



English: Language of controversy

Why has the rise of English caused so much controversy?

NARRATOR

As English becomes increasingly important as a global Lingua Franca we need to consider why it is that the rise of one language has caused so much controversy. How is it that English is widely championed as an essential attribute for successful participation in 21st century society? Yet at the same time criticised for causing real social and cultural damage across the globe. Is English a force for good or a force for bad in the world today?

LIZ HAMP LYONS

It is a force for both. And it's down to every person who uses English to ensure that they use it as a force for good. But it really can quite easily be a force for just another way of colonising individuals and imposing power upon them. It doesn't have to be that but it lends itself to it.

NARRATOR

It is the association with colonialism and the legacy of empire that is at the root of much of the controversy which the English language attracts.

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

I love the English language and we divorce it from the empire. With the empire I think was brutal. And some of us had English down the barrel of a gun. If you look at my family, you know, we came from Africa. Some part of Africa we don't know. Because we were so brutalised that they wouldn't, you know, a slave. They mixed us all together and stopped us speaking our native languages. And stopped us practising our culture. So by the time, you know, we settled into Jamaica we didn't know what our original language was. But you know you can take good things from it. I don't know, you know, I wish I would have just received it another way. But the English language, you know, I love it.

CHRIS FRANKLAND

Unfortunately because Malaysia is an ex British colony there is this feeling of elitism attached to English. I've, I've experienced as many teachers have, in a playground you might get a couple of students talking together in English. They will be chastised by their peers, why are you speaking English, you think you're better than we are?

The government, it's trying to change that mentality and trying to ensure that people understand that it is the language of business and commerce, the Internet. But still there is this lingering elitist kind of idea. Particularly among rural students.

NJABULO NDEBELE

There is no way that we could have continued to have English and Afrikaans as official languages of, of South Africa. There's no way. Their constitution demands that we should do everything we can to promote African languages in those areas in which they, they are predominantly spoken. And I think it was a stroke of genius to have decided to do that. The big challenge now is to make them work, develop them and the constitution does make provision for, for, for the responsibilities of various tiers of government to ensure in their region in which a particular language has dominance or has a particular presence to do something to, to promote the use, of, of that particular language.

NARRATOR

In many countries there is a concern that the dominance of English threatens indigenous languages.

YI'AN WU

Everything has two sides. The learning of English by the Chinese people is for a very practical purpose I think. English is a tool of communications many people say. Lets say without a common language we cannot join in the globalisation process. And China's modernisation really needs English.

In this sense English is a good force. But on the other hand if we are not careful, you see, we might as we might have already, you see, well develop English language learning at the expense of the Chinese language learning. The mother tongue language learning, you see. So I see this as a danger. And on occasions I joined other scholars in appealing to the strengthening of the teaching of Chinese language.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

We live in an African environment. People speak African languages. They cherish them, they value them. But these languages have no marketing value or very little. And yet if the people, if this democracy is to become anything close to real it's got to be amongst other things through the languages of the people. And for that reason the indigenous African languages have to be given market value.

SARAN KAUR GILL

It's so easy to be seduced by the English language and to go with the flow. Because if all of us went down that path of only giving into English who would there be in the country then to take care of the national language and ensure that also develops along the same lines.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

Fundamentally what we were saying can be put in a very simple formula, namely that every South African needs to know, apart from his or her mother tongue whatever it is, needs to know English as part and parcel of a global survival kit as it were for every individual in the world today. And in addition to that a second important South African language.

In other words a multilingual policy, language policy such that if two South Africans meet anywhere in the world or in South Africa they would immediately be able to decide which language they would want to speak in. And communicate with, with each other.

NJABULO NDEBELE

The beauty of that is that because we speak, we speak many languages English will take its role and its place among, in, in that community of languages. And, and that it will be English that, then you speak out of choice, and right out of choice rather than out of compulsion.

Because you've got other alternatives, you know, in front of you. And so the guilt of using English will disappear.

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

The thing with the English language is that it no longer belongs to the English. And I say that as an English man, you know. Some of the greatest writings in English lately have come from the Indian subcontinent and other places around the world. Some of the Nigerian writers are writing in, in English. Sometimes English, most of the times English is a second language. So it no longer belongs to the English.

NARRATOR

But access to English is often limited which means that in some countries there's a danger of it becoming the language of the elite.

SUBRAMARIAM PILLAY

So now you have a dichotomy in this country. Public universities use Malay and private universities use English and over the years what's happening is more affluent families are able to afford to send their kids to private universities or abroad to get English education. The poorer Malaysians have to send their kids to public universities because they are subsidised, the fees are lower. So they end up learning in Malay so the gap is growing wider. You know in terms of mobility for children of poorer families. Their ability to move up in the social, economic ladder is actually being, there is a big barrier now because of this language. And it's a sad thing, you know. Because you don't want to see the gap widening because it leads to all kinds of social problems, you know.

And I don't think the government has still a clear idea of what they want to do, you know.

They're still confused I think because of these conflicting pressures on them, you know. From

the people who believe that it should be English and people who believe that they should use Malay.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

There's no doubt that the middle class elite which is in charge of South Africa at the moment, regardless of colour, even regardless of language origin, the middle class elite believes that English is the way to go. They, they have their children sent to English medium schools. Basically they believe that through English South Africa can be united. And South Africa can be uplifted and economically developed.

Now that is false in every dimension. English will not unite South Africa, only multilingualism will unite South Africa first of all. Secondly, English will not develop the economy, it will develop the economy of those who own the economy. Not those who are consumers and the poor and marginalised majority.

LIONEL WEE HOCK ANN

This important ideological policy is used here is that for many Singaporeans English is increasingly the language of the home. And for some of these foreign talent especially if you've got talented, people from America or Britain they kept Singapore citizenship. For them English is their, what Singaporeans might consider a mother tongue. But at the policy level it is still important to maintain the position that English is somehow ethnically neutral. It belongs to no particular segment of Singapore society. That's going to be more difficult obviously if you, if the demographic profile of the country changes.

But it's important to do that and I can understand why because English still is the language by which most people can expect to move up the social economic ladder. So because of that you don't want to see the economic benefits of using English to be associated with a particular ethnic group because that could heighten ethnic tensions.

NARRATOR

There's also a concern that the growth of English can undermine a people's culture and identity.

BOB SHI

Why you can't study any language for so long without really seeing any deep changes in you both, both in the way you look at your own country, the way of thinking exactly, even your lifestyle. So everything is different now.

It is causing some kind of identity crisis because you keep asking yourself, you know, is my heart really Chinese now? Is my, you know, psyche, my soul completely Chinese now? Why am I thinking like a foreigner?

YI'AN WU

I believe that for the majority of our young English language learners English is a tool. A tool of communication. So they, these learners are trying to master the tool, you see, as well as they can of course. But for me and a lot of my colleagues who really study language and study language and thought, language and culture -

So our view is a little bit different in the sense that we, we agree that English is a tool of communication but at the same time we don't, we, we, we see that language and culture, language and thought are inextricably tied to each other. You just cannot separate them. We would believe that you change a little bit in your identity. You have a chance to draw upon two languages, two cultures. And that would very likely to lead to some change in your identity. Perhaps without our knowing it.