




English As a Vehicle for Communication: Commerce and Civilisation

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Abstract

Many years of experience and numerous studies attest to the fact that English has long been associated with business and international commerce. Most informed scholars and interested observers would acknowledge the major role the English language plays in the communication process between peoples, companies and societies across the world.

Keywords: English, Globalization, Commerce, Culture, Knowledge Economy

Introduction

Many years of experience and numerous studies attest to the fact that English has long been associated with business and international commerce. Most informed scholars and interested observers would acknowledge the major role the English language plays in the communication process between peoples, companies and societies across the world.

Examining this central part played by the English language in international commerce can take a number of forms; for the purposes of this discussion, I have chosen to focus on the relationship between the English language and its relationship with scientific research and economic development as key pillars of our shared civilisation.

In the modern and post-modern eras, few would disagree with the assertion that the defining feature of our times is the rise of technology and its role in providing both the means and much of the momentum for the process of globalisation.

Accumulation of Wealth and the Application of Technology

The investment of capital is a necessary preliminary in the process of the creation of wealth. Even a cursory examination of the features of the industrial revolution features some exploration of the role of technology. For a broader account of this process, I wish to

turn to the work of Francis Fukuyama in his well-known book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Chapter 8 of this book is titled "Accumulation Without End" and in there Fukuyama reminds the reader is treated to a succinct exposition of how technology and the rational organization of labour form the foundation for industrialization. This process has also acted as a catalyst for greater urbanization, the creation of an organized bureaucracy, the softening of family structures and tribal loyalties and greater levels of education (Fukuyama, 1992, p.89).

Countries have been brought into the modern era with powerful momentum due to industrialisation. A defining feature of this phenomenon is its continuously evolving nature where obsolescence quickly envelopes less recent ideas and devices as their successors command immediate attention and consumption. This reflects what Hegel referred to as the "system of needs" which evolve as those needs also change. Early examples of industrialization featured textile manufacturing in England and porcelain production in France. Before long these were overtaken by iron, steel and chemical producing and the railroads necessary to transport raw materials and consumer goods which were also complimented by the shipbuilding industry and other kinds of heavy manufacturing. With the availability of such manufacturing capacity, new markets were created as this situation pertained to the Britain, France, Germany and the United States by the First World War followed by the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe by the onset of 1950s. Further developments with the passage of time have ensured that this stage of development has been superseded by what is now characterised as being the era of "high mass consumption" which is part of "technetronic era" within the "information age" together forming a "post-industrial society." Taken cumulatively, the effect has been an enormously greater role has been given to creation of information and the accumulation of technical knowledge and the service industry to the major detriment of heavy manufacturing industries (Fukuyama, 1992, p.91).

While it can be claimed that the creation of greater levels of technical knowledge is a positive development, there are disadvantages to encouraging one set of sectors over another. Fukuyama alerts us to the effects of this imbalance where he remarks:

The higher "information" content of modern economic production is reflected in the rise of the service sector-professionals, managers, office workers, people involved in trade, marketing, and finance, as well as government workers and health care providers-at the expense of "traditional" manufacturing occupations (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 92)

As we can see from this quote, Fukuyama identifies an important issue that dates back to at least the 1970s and has become all the more acute today: the problem of a large deficit in manufacturing capacity in the Western world, particularly in the United States of America. In a concerted effort to reduce costs and raise profits, a whole range of Western multinational corporations (MNCs) closed or severally downsized their manufacturing facilities in Europe and North American and shifted production to the far east and a south

east Asia. China was one of the primary beneficiaries of this repivoting of production. As nationalist sentiment has risen across the Western world, strong protectionism tendencies have permeated political campaigns and has now become part of the official economic narrative in the U.S. and other industrialised nations. This poses problems for advocates for barrier-free international commerce.

Promotion of Harmonious Cultural and Commercial Exchanges

At this point, we realise that barriers to trade can be a serious impediment to commerce. However, we should also acknowledge that there are some devices – both practical and conceptual – that can bestow meaningful advantages on those of who possess them. The primary consideration in this respect is language, which is itself an essential cultural tool. As we shall see, there is a very strong body of evidence to attest to the fact that English is widely seen and used as a lingua franca for cultural and commercial purposes across the world.

But, what evidence is there to support such a claim? Quite a number of studies have produced undeniable evidence of the fundamental role played by the English language in commerce and the intellectual and scientific sectors of societies and the international economy. For instance, research by Chin Kim (2019) has clearly demonstrated the enormous utility of the English language by noting: ‘...It is spoken in every part of the world and in all social ranks, from Africa to (the) Americas, from academicians to airline pilots, from barristers to bazaar merchants’ (Kim, 2019, p.128). Similarly, the overwhelming presence of English in higher education is very strong according to the work of Barbara Seidlhofer (2012) who observes that, depending on the discipline in question, English is the medium of writing for more than 90% of periodicals. She also remarks on the fact that such is the hegemonic position of English in the production of scientific knowledge that even what is regarded as ‘international’ is now heavily associated with being ‘Anglo-American’ to such a heavy extent that increasingly influential bibliographic evaluation systems measured through citation indexes are generally only regarded as ‘international’ if written in the English language. Allied to this situation is the implication that what is not written in English is not regarded as fully scientific and this in turn creates colossal pressure to publish in English if researcher wish to attain career advancement (Seidlhofer, 2012, pp. 393-94).

Furthermore, other researchers have attested to the fact that English is not restricted to specific countries but it is used within international organizations, in this case commercial enterprises on a large scale, where it has the status of English as a mother tongue (EMT) by native English speaking employees and in the form of English as a lingua franca (ELF) by those whose native tongue is another language. This pragmatic reality is supported by the decision of certain corporate entities such as German company Siemens AG to adopt English as its corporate language. Bernhard Welscke, head of policy at the

Federation of German companies has remarked that: “German companies are very pragmatic. They value a single language for business, even if it is not their own” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, pp.106-108).

The New Impetus for Technology: Artificial Intelligence

We have mentioned the advent of English as a lingua franca and its importance for the international business world. However, the ecology of language means we cannot ignore the context in which it operates and when it comes to current modern scientific research and business panorama, the increasingly powerful and prominent role played by Artificial Intelligence is now an unavoidable and integral part of the modern economy.

AI had seen incremental growth from its earliest inceptions in the 1940s and 50s. The onset on the Covid pandemic injected a renewed impetus into research seeking more efficient applications for big data. This data serves as the raw material for the further refinement of algorithms on which AI is dependent and thus bestowing higher efficiencies on computing systems. Given that there has been a considerable improvement in the cost efficiencies involved in scaling up computational power, data can now be processed at much greater velocities and scales. These two key developments have transformed artificial intelligence from a dream to a reality and have also made such systems commercially sound.

Such is the scale of the paradigm shift brought about by AI, it has been referred to as being the central part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, more specifically conceived of as the Intelligence Revolution. The original industrial revolution brought about extraordinary increases in people’s mechanical abilities, the Intelligence Revolution is responsible for creating conditions whereby humankind’s intelligence will see an enormous augmentation in its own capacity (Kaplan, 2022, p.2).

Educated industry opinion holds that it makes little material difference where exactly AI falls within the Fourth Industrial Revolution since the net effect of its presence will still stimulate significant development in all areas. Views from the management bodies of top of companies leave little doubt as to this reality particularly as can be seen by Google CEO Sundar Pichai who has stated that AI should be regarded as one of the ‘essential breakthroughs on which human civilization is currently working that will be more impactful than the discovery of fire and electricity’ (Kaplan, 2022, pp.2-3).

However, there is also an awareness of the acute dangers that AI can pose. Three principal dangers in this respect are manipulation, citizen surveillance and artificially generated frustration designed to depress voter turnout. In practical terms, AI-boosted media is a powerful tool that can be used effectively to influence voters’ behaviour. Specially designed algorithms ensure that social media can analyse users’ preferences and provide content that matches their tastes consistent with their online preferences. For example, if one likes images of pets, your browsing history will reflect this predilection

and it will be duly recorded for future use (Kaplan, 2022, p. 25).

Besides manipulation and supervision, AI-stimulated behaviour poses an additional danger to democracy as it can cause the proliferation of artificially generated images which may not reflect the truth and this causes citizens to develop serious doubts about the entire democratic system. This in turn causes electoral participation to suffer and consequential trust in political institutions will decline further (Kaplan, 2022, p. 26).

Whatever reaction these realities ultimately cause, ignoring them will not arrest their advancement. Engagement and responsibility are the best way forward as Pierre Lévy notes in his insightful 2005 article 'Collective Intelligence, a Civilisation: Towards a Method of Positive Interpretation'. Lévy cautions that:

No reference, authority, dogma or certitude will remain unchallenged by the future which awaits us. We are now discovering that reality is a collective creation. We are all in the process of thinking within the same network. This has always been the case, but Cyberspace renders it so evident that it can no longer be ignored. Now is the time of responsibility.

Such power, freedom and responsibility can only oblige us to be audacious in creating new paths to the future. In one sense, nothing will ever change. As always, we will be born, suffer, love, weave beautiful and meaningful patterns together, and then we will grow old and die. However, in another sense, we are now in the position to invent a new human reality, just as at the end of the Neolithic period mankind evolved by inventing agriculture, the town, the state and writing. (...) (Lévy, 2005, p.191).

It is evident from Lévy's observations that AI represents a fundamental shift in the evolution of commerce and civilization. At this point in our discussion, it would be fruitful to explore some broad understandings as to what civilization actually means.

Civilization: Mediating Culture and Commerce

In his seminal work, *The Class of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996), Samuel P. Huntington asserted that:

Civilization and culture both refer to the overall way of life of a people, and a civilization is a culture writ large. They both involve the "values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance" (Huntington, 1996, p.41).

The concept of civilization is thus complex and profound. It is a broad term which encompasses entities such as villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, each of which have their own distinct cultures. A civilization then, is heavily characterized by being the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity possessed by people. Its function is reflected by shared objective elements including language, history, religion as well as institutions (Huntington, 1996, p.43).

Acknowledging the broad and permeable nature of civilization, Huntington further

opined that:

(...) Civilizations have no clear-cut boundaries and no precise beginnings and endings. People can and do redefine their identities and, as a result, the composition and shapes of civilizations change over time. The cultures of peoples interact and overlap. The extent to which the cultures of civilizations resemble or differ from each other also varies considerably. Civilizations are nonetheless meaningful entities, and while the lines between them are seldom sharp, they are real. (...) (Huntington, 1996, p.43).

Meaningful entities they are most certainly – cultures are real and many of us could not imagine life without being part of one. Since human nature contains many fundamental aspects, this means that there are inevitably common features across cultures and in turn the civilizations which they form part of. Identifying and labelling all the features of a civilization is a challenging task. We can, however, take some guidance from Richard Swedberg (2010) who has postulated that a civilization is said to be comprised of five main elements, namely: *religion, politics, the economy, art and science*. Swedberg is cognizant of the role played by the economy in a civilization which he links to the Protestant (Work) Ethic and the inspiration it has provided for the nature of Western civilization. He notes that after the Reformation religion was no longer regarded as the primary justification and objective of human life. Instead, a paradigm shift took place which resulted in the formation of the view that engaging in work for financial compensation and participating in profit-generating enterprises could be seen – and has since firmly become entrenched – as a legitimate ambition and acceptable conduct in life (Swedberg, 2010, p.23). Thus, we can say that a civilization ‘can be defined as a cultural order, with symbolic boundaries, to which individuals orient their actions’ (Swedberg, 2010, p.28). In practical terms, the reference to a particular cultural order relates mainly to the language we speak and the economic system that pertains to the community or country we live in.

A Civilized Knowledge Economy?

So, if we are to be able to make reasonable choices in respect of how we spend our money on this or some other product or service, we need access to information, and this can be sourced through the media in the form of advertising or by searching online. Investors expect a return on their money as much as shareholders do and so little is left to chance in how potential customers are attracted or indeed in respect of retaining existing clients. One of the most instructive and clearest examples of an open economy where such forces are permitted to function largely unregulated, is that of the United States of America. Few greater examples of the application the knowledge economy is to be found. Thus, we can rapidly begin to notice the materialization of the art and science elements of Swedberg’s example above when we examine remarks made by Francis Fukuyama a

decade after the first publication of his *The End of History and the Last Man*, when writing in 2002 in his compelling analysis of the effects on biotechnology on the human race in his book *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. In this work, Fukuyama instantiates remarks made by Thomas Jefferson who offered praise but also prudence on the role of science as the first pangs of the knowledge economy began to materialize. Jefferson affirmed that: *'The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.'* That being the case, Fukuyama also observes that political equality that forms an integral part of the U. S. Declaration of Independence is dependent upon the existence of human equality. While each person can be very different to the next person within and across cultures, we do share a common humanity which permits each person to have the capacity to enter into dialogue with and create a moral relationship with other people in the world. The moral hazard that arises with the greater possibilities afforded by the mesmerizing results of biotechnology is that, while in the past people were born with limited abilities and had to invent appropriate tools and apparel to assist them, *'what will become of political rights once the ability to breed people with saddles on their backs, and other with boots and spurs?'* (Fukuyama, 2002: 10). Such a situation brings the five elements of civilization mentioned above into direct conflict. The question then arises: *what should we do about it?*

Civilization through Dialogue

Realizing the full potential of our common humanity must necessarily involve creating meaningful conditions for genuine dialogue with societies and across cultures. The absence of these conditions is harmful to the long-term health and prosperity of such communities of peoples. The ability to engage in cross-cultural dialogue returns to the issue of a lingua franca, in this case, as we have been discussing, English as a lingua franca. Where agreement can be found to use a common language – English has now been established as that language – greater efficiencies of communications can be achieved. Looking at the work of Charles Taylor in his chapter 'Language and Society' in Honneth and Joas's (1991) book titled 'Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's *The Theory of Communicative Action*, we find Taylor remarks that if we wish to understand a society properly, we must refer to its structures of discourse. From this perspective, Taylor notes that language arises and perpetuates itself through its use in discourse. Our ability to speak is acquired when we become part of the discourse and part of this phenomenon is how we attain new forms of expression through learning new vocabulary in the company of other people. However, this can only happen in the context of the presence of a common language. Ultimately, he notes that *'When assuming that I have generated a new meaning I must at least impute to others the ability to understand my ideas'* (Taylor, 1991, pp. 23-

24). The need for a lingua franca is thus clearly justified under the argument set out by Taylor and inspired by Habermas's original thinking. Reaching an agreed position in terms of meaning and exchange of information and further research by means of joint-research teams and shared projects is necessarily dependent on such a strategy. Economies of scale also make it a commercial imperative to streamline the kinds of varieties of projects and dovetail their range according to specific tastes and preferences governed by particular linguistic and cultural realities.

English in International Commerce

Empirical data on the practical advantage of possessing a command of the lingua franca is to be found in many studies. For example, Thomas Ricento (2012) observes that: *'Even a cursory examination of one economic sector—the knowledge economy—reveals the ways in which knowledge of certain “world” languages, and especially English, provides a competitive advantage, but only if coupled with appropriate educational credentials'* (Ricento, 2012, p. 43). Moreover, writing in a paper about the relationship between the English language and international business, Hejazi and Gravity (2011) applied the CAGE framework, namely looking at the four dimensions of cultural, administrative, geographic and economic factors developed by Ghemawat (2001). They used these parameters to determine the relationship between the level of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) activity in countries and how language similarities effect such behaviour. Hejazi and Gravity (2011) provide an insight into how the role of English as a common language impacts FDI in comparison to other languages and also assesses the relative weight of the English language in influencing FDI related decisions (Hejazi and Gravity, 2011, p.153). A detailed breakdown of the statistics exposed in their paper reveals that countries where English is the official language represent 49.5% of GDP and 46.9% of FDI. In contrast, German-speaking countries, represent just only 9.2% of GDP and 14.3% of FDI. Furthermore, Spanish-speaking countries appear to enjoy greater balance in figures as they register just of 6% of GDP and FDI. French-speaking countries account for 10.6% of GDP and represent just over 18% of FDI. Other less-spoken languages such as Dutch account for 2.5% and 7% respectively, Italian 5.5% and 7.2% respectively and Swedish, 1.3% and 3.6%, respectively. Such statistics affirm the hypothesis that English-speaking countries are extensively involved in the global economy and the fact that they account for the largest share of FDI and GDP within OECD participating countries (Hejazi and Gravity, 2011, pp. 159-165).

Broadly speaking, we can summarize these findings in the authors' own words where they say:

The results presented here clearly indicate that countries which do have English as an official language or have better proficiencies in English are more engaged in the global economy (and) having English as an official

language or having an official language that is linguistically close to English enhances that country's multinational activities...English is in many ways the language of international business – at the country level, English abilities enhance global competitiveness (Hejazi & Gravity, 2011, p. 165).

Global competitiveness is indeed an essential asset in today's internationalized economy and only the most short-sighted officials and businesspeople alike would choose to ignore its importance. As we have seen, there is little doubt as to the fact that knowledge is the main catalyst for economic advancement and this in turn is reliant upon scientific research. Some bodies of opinion would hold that stimulating the growth of knowledge should be a human right, this stands in contrast with the generally adopted attitude that the competitive nature of science and the generation of knowledge helps to create a client base in lower income countries. This stance poses questions about agency and control (Erling & Seargeant, 2013, p. 224). Moreover, this virtually hegemonic status of English has been succinctly affirmed by one set of researchers who have observed: *'English is not just the 'language' of science but is rather the language of the richer countries at the heart of scientific production, the language of the most prestigious journals and the language of evaluation and reward systems'* (Erling and Seargeant, 2013, p.230).

At this point in our discussion little room for doubt remains as to the powerful position occupied by the English language in the international economy and the knowledge-generation industries spread across the world. However, it behoves us to recall that we must exercise caution as operating from a position of arrogance – particularly those in possession of the favoured linguistic and intellectual capital – can quickly become counterproductive. As Pierre Lévy (2005) apt notes, that simply because we are now in possession of such a vast body of knowledge that has given us the power to destroy ourselves, we cannot jettison our sense of conscience as against the freedom that such knowledge grants us. Facing the threats of armed conflict, deprivation and ecological disaster we must continue and re-double initiatives that seek to augment our collective freedom and intelligence (Lévy, 2005, p.192).

The remaining question I wish to confront before concluding my remarks is to how we can reconcile the competing interests of commerce and civilization? Must they necessarily be in conflict at all? Educated minds have tackled this issue before and one great thinker shaped his thoughts into digestible form in the England of the late 1960s in the form of historian Kenneth Clark. His well-received documentary series *Civilization: A Personal View* hit the airways a few months before humankind reached the historic and scientific milestone of the Moon landing. This series was later published in book form and I now wish to quote from a chapter titled "Heroic Materialism" in which Clark cautions that economic advancement should be a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. He opines:

Imagine an immensely speeded up movie of Manhattan Island during the last hundred years. It would look less like a work of man than like some tremendous natural upheaval. It's godless, it's brutal, it's violent – but one can't laugh it off, because in the energy, strength of will and mental grasp that have gone to make New York, materialism has transcended itself. Dorothy Wordsworth said about the view of London from Westminster bridge that 'it was like one of Nature's own grand spectacles'. Well, nature is violent and brutal, and there's nothing we can do about it. But New York, after all, was made by men. It took almost the same time to reach its present condition as it did to complete the Gothic cathedrals. At which point a very obvious reflection crosses one's mind: that the cathedrals were built to the glory of God, New York was built to the glory of mammon – money, gain the new god of the nineteenth century. So many of the same human ingredients have gone into its construction that at a distance it does look rather like a celestial city. At a distance. Come closer and it's not so good. Lots of squalor, and, in the luxury, something parasitical. One sees why heroic materialism is still linked with an uneasy conscience. (...) (Clark, 2018, p. 263).

Clark's reference to an 'uneasy conscience' is a timely and important warning to remain alert to the social and cultural ills of excessive wealth concentration and the abuse of its fruits. Surely being civilised demands that we treat others with respect and help those less fortunate than ourselves? On these matters Clark also had some interesting remarks which were he said:

This new religion of gain had behind it a body of doctrine without which it could never have maintained its authority over the serious-minded Victorians. The first of its sacred books – printed in 1789 – was the *Essay on the Principle of Population* by a clergyman named Malthus, which demonstrated the population will always increase faster than means of subsistence. In consequence, miser and want were bound to be the lot of the majority of mankind. This depressing theory, which cannot be altogether brushed aside, even today, had been put forward in a scientific spirit. (...) (Clark, 2018, p.268).

Depressing and all as it may be, we are perfectly at liberty to criticize harmful ideas dysfunctional practices, and this may offer a way forward. This, once more, depends on the nature of the language we employ as Clark alludes to when he affirmed:

(...) For the last forty years or so, the word hypocrisy has been a sort of label attached to the nineteenth century – and with about as much reason. The

reaction against it continues; and although it is a good thing to have cleared the air, to think that this reaction has done harm bringing into discredit all professions of virtue. The very words 'pious', 'respectable', 'worthy', have become joke words, used only ironically. (Clark, 2018; p. 268).

Mass-hypocrisy is often referred to as Victorian. But in fact it dates from the very beginning of the century. Here is Blake in 1804: 'Compel the poor to live upon a crust of bread by soft mild arts. When a man looks pale with labour and abstinence, say he looks healthy and happy; and when his children sicken them die; there are enough born, even too many, and our Earth will be overrun without these arts.' Well, much as one hates the inhuman way in which the doctrines of Malthus were accepted, the terrible truth is that the rise in population did nearly ruin us. It struck a blow at civilisation such as it hadn't received since the barbarian invasions. First it produces the horrors of urban poverty and then the dismal counter measures of bureaucracy and regimentation. It must have seemed – may still seem – insoluble; yet this doesn't excuse the callousness with which prosperous people ignored the conditions of life among the poor on which to a large extent their prosperity depended, and this in spite of the many detailed and eloquent descriptions that were available to them. (...) (Clark, 1969, pp. 268-9).

Indeed, Clark was quite right to point out that we must find and deploy the appropriate vocabulary if we wish to do the right thing. After all, what right do we have to anoint ourselves with the description of 'civilised' if we are unable or even refuse to engage others in dialogue and live with courtesy and respect? Ultimately, we must make it our business to trade in more civilised terms worthy of a species that prides itself on using the label 'humanity'.

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