English: Language of controversy

The position of English today

Interviewer

Introduction of participants and debate

Hello, I'm Barbara Mayor from the Open University

Today we're here to discuss the future of English in an increasingly globalised world – what are the current issues associated with English and how are these likely to develop? With me in the studio, are three linguists with different interests in the English language. Sue Wright is director of the Centre for European and International Studies Research at the University of Portsmouth in the UK. Her interests lie in the role of English alongside other languages in the European Union. John Gray works in the Cass School of Education at the University of East London, and he's interested in the industries which promote and sustain the dissemination of English globally, and particularly in the textbooks used in the teaching of English. Tope Omoniyi is Director of the Centre for Research in English Language and Linguistics at Roehampton University, which is also greater London His interests have to do with the links between English and indigenous languages and development issues in sub-Saharan Africa. Tope is also a published poet. Finally, on the phone from Hong Kong, we have Andy Kirkpatrick. Andy directs a research centre for language education and acquisition in multilingual societies at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Welcome to you all.

So let's start by looking at the role that English plays in the parts of the world with which you are each familiar. What do you see as the main emerging issues? Andy.

Andy Kirkpatrick:

I think what is happening very much in Asia and I guess also in Europe that English is actually now a multilingual language spoken by many more second language speakers who've learnt it as an additional language than by native speakers. This is certainly true in Asia.

It's the sole working language of the Association of South East Asian Nations for example. So that means, it seems to me anyway, that we need to look much more closely at English as a multilingual language and start using multilingual models in, in the sense that people who are multilinguals who use English are actually the, the great majority of people who are using it.

So that starts to chip away I guess at the privileged position of American or British English in that context anyway.

Sue Wright:
what I find so interesting about this is that in a sense its post-national. You have in er the Nation State era the codification, the standardisation of the language and then there's a very purist attitude towards it, its set in stone. now it's a, it's a change er of mindset. And that's why it's so difficult for teachers to accept that there are going to be lots of different Englishes and that we can use these and as long as they remain fairly inter-comprehensible that's not a problem. Because it allows appropriation, it allows, it takes away this idea of domination from one language, one Nation State.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
Sue talked about post-national Where people are using English without really any reference to the traditional basis of English whether that be the United States or Britain. So Cambodia which as everybody will know was a French colony and then had Russian influence and so forth, people are all learning English there. But they're not learning English necessarily to communicate with Americans, actually its Australians more than anybody else who are Anglophones there. But they're using it because they want to be part of ASEAN. They want to be part of the Association of South East Asian Nations and they want to be part of APEC. So it's er a kind of quite significant shift in that sense I think.

Barbara: John what's your experience ?

John Gray:
In my research one of the things that I do is I talk to a lot of teachers working in, in Spain. They are mainly Catalan and Spanish teachers. And then ex-pat, British-Irish and American teachers working there. And one of the things that they complained about in their interviews was the way in which the materials that they were using global, materials designed um for use in the, in the global marketplace relied on a narrow range of, of accents. And the argument that they made to me was that as English had become increasingly plural that there was a need for a much wider range of accents from the outer and the expanding circles to be included on the listening materials. Which I thought was a very interesting thing um to see practising teachers saying that that needed to be included in the materials.

Um so I think um there may be er that, attitudes towards accents may actually be changing I think.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
There's an interesting er programme at the, in Vladivostok er in the far eastern university there, in the eastern coast of Russia. Where they teach English by using materials of Koreans, Japanese and Chinese speaking English. Because those are the people they, they use English with. So that's an example I think of, of where things are heading. So there aren't very many native speakers in their listening materials at all. They're Chinese, Koreans and Japanese.

Barbara:
So Andy, What role do you think English should play in education more generally?

Andy Kirkpatrick:
Well the, the, language is crucial in education for a whole range of reasons. and why English is so important here is we're, we're seeing parents in particular wanting their children to learn English because they want them to participate in the great modernisation, internationalisation of our time.

And I think we really do have to try and work out how we can get English, how can we get it operating in a complementary way in language education policy with local languages and national languages? I think that is the fundamental challenge we all face.

Barbara:
Tope

Tope Omoniyi:
Um English in the school system is a kind of a gatekeeper. That policy of, of English, official instruction and as a subject becomes a gatekeeping tool, in, in the school system. For example, you couldn't go on to universities in Nigeria without a credit level pass in the English language. So you could score your, your A star in physics, chemistry and biology but without the credit level pass in English you can't go on to university.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
My own feeling is that there's far too much English too early especially in the primary curriculum. And it's getting, there's more and more English coming in earlier and earlier. And the combination of learning English and the national language is meaning that most kids don't get a chance for mother tongue education at all. And local languages are under severe threat. But also I think the learning taking place by the kids is also nothing like as er proficient as it would be if they were using their mother tongue so it's a lose-lose situation really.

John Gray:
Can I just pick up on something that Andy just said there which I think resonates very much with things um seen from my perspective as well. Thinking about the industries um promoting the global spread of English. One, one thing that I'm concerned about is, for example, monolingual methodology is being exported from the centre to the rest of the world. And I think the neglect of the mother tongues and their use in, in the teaching of English, for example, is something that I see as, pernicious and, and dangerous actually. And I think we need to be thinking more about a bilingual approach to the teaching of languages.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
Well I couldn't agree more with that if I may just come in. Because er that's exactly what we're trying to promote here is, is using the multilingual resources of teachers, the local teachers and the kids here have.

Sue Wright:
And this is very interesting because you, you seem to be suggesting that English can be paired with, you called it the mother tongue, so whatever is the family language, the first language, the local language and then that squeezes the national language. And that's what I find very interesting. Because it was the national language in the past that was the er language that eclipsed the smaller languages. Now will there be room for English and er, local language. Those two might pair together more easily in bilingualism than national language and another language.

Tope Omoniyi:
I'm, I'm glad that we, we're actually separating er er the languages from, from makers of policy and, and executors of policy. And the way that we tend to represent the English language er is that it is the agent or the agency of, of these problems. But as a matter of fact there are these people who are making these policies and er putting them in place. So that's a difference between, between those two. To take on Sue's point on um national identity and national languages I think it's a little more problematic for er post-colonial Africa where the issue of a national language is, is not so simple and straightforward. There are about 400 languages in Nigeria for instance.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
I can give you two examples of Asia. It's also picking up what Sue was saying and which languages should work together. What is happening here is that the national language, let's say Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia and Putonghua Mandarin in China. They've become national languages. And then the combination of teaching the national language with English from primary school is really presenting a huge threat on the local languages. So what we're

trying to look at is how can you combine the national and local language in primary school and allow English to come in later in secondary arguing that there's plenty of time to learn English later. But it's very difficult to persuade parents and policy makers of that of course. So that, that's the big issue really.

Tope Omoniyi:
I, I want to say that in, in connection with Andy's last point there. The problems that parents are having being convinced about the model that you're presenting them might have to do with their perception of how er those who are making these policies are positioning themselves viz a viz, the, the policies that they're making. If you put a policy in place but your kids are sent out to the United Kingdom, to the United States to go to school and get English medium education then it's difficult for you to sell a policy which is promoting indigenous languages in, in Beijing.

Sue Wright:
It's a question of cultural capital. I mean people who want the best for their children the languages that will, a repertoire of languages, that will give them the maximum life chances don't they?

John Gray:
I just wanted to say that if, if local languages whatever they are, are allowed space in the classroom they are in a way being validated in a very important domain which is the school. And I think the people if they see this happening, that this is, that there is this multilingual environment for, for the learning of lets say English or whatever, um that that in a way um serves to link those indigenous languages. I think that by allowing local languages into the classroom they are associated with the pen and validated and given a legitimacy um er in that way.

Interviewer:
Andy.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
I just want to go back to what Sue was saying and that is that what, we're finding here, and I don't think this happens in Europe but it certainly is happening in Asia that people, who can afford it, are choosing to send their children to English medium schools at the expense of literacy and fluency even in their own language. This is the national language. So in Hong Kong for example, a lot of the English school foundation schools which were set up for ex-patriots are actually now populated by the children of locals. And they're learning through English. So their level of Chinese literacy is actually dropping. And that seems remarkable

doesn't it, when you think of the possible cultural capital and the linguistic capital that could be offered by Chinese in the next 20, 30 years.

Barbara:
Ok thanks everyone. Can we , at this point, perhaps move on to talk about any other fields in which you feel English is a contentious issue. Tope…

Tope Omoniyi:
I want to mention the Nigerian case where, for example, both in health and in law insistence on English language as, as the official language of business as a matter of fact compromises and, and also undermines the, the human rights of, of people. I, I recall that this is anecdotal. Um the case of, of somebody who was being tried in a Court of Law for, for murder. And at the point where the Judge sentenced him to death by hanging. He didn't speak English, and so he turned to the person beside him and said, "E dakun ki nwon wi na?"which is Yoruba for "Please what are they talking about?". The moment before that his life had just been terminated by that statement in English. So people's human rights are being undermined, you know, um by this official language thing. And that's, that's in legal.

With the problems of HIV Aids we also know that the places where humongous success has been registered or recorded across Africa have been those places where intervention has been in the medium of the indigenous languages rather than in the official languages.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
There's um, an, another issue and I very much like also Sue's er comment on this. And the difference between Asia and er the European Union with English as being the only sole official working language of ASEAN means that what is happening very often is that people whose English isn't very good of course are hugely disadvantaged at ASEAN meetings. And secondly that then countries are sending people who happen to have good English to these meetings rather than the expert in the field. Now can you imagine in Europe that there was only one language in the European Union, what are there, there are 23 or something. So I'd be very interested to know what Sue has to say about it.

Sue Wright:
Well I, I did the field work there in 1996 and 2006. And things changed pretty rapidly over those ten years. And in 2006 I can tell you that a MEP that didn't have some English was limited in his effect, or her, the effectiveness and, in the parliament. Because obviously things are interpreted in formal meetings. There're translations of the main papers but that's not how an institution works. Institutions work with people meeting at lunch, meeting in the corridor,

meeting in the loo talking. If you can't do that then you rely on your gatekeeper, your assistant who is, the, the person who speaks the Lingua Franca of the institution. And that is more and more English now.

So we have a claim that its multilingual but that isn't actually true. That's not what actually happens. And we can understand that. I mean you, working in 23 languages um is impossible. The number of interpreters that you need in a room is just enormous. So we've got all the problems of relay interpreting and loss of um meaning and all sorts of things.

Andy Kirkpatrick:
Well it, it is one of the things ASEAN, the ASEAN Secretary had always says, or doesn't always say but often mentions that they're, they're interpreting translation budget is zero. Quite significantly different from Europe.

Sue Wright:
And at least its, its honest you know. If you don't speak English you won't manage this. Whereas in the, er European Parliament um there is this fiction that you will get by if you just have Estonian or whatever, you know.

Barbara
So how do we think things might have changed in, say, 20 years time?

Tope Omoniyi:
Right. I er was listening to CNN news last, last night. And um I gathered that er China has just unveiled in Beijing what they call a Tianha-1A Supercomputer which, which has the, the capability of processing 2.5 quadrillion calculations in one second. And it supersedes the pre-existing American Supercomputer. And, and that got me thinking about these, this whole tension between er, Putonghua Mandarin and, and the English language and in terms of global economy and global politics 20, 25 years from, from now.

Um and my, my thinking is, and this is only very tentative and um I'm still thinking about it. Um my thinking is I don't think Putonghua Mandarin is going to be any kind of serious threat to the English language because you have a region of the world er because of the historical trajectory that has brought them to where they are I sense that beyond 20 years, 50 years if not more or the nations of Africa will still be as entrapped or as involved or as linked or connected to the English language as, as they are now. And so even though the, the Chinese government is putting together what you call the Confucius Institute which is the equivalent as I see it, the equivalent of the British Counsel across Africa and they're buying more into the African economy. Um I don't see the optic on Putonghua Mandarin amongst Africans to be going in the same direction.

Sue Wright:
I understand what you're saying but I do think we need to be quite careful. Um I think as William Cage in 1986 er wrote that er Russian was the other super language. And that access to er science and technology came through the two super languages, Russian and English. Then in five years Russian had disappeared more or less from the education systems in Central and Eastern Europe. And er we can see how quickly things can change.

And we have to remember that languages so closely associated with power, Lingua Franca's er closely associated with power. And the other thing I would say about a Lingua Franca is it's not like the language that you learn in the home. You don't have this effective um relationship with it. You can change your Lingua Franca quite easily. It doesn't hurt you in the same way that changing your mother tongue. You know, it, it can be in the education system two or three generations and you've changed it. It's not quite the same. So I think you have to be a bit careful about thinking that we're at the end of history, we're not. I don't think that English is the last Lingua Franca.

Interviewer:
Tope.

Tope Omoniyi:
I, I, I agree with you absolutely. We have to be extremely careful about that. Er but you see with the, with the African context that I'm talking about and this is, this is a dire, dire problem, you know, that we are having to deal with.

When you have a nation that has 400 indigenous languages there and then the myth of English as the language of unity, that's, that's where I'm coming from. I don't foresee in Nigeria as successful as it is in terms of the natural resources that it has. And, and its political status on the African continent. I don't foresee the, the change of policy to, to Hausa to Yoruba to any of the indigenous languages that would not entail political problems, you know, crisis. And that's what sustains the English. English thrives on that fear of the other within the African continent.

Sue Wright:
And of course its role as the national language.

Barbara:
Andy ….

Andy Kirkpatrick:

I'm sure Tope would agree that despite tremendous attempts by various people to establish an African language even as a Lingua Franca in Africa has been er characterised by failure basically. And English remains. What's happening in China interestingly in higher education and this tends to be linked to the internationalization of education is that there're actually more and more English medium courses being taught especially at postgraduate level in mainland Chinese universities.

Now that's a tendency I think you can see happening everywhere because people want to internationalize education, internationalization almost always actually means Anglicisation in terms of medium instruction and in the dissemination of knowledge and publication.

So there are huge pressures at the, the high levels here for English. And many universities, I know in, in the Nordic countries they've introduced bilingual policies in order to revitalise local languages as language as a scholarship. That is not happening really much, very much in Asia. And I think Asian universities are going to have to look very, very carefully at developing bilingual policies, getting the idea of parallel languages, not more complementary languages. Otherwise like you can see English becoming completely dominant in that field.

Barbara:
John.

John Gray:
From my perspective looking at the, at the industries like, for example, the publishing industry. I think that the publishers are going to have to respond to the massive discontent that there is um among teachers with regard to, for example, um the notion of, the global textbook or the global course book. I think that the one size fits all um sort of policy that's been in operation there for the last 30 years or so. I think is coming to the end of its life and I think materials are going to have to be much, more contexts sensitive.

Tope Omoniyi:
I have published a book of poetry and have published several poems or some poetry in, in journals. In Asia, in, in Europe and in the United States.

John:
But in English.

Tope Omoniyi:
I will share with you an experience that I had back in 1991. Um if you take into consideration the fact that I am er in my 50's now. Er in 1991 I, I decided for six months that I was not going to write anything unless it came to me in Yoruba. And so I went through six months of not

writing. And at the end of my six months I actually broke down and wept. Because I had to accept then, you know, that this was it. I didn't have the competence to produce the literature that had endeared me to a lot of people in the English speaking world er in, in Yoruba. And that was very painful for me. And it's the reason, its one of the reasons, you know, that I have become an apostle of indigenous language er, promotion on the African continent now.

Barbara:
So is this perhaps a good point to ask you Tope about this concept of English as the killer language? Does that metaphor work for you,?

Tope Omoniyi:
I don't see English as a killer language. I, I, I think I, it goes back to a point that I made earlier about giving agency to the language rather than to the people who put policies in place. the English language it's a very useful tool. And it's a very useful possession for those for whom this is a, a mark of local identity. I don't see how it, it can kill another language but I suppose that if you have in place a policy that place up one language and place down another then of course the person who is doing the killing or, or the agency that's doing that killing is, is the policy maker. And the policy planner er, executor. You know rather than the policy, the, the language itself.

Sue Wright:
That does need to be said um because languages don't do anything. It's only the speakers. And if you have English in your repertoire um you're an English user and so what you do with it has an effect. and if obviously you're um a nasty transnational corporation that is doing all sorts of nasty things and introducing English. Or if you're the WTO that's suggesting that you won't get aid money unless you have English in the education system, all these things, then yes that's negative.

But then of course if you're um, um a transnational medical group OMG and you're using English then English is being used so. So it doesn't make any sense to talk about killer language or good or bad, its, its what the people do with it.

Interviewer:
John.

John Gray:
I agree entirely with, with what my colleagues are saying here. I mean I think it's a, it's a highly emotive term to refer to, to English as a killer language. And as Tope says it does employ a kind of agency that, that no language actually has because it's the, it's the policies that are, that are, that are to blame. But certainly there has been language shift in, in favour of

English. And certainly in monolingual ideologies with regard to teaching have sidelined indigenous languages and this has had negative consequences for them.

Then but again as, as Andy has said and as Tope has said English has been appropriated by people all around the world and it has been used to combat the iniquities of globalisation for example, that English is intimately associated with. So English can also be, I mean it was also the, the language of the anti-colonial struggle and the Indian subcontinent. It was the, the language of the antiapartheid struggle. Throughout the 90's for example, the Zapatistas in Mexico regularly posted their statements to the world on the Internet in Spanish and in English. So I think English can also be seen as a language which of, expression and, and, and reclaiming, and, and things like that. It's not simply an imposition and to refer to it as a killer language I think simplifies um what is in fact a very complex situation.

Interviewer:
I think one thing we're all agreed on John, is that it is indeed a complex situation. I've found this a really fascinating discussion and I'd just like to thank you all very much for giving us a genuinely global perspective.
Thank you.