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How British is English: Culture and Contemporary Language Learning

Abstract: The paper examines the extent to which it is possible to displace English as a functional communication tool from its culturally rich British contexts and associations. Starting from the analysis of the relationship between culture and language, the study discusses the ties between British culture and English in the context of its emergence as a global means of communication. In addition, the paper refers to developments in language pedagogy to outline the role of British culture in contemporary English learning. The conclusion is that reducing English to a mere culturally neutral container for information is not beneficial for educational outcomes, as outlined in the two principal reference documents for foreign language learning, the CEFR and ACTFL. A joint literacy in English and its culture will not foster undesirable individual acculturation but contribute to the development of intercultural competence among learners from diverse backgrounds who bring their own negotiations with British culture.

Keywords: British culture, English, English as an international language, intercultural competence, English varieties, plurilingualism, pluriculturalism

Introduction

The interconnectedness of language and culture has long since been established in various fields of study, including philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology (*see* Chomsky 1968; Malinowski 1930; Sapir 1962; Saussure [1959] 2016; Humboldt 1876; Whorf 1956). The ground-breaking Sapir-Whorf hypothesis proposes that our native language can shape and influence our perception of the world implying that cultural differences can lead to dissimilarities between languages, where elements present in one language might be absent in another. However, an unprecedented spread of the English language has raised questions whether English, when employed as an international medium of communication, can truly maintain cultural neutrality. The paper examines the extent to which it is possible to disentangle English as a functional means of communication from its culturally rich British contexts and associations. It also looks into

developments in language pedagogy to delineate the role of British culture in contemporary English teaching and learning. We believe that the starting point for this analysis is to outline the understanding of the relationship between language and culture from both anthropological and linguistic perspectives.

The Relationship between Culture and Language

The relationship between language and culture has been a topic of anthropological research, confirming the interconnectedness between the two and their mutual influence in various communities and societies. In the early 20th century, Edward Sapir (1962) laid the foundation for the field of linguistic anthropology, contributing to our understanding of how the structure and vocabulary of a language shape the perceptions and thinking of its speakers. His work emulates Humboldtian view that each language holds a distinct worldview and encompasses a unique set of concepts for expressing aspects of human understanding (Humboldt [1836] 1999, 60). In the 1930s, Malinowski's ([1935] 2002) anthropological work touched upon the functional role of language in expressing and shaping cultural practices. He delved into language, myths, and rituals of the Trobriand Islanders examining the importance of understanding language within its cultural context. Evans-Pritchard (1951), known for his work in social anthropology, underlines that understanding one's thought is not possible without thinking in their symbols. He also argues that learning the language cannot be separated from learning the culture and the social system embedded within it.

The concept of "communicative competence" introduced by Dell Hymes (1972) extends beyond the mere formal elements of language to encompass the societal and cultural conventions that guide effective communication in specific contexts. For Silverstein (1976, 130), whose work involves the study of linguistic anthropology and semiotics, the rules of use in speech situations depend on analysis of cultural behaviour within a particular society, while messages must be analysed as linguistic behaviour, carrying cultural meaning. Along these lines, Agar (1994) introduced the concept of "languaculture", referring to the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, which reflects the inherent interconnectedness between language and culture. McKay (2004, 5–9) added another field to the previous two: that of rhetoric. Thus, according to her, there are three fields in which language and culture are inseparable: semantics, pragmatics, and rhetoric.

The emergence of cognitive linguistics introduced cultural conceptualizations, which encompass units of conceptual knowledge like schemas, categories, and conceptual metaphors that result from interactions within a cultural group. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), no metaphor can be understood

or adequately represented without embodied human experience. Here, embodied experience entails not only personal experience but also the entirety of human cultural and societal experience.

Nevertheless, the notion of culture-neutral global English has gained ground in contemporary linguistic theories. In order to discuss whether and how the English language has become detached from British culture, we will first examine the circumstances under which the language, originally stemming from England, has attained the status of *lingua franca*, encompassing a multitude of varieties.

The Spread of the English Language

The English language has become one of the phenomena of the second half of the 20th century, acquiring the status of a global language used for many purposes (Crystal 2012; Seidlhofer 2001). Such a development carries serious linguistic, cultural, ideological, political, and pedagogical implications.

The global adoption of the English language as a means of communication can be attributed to its distinct status, recognized across nations. This recognition partly stems from the need to establish a common language for inter-state communication after World War I (Crystal 2012, 152–77). Consequently, the English language assumed a unique position within the League of Nations, where it, alongside the French language, received official recognition. After World War II, English continued to serve as the “working language” within the United Nations, now encompassing 193 member countries. Beyond being the predominant language in countries like the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, English took on the mantle of an official and administrative language in over seventy countries, including examples like Ghana, Nigeria, India, and Singapore. Furthermore, the English language plays a significant role in foreign language education strategies, serving as both the preferred language of instruction and a foreign language taught in schools (Crystal 2012, 151).

The extensive use of the English language has been examined by studying its expansion through several phases (Kachru 1996). In the initial phase, English extended to Wales in 1535, followed by Scotland in 1603, and by 1707, it had reached Ireland, coinciding with the formation of Great Britain. In the subsequent phase, English-speaking communities migrated to North America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where English became the official language of these newly established nations (Kachru 1996; Bhat 2001). English underwent a sociolinguistic shift and acquired global language status in the following stage, when it came into contact with languages in Africa and Asia to which it

was not linked either genetically or culturally (Kachru 1996). These interactions led to the emergence of localized variations such as Indian English, Malaysian English, Singaporean English, Filipino English, and Nigerian English. Kachru's 1988 model of the "Three concentric circles" serves as an attempt to classify varieties reflecting the pluricentric nature of English, which is not only of demographic but also of cultural, linguistic, and literary significance (Kachru 1996). English varieties are classified into Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles based on the status of English in a specific country, which can range from being a native and official language to being a foreign language.

The factors contributing to the emergence of a global language can be either intrinsic (related to the language itself) or extrinsic (related to external factors, such as socio-political influence). The emergence of English as a global language is most commonly attributed to its linguistic characteristics, a relatively limited number of inflectional endings, the lack of grammatical gender and lexical tone, often referred to as "intrinsic linguistic factors" (Crystal 2012, 156). However, Crystal (2012, 156) argues that a language can achieve global status primarily due to "extrinsic" factors unrelated to its linguistic features. These factors are associated with the influence and power of the language's speakers. This influence takes on various forms in political, military, technological, economic, and cultural contexts. In the case of native English speakers, their political sway manifested itself through colonialism, commencing in the sixteenth century. This was supported by the Industrial Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which originated from English-speaking areas. Economic imperialism is linked to the economic power of Great Britain as the leading industrial and trading force in the nineteenth century, as well as the economic growth and development of the United States in the same period. The twentieth century is notably characterized by the pervasive impact of American culture across all aspects of life. In this way, English becomes dominant as the functional language in politics, economics, the media, advertising, television, film, popular music, international travel, education, and communication (Crystal 2012).

British Culture and the Spread of English

Our analysis of the potential detachment of British culture from the English language will take into consideration the use of English as a global language not limited to Kachru's Inner circle which includes the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Kachru 1996, 137). Wierzbicka (2006) refers to English spoken in these countries as Anglo English claiming that it has an identifiable shared cultural core. Although the 20th century witnessed the shift of economic power to North America and emergence of the multitude of English varieties

worldwide, it poses a challenge to dispute the view that the origins of the language remain undisturbed lying in Britain (McArthur 1987, 9). Is it then possible to root out British culture from the English language in spite of its worldwide usage? Has the cultural aspect of English yielded to the need for creating a culture-neutral functional means of communication?

Historically speaking, the British are well acquainted with the understanding that English is firmly ingrained within their society and the cultural viewpoints of its speakers. Namely, the tendency to reflect the class system, culture, and status through language forms and their 'proper' usage has been present in British society since the Middle Ages (Mugglestone 2001). The hierarchies rooted in culture and social values, almost inevitably accompanied the rise of Standard English that gained linguistic and cultural advantage in London in the fifteenth century. Other varieties were considered dysfunctional, so the hierarchy among varieties reflected a social hierarchy with distinct cultural associations. The standard English variety, being spoken by the well-bred and well-educated, the elite echelons of British society, was simultaneously recognized as an exponent of British culture.

Once English started conquering the world, it was exported in the form of British Standard English to the language educational institutions and literature, as a standard to look up to. It was not an all-encompassing variety, as it reflected the worldview of a particular British social class. Standard English is perceived as a class dialect of educated people across Great Britain (Sweet 1908, 7–8), deprived of local or regional connotations. Consequently, Standard English can be spoken with different regional accents, but the only accent typically considered regionally neutral is Received Pronunciation (RP), which has been associated with Standard English since the 19th century. For the purpose of learning the English language outside the borders of Great Britain the well-established standard of RP was given preference (Hughes and Trudgill 1987, 8).

The expansion of the British Empire during the 19th century led to it becoming the world's strongest economy. This, in turn, instilled the British with great confidence and a sense of moral responsibility to spread their culture and civilisation globally, a concept often referred to as the "white man's burden." (O'Driscoll 2009, 27).

The twentieth century witnessed the decline of British colonial supremacy. However, political, economic, military, and cultural influence continued to advance through deliberate and coordinated efforts aimed at the promotion of English, as outlined in Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism. In the 1930s, the British Council was established in order to "consider a scheme for furthering the teaching of English abroad and to promote thereby a wider knowledge and understanding of British culture generally" (Nicholson 1955, 10).

The cultural politics of languages during the Cold War was also a Cold War politics (Kayman, 2004, 10). Reports from that era, as highlighted by Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (2017), clearly delineate the ideological and market-related aspirations underlying the efforts of the British Council to provide educational support aimed at maintaining Britain's economic and political sway in both Europe and its former colonies. The British were not alone in their endeavour. These efforts were largely supported by a significant and powerful ally, the USA, whose language development strategies have predominantly been influenced by geopolitical factors (Kayman 2004, 10). Phillipson (2003, 74) cites the director of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington DC in 1977 who stated that the process of creating American hegemony was significantly aided by substantial government and private fund expenditures between 1950 and 1970 for the expansion and promotion of the English language. This was considered to be the largest expenditure up to that point related to the dissemination of a language.

Although it appears that the Cold War politics shifted the focus to pursuing political and economic influence through the spread of the English language, the aspiration for the English language to be a promoter of culture was not abandoned. Those aiding the promotion of English and related teacher training and curriculum development in Third World countries understood that language and culture are closely interconnected: "Naturally, when people learn English, for whatever purpose and by whatever method, they acquire something of the flavour of our culture, our institutions, our ways of thinking and communicating" (quoted in Phillipson, 1992: 11).

It remains to be determined whether and to what extent English has truly managed to detach itself from the intentions of its promoters and global power dynamics and become a culture-neutral and beneficial means of communication encompassing various English varieties. Recent developments in the field of language pedagogy bring to light whether English varieties have been successfully integrated into their regional contexts as officially taught forms in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. At the same time, these tendencies will offer insight into the extent to which English has genuinely disassociated itself from its inherent connections with its original British culture in practical terms. The analysis of the pedagogical approaches, content, aims, and outcomes can help us determine whether English, when learned in an international context, should disassociate from its historical ties, cultural connotations, and influences rooted in British culture. Culture and Contemporary Language Pedagogy

In language pedagogy driven by the language varieties theory, the prevailing belief is that EFL learners often do not require an awareness of culture-specific language, particularly because the cross-cultural aspect of English among non-native speakers often omits both the native speaker and their associated cultural distinctiveness. Furthermore, it becomes unreasonable to include a cultural

studies dimension focused on British history, society, culture, and institutions when teaching English as a foreign language. (Modiano 2001, 161–2.). McKay (2003, 18) agrees that considering cultural diversity, imitating Western cultural models within the classroom and in teaching materials becomes unnecessary and unproductive. The concept of “appropriate methodology” advocates for a language pedagogy that is suitable on a global level and easily adoptable locally, i.e., a “pedagogy of global appropriacy and local appropriation”, which will in its essence represent multilingual and multicultural exchange (Kramsch and Sullivan 1996, 199).

One of the indicators of the extent to which these pedagogical principles have been embraced and incorporated into language teaching practice after several decades of theoretical considerations is the existence of official documents, two major frameworks for teaching, learning, and assessing foreign language skills: the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) published by the Council of Europe, and the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Language’s Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (ACTFL). The CEFR was formulated to offer a foundation for creating language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, teaching and learning resources, and proficiency evaluation in foreign languages. The latest version of 2020 includes descriptors for mediation, online interaction, plurilingual/pluricultural competence, and sign language competences. Its emphasis on plurilingualism along with pluriculturalism is notable. However, the practical feasibility of this approach depends on the methods of implementation, which are mostly left to teachers and learners themselves. The overall conclusion is that language-specific cultures have not been marginalized although there is a shift towards “facilitating pluricultural space” between linguistically and culturally different interlocutors in order to enhance communication (CEFR 2020).

Arnes (2010) highlighted several points related to the concept of culture in contemporary language pedagogy, as reflected in the ACTFL: learning culture involves learning the pragmatics of identity formation within the target language culture, rather than focusing solely on language, facts, institutions, or objects; it underlines individual agency rather than assimilation or acculturation; a curriculum aims to provide clear guidance on acquiring cultural literacy that extends beyond language. It also enables users to incorporate elements of the language-specific culture into their own culture while remaining aware of the implications of this incorporation. The learner’s ability to compare the meanings and cultural significance of patterns within both their own culture and the target language’s culture should be developed.

Interpreting the standards outlined in the CEFR and ACTFL in this manner leads us to the intercultural approach, with its central objective being the promotion of “the favorable development of the learner’s entire personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and

culture” (CEFR 2001, 1). Inspired by Bourdieu’s definition of culture as a field, Arnes (2010, 322) considers that a language curriculum can evolve into a culture-focused curriculum, encompassing not only the language resources of a “native speaker” but also interconnected cultural literacies. These literacies encompass historical knowledge, traditions, and the pragmatic patterns employed by individuals in a particular context to shape and express their identities and negotiate with infrastructure, the community, and established historical norms.

General experience of communication as an interaction should be captured in language learning approaches aimed at enabling learners to interpret and exchange meaning across cultures. Raising learners’ awareness of local cultural contexts within English teaching can indeed lead to the acceptance of other cultures, representing a crucial step in the process of acquiring intercultural competence (Ošmjanski and Beko 2018, 167). Scarino (2010, 326) explains that the first language provides a reference point for understanding the meanings made in the target language, while the world is interpreted through the learners’ cumulative experience within their own language and culture. When learning a language, students are simultaneously engaged in two languages with the possibility of moving back and forth between these two languages and their associated worlds of meaning. Consequently, they acquire the ability to shift their perspective away from their own social, linguistic, and cultural context, leading to a changed perception of themselves in relation to others (Scarino 2010, 326).

Contemporary language pedagogy emphasizes the necessity of teaching both language and culture, rather than advocating for the assimilation of learners into the culture of the target language. One possible approach to achieve this goal is to prioritize teaching individuals how to navigate cultural knowledge within particular local contexts, timeframes, and communities. Rather than presenting grammar paradigms as simple patterns, we should emphasize their function in serving the community, where they are manifested in context-specific social and cultural demands (Arens 2010). Focus on function also requires a shift towards evaluation of communicative effectiveness rather than the adherence to grammar rules and forms (Ošmjanski 2016, 150). In this way, according to the provisions of the CEFR, a learner becomes “acteur social”, an individual actively engaged in social contexts where language use is a key component.

Conclusions

Traditionally, language instruction has always included a cultural aspect embodied in knowledge ranging from literature to everyday aspects of life in the target language country. The purpose of including cultural elements in English language instruction can be examined from different angles, with Phillipson’s theory of linguistic imperialism on one extreme and pluricentric theory on the

other extreme of the spectrum. However, there is a common recognition among various approaches or perspectives that students' understanding of the target language is enhanced through language instruction containing a cultural component. Where recent theories and approaches disagree is the issue of whose culture it is. While in traditional approaches learning about the target language culture was closely connected to the language and disconnected from the learners' own native culture, the intercultural approach as described in the CEFR advocates for a shift in perspective – the achievement of intercultural competence which involves students engaging with the target language culture to question and reshape their own identities and values. In this way, students will come to understand culture as “the contextual framework that people use to exchange meaning in communication with others and through which they understand their social world” (Scarino 2010, 324).

When it comes to the English language, its global reach cannot be disputed, as well as a growing perception of it as a neutral, natural, and beneficial means of communication. The implied reasoning is as follows: it came naturally as it intertwined with the globalization processes; it is thought to be neutral once it disconnected from its original cultural contexts; it is seen as beneficial as English is used for international communication assumed to occur on equal terms (Pennycook (2017, 9). Once it becomes an international language, English or any other language acquiring that status is no longer used to express the cultural norms and values of native speakers, but rather those of the local context. Those acquiring a global language are not required to adopt the cultural conventions of native speakers of that language, as well as the ownership of a global language becomes detached from specific national identities. Lastly, the educational objective of mastering English as a global language is to enable learners to effectively express their ideas and cultural perspectives to others (Smith 1976, 15)

Yet, tendencies to divorce language from its culture are doomed to failure, even in the case of English used as an international means of communication. Reducing it to a mere container for information is not beneficial for educational outcomes, as outlined in the two principal reference documents for foreign language learning, the CEFR and ACTFL.

A joint literacy of English and its culture will not foster individual acculturation but contribute to the development of intercultural competences where learners from different backgrounds will bring their own negotiations with British culture, and that is exactly where pluriculturalism comes into play. The issue of interconnectedness of English and British culture might have been masked by the pluricentric nature of English, embodied in the existence of varieties on the one hand, and the idea of culture-neutral *lingua franca* on the other hand. Displacement of culture in global English abolishes the very idea of English varieties having the shared cultural core, which in turn, according to Wierzbicka

(2006), renders meaningless the existence of all varieties of English. The most recent developments in language pedagogy advocate for reuniting language and culture in language instruction without exception, including the English language and its core culture, as integral to the process of facilitating plurilingualism and pluriculturalism.

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Koliko je engleski jezik britanski: kultura i savremeni pristup učenju jezika

Cilj rada je da ispita u kojoj meri je moguće odvojiti engleski jezik kao funkcionalno internacionalno sredstvo komunikacije od konteksta i asocijacija vezanih za britansku kulturu. Polazeći od analize odnosa jezika i kulture iz antropološke i lingvističke perspektive, u radu se razmatra spona britanske kulture i engleskog jezika u kontekstu njegove diversifikacije u mnoštvo varijeteta i postizanja statusa međunarodnog sredstva komunikacije bez kulturnih obeležja. Razmatramo opravdanost tvrdnji da sticanjem statusa *lingua franca* engleski jezik ne izražava kulturne norme i vrednosti izvornih govornika, već lokalnog konteksta, dok vlasništvo nad globalnim jezikom postaje odvojeno od konkretnih nacionalnih identiteta. Upoređivanjem tradicionalnog pedagoškog pristupa upoznavanju sa kulturom ciljnog jezika i savremenog interkulturalnog pristupa zagovaramo promenu perspektive – postizanje interkulturalne kompetencije koja uključuje učenike u interakciju sa kulturom ciljnog jezika kako bi ispitali i oblikovali sopstveni identitet i vrednosti. Zaključak je da svodenje engleskog jezika na puko sredstvo komunikacije lišeno kulturnih obeležja ne doprinosi ostvarivanju obrazovnih ciljeva i ishoda predstavljenih u dva referentna dokumenta za učenje stranih jezika, Zajedničkom evropskom referentnom okviru za jezike i Američkim standardima za učenje stranih jezika. Cilj istovremenog postizanja jezičkih kompetencija i upoznavanja sa izvornom britanskom kulturom neće podstaći neželjenu akulturaciju učenika, već doprineti razvoju interkulturalne kompetencije uz pomoć koje će učenici različitog porekla na sopstveni način vršiti pregovaranje značenja u različitim kulturnim kontekstima.

Ključne reči: britanska kultura, engleski jezik, internacionalni engleski, interkulturalna kompetencija, varijeteti engleskog jezika, plurilingvizam, plurikulturalnost

*Comment l'anglais est devenu britannique:
la culture et l'approche contemporaine de l'apprentissage de la langue*

L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner dans quelle mesure il est possible de séparer l'anglais comme un moyen de communication international fonctionnel du contexte et des associations liées à la culture britannique. En prenant comme point de départ l'analyse du rapport de la langue et de la culture dans une perspective anthropologique et linguistique, dans cet article est étudié le lien entre la culture britannique et l'anglais dans le contexte de sa diversification en une multitude de variétés et de l'acquisition du statut de moyen de communication international sans marques culturelles. Nous discutons la légitimité des affirmations que par l'acquisition du statut de *lingua franca* l'anglais n'exprime pas les normes et les valeurs culturelles des locuteurs natifs, mais celles du contexte local, alors que la propriété sur la langue globale devient séparée des identités nationales concrètes. Par la comparaison entre l'approche pédagogique traditionnelle de familiarisation avec la culture de la langue cible et celle de l'approche interculturelle contemporaine, nous plaçons pour un changement de perspective – à savoir l'acquisition de la compétence interculturelle qui inclut les élèves dans l'interaction avec la culture de la langue cible afin qu'ils examinent et forment leur propre identité et leurs valeurs. La conclusion est que la réduction de l'anglais à un simple moyen de communication privé de marques culturelles ne contribue pas à la réalisation des objectifs et des résultats éducatifs présentés dans deux documents de référence pour l'apprentissage des langues étrangères, le Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues et les Standards américains pour l'apprentissage des langues étrangères. L'objectif de l'acquisition simultanée des compétences linguistiques et de la familiarisation avec la culture britannique authentique ne vont pas stimuler une acculturation non souhaitée des élèves, mais contribuer au développement de la compétence interculturelle à l'aide de laquelle les élèves de différentes origines vont à leur propre manière effectuer la négociation des significations dans différents contextes culturels.

Mots clés: culture britannique, l'anglais, l'anglais international, compétence interculturelle, variétés de l'anglais, plurilinguisme, pluriculturalité

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