traditionally the strongholds of the Celtic languages. After the Norman invasion of 1066, many nobles from England fled north to Scotland, where they were made welcome, and eventually the language (in a distinctive Scots variety) spread throughout the Scottish Lowlands. From the 12th century, Anglo-Norman knights were sent across the Irish Sea, and Ireland gradually fell under English rule. But, compared with later events, these were movements on a very local scale – within the British Isles.

The first significant step in the progress of English towards its status as a global language did not take place for another 300 years, towards the end of the sixteenth century. At that time, the number of mother-tongue English speakers in the world is thought to have been between 5 and 7 million, almost all of them living in the British Isles. Between the end of the reign of Elizabeth I (1603) and the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth II (1952), this figure increased almost fiftyfold, to some 250 million, the vast majority living outside the British Isles. Most of these people were, and continue to be, Americans, and it is in sixteenth-century North America that we first find a fresh dimension being added to the history of the language

The present-day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century. It is the latter factor which continues to explain the world position of the English language today (much to the discomfiture of some in Britain who find the loss of historical linguistic pre-eminence unpalatable). The USA has nearly 70 per cent of all English mother-tongue speakers in the world (excluding creole varieties). Such dominance, with its political/economic underpinnings, currently gives America a controlling interest in the way the language is likely to develop.

How then may we summarize this complex situation? The US linguist Braj Kachru has suggested that we think of the spread of English around the world as three concentric circles, representing different ways in which the language has been acquired and is currently used. Although not all countries fit neatly into this model, it has been widely regarded as a helpful approach.

- The inner circle refers to the traditional bases of English, where it is the primary language: it includes the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
- The outer or extended circle involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of a country’s chief institutions, and plays an important ‘second language’ role in a multilingual setting: it includes Singapore, India, Malawi and over fifty other territories.
- The expanding or extending circle involves those nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language, though they do not have a history of colonization by members of the inner circle, nor have they given English any special administrative status. It includes China, Japan, Greece, Poland and (as the name of this circle suggests) a steadily increasing number of other states. In these areas, English is taught as a foreign language. (The term ‘expanding’ reflects its origins in the 1980s: today, with English recognized virtually everywhere, a tense change to expanded circle would better reflect the contemporary scene.)

There are some seventy-five territories in which English has held or continues to hold a special place, as a member of either the inner or the outer circles.