

Language and Power: An Insight into American English Dissemination

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Abstract—Language, intertwined with power and interests, is not an objective and transparent medium. American English, both in its creation period and in the process of its external dissemination, has been accompanied by power factors. The creation of American English is a result of the North American people revolting against the British colonial rule and pursuing the cultural independence with language as a weapon. After the American War of Independence, relying on strong economic, political and military strength, coupled with advanced technology and means of communication, American English has achieved great success in the United States and abroad, presenting powerful language hegemony. The dissemination of language depends on the exercise of power and the language dissemination also serves the exercise of power. The proper treatment of American English, the objective understanding of the nature of language dissemination, and the appropriate protection of national languages are the common responsibility and obligation of the whole human community.

Index Terms—Power, soft power, American English, dissemination.

I. INTRODUCTION

American English is a variant of English language, developed from the influence of America's social multiculturalism and its constant innovation during the almost-400-hundred-year use of English language in North America's particular geographical environment. Arriving in North America together with the early British settlers, English language gained continual development on this new land and become the language shared by all North American ethnic groups, helping build the linguistic foundation for the formation of American nation and civilization. After the American Civil War, owing to the rapid development of economic, political and military strength, America became the world's leading power in the late 19th century. The country's victory in the two world wars further helped secure its significant role in the world arena. American English, as a power tool and cultural carrier for the superpower, America, has extended its influential force and communication scope to every corner of the world.

In this paper, on the basis of analysis of the relation between language and power, the creation of American

English and its power factors and linguistic strategies during the communication process is reviewed and an insight into the nature of language communication is provided, aimed at proper treatment of the relation between the communication of American English and the development of the nation's language development in the globalization context.

II. ANALYSIS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND POWER

As B. Xin mentioned in [1] that power involves people's capacity of taking action in pursuit of their goals and interests, as well as the authority to control and dictate others and mobilize all sorts of resources. Professor Joseph Nye at Harvard University, after comparing the traditional "hard power" -- dominant strength centering on economic, military and scientific power, put forward in [2] the creative idea about "soft power". In his view, "soft power" represents the capacity of "satisfying one's desire by becoming attractive instead of using force or bribery. It originates from the attraction of a country's culture, politic notion and policy." The reason why language becomes one of a country's soft and integrated powers has actually revealed language's key counterforce on thought and culture. Wilhelm von Humboldt, German linguist & philosopher and founder of general linguistics, first raised the question about the relation between language and world view. He stressed in [3] that "every language contains a unique world view". In Humboldt's view, the difference in language is not only about the difference between sound and symbols, but also about the difference in the world view. L. R. Palmer said in [4] that "Accepting a language means a cultural commitment -- to accept a set of ways of thinking and values." It is precisely because language contains this special, irreplaceable cultural value and social function that it has always been an arena where fierce competitions for powers and interests take place. X. Shen concluded in [5] that "The most subtle, least perceivable, and therefore the most irresistible way to oppress people is to execute language control and oppression." The language control and oppression marks the establishment of ideology and cultural hegemony, and the start of ideological and cultural colonial movement.

Language and ideology stay in pair to serve power, helping construct, maintain or disintegrate social power relations. Language is influenced by the power relations among social groups and affects such power relations in turn. Language is not an objective, transparent medium, as claimed by linguists in the past, but a social practice and intervention force of social process. Instead of simply reflecting the society, language is directly involved in social affairs and relations. As the language of the world's only superpower, American

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English, whether at its creation or external communication stage, always goes hand in hand with power.

III. POWER FACTORS FOR AMERICAN ENGLISH AT ITS CREATION STAGE

American English creation process can be described as a history that North Americans used language as weapon against the colonial rule from British and seek cultural independence. American English stemmed from the British English in the 17th century, when the first Puritans arrived on *The Mayflower* ship in Plymouth, south of Massachusetts in 1620 and established their colony to introduce English language to North America. A majority of the early settlers was British, and accordingly British English dominated the American Continent. After the multi-cultural transplantation on the colony and integration of indigenous American cultures, English language in North America had gone through a great variation. People often called English in the Americas as “English in North America” or “Colonial English”.

After the Independence War, with the rise of American nationalism, Americans became more aware of the importance of language independence. For political needs, some politicians, linguists and social celebrities had written books to “demonstrate” the superiority of American English and exclude British English. In 1781, John Witherspoon, one of the signatories of the *Declaration of Independence of America*, argued in the *Pennsylvania Journal* that “The language Americans use should not imitate the Scots, otherwise they would merely become a local accent “We should be completely separated from the Kingdom of Great Britain, looking for a standard for our own pronunciation habits, rather than continuing to rely on the island residents. We need to reject the old traditional pronunciation and embrace the new.” [6] The idea of considering British English as a paradigm was definitely given up by the early American patriots, especially by Benjamin Rush, another signatory of the *Declaration*, who wrote in 1798: “The current era is the simple writing era of the United States.” [7] Rush advocated the establishment of a set of American English standards on the basis of summing up the idioms used by the most common people, equalizing all industrial languages and implementing informal usage. This desire to shape difference and the firm determination to divorce from its sovereign state, Britain, is the key to the emergence of American English. Noah Webster, in his *Dissertations on the English Language* published in 1789, clearly pointed out the reason for American English’s road to independence: The pride of the United States, as an independent country, requires it to have its own language and government system. [8] In 1828, Noah Webster published the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, marking the formal formation of American English, known by the people as the English in the U.S.A. or Americanism, an attempt to show that it is “the country’s unique way of speaking”. [9] Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* promoted the course of American history, and Americans achieved language and cultural independence on this basis. Arguably, it is “the last shot of the American war of

independence.” Webster not only contributed to the establishment and development of the standard of American English, but also saw its internal relations with power through language and knew how to use language to stimulate American people’s patriotism and national pride.

Having inherited Webster’s undertaking, American scholars helped push American English forward. The more influential person was Henry Louis Mencken, a famous American writer and journalist, who brought together the materials about American English and published *The American Language* in 1919. In this book, he strongly emphasized the difference between American English and British English and “demonstrated” that American English and British English were “different” languages. [10] With high popularity, it was known as the “American English’s Declaration of Independence.” In the second half of the 19th century, the United States rose rapidly on the world stage. At the end of World War I, it seemed to have become “young and strong” among the imperial powers. In addition to joining those invading powers in dividing the world, the United States also began to covet the top empire position, trying to bring down and replace the British Empire. Scholars like Henry Louis Mencken stressed that the concept of American English met the chauvinistic mood existing in the United States at that time, indicating the country’s true desire to replace the British Empire as the world dominator. After the World War II, with the gradual establishment of America’s hegemony worldwide, American English also received recognition in its position.

IV. POWER FACTORS FOR AMERICAN ENGLISH DURING ITS DISSEMINATION

Language popularization, part of a country’s language policy, is the strategy adopted by a country or nation to, for its own benefit, purposefully expand its national language or drive language communication, and formulate certain policies to consolidate its language position and speed up its language progress. J. Aitchison pointed out in [11] that the success or failure of a language was not strongly related to its intrinsic nature, but to the power of the language user. Since the independence war, through the country’s strong economic, political and military strength, coupled with advanced technology and means of communication, the promotion of American English has achieved great success whether on its homeland or overseas, showing a strong trend of language hegemony.

A. Local Expansion of American English

The United States set off a century-long “westward movement” shortly after the end of the Independence War. In the west, the Americans met a large number of Indian tribes speaking different languages. According to statistics, when the European colonists set foot on the American continent, it was estimated in [12] that there were thousands of Native American languages and over 300 in North America areas north from Mexico. But now, 500 years later, this figure declined sharply. Some statistics shows that about 150 Indian languages still survive in North American, but they may well die away in the near future. The exact reason is that as the United States conquered the western land by military force,

they also attacked Indian languages by claiming them as one of those belonging to barbarians and ignoring their existence, so as to establish and maintain the “language consistency” centering on American English. As John Jay asserted in [13], America must be a nation of the same language, religious belief, behavior and customs. In addition, as recorded in [14] by B. Child, in the course of the westward movement, the US government specially founded the “Indian boarding school” to separate the indigenous children from their parents and took them to the school miles away for “immersion” English education, where they were not allowed to use native languages. Consequently, such language education led to the “fracture” of indigenous languages inheritance and served as one important force driving many indigenous languages towards extinction. Different languages reflect and express the characteristics of different cultures, and are ways of different national identities. The loss of language leads to the loss of culture, and that eventually results in the demise of a nation. The disappearance of language means that the nation using that language will suffer the loss of its special cognitive approach, identity source, cultural characteristics, world views and values. It can be seen that in the process of conquering the West, American English played not only the role of communication tools, but also a powerful weapon for the US government to exercise political power, assimilate other nations and maintain unity.

One extreme event of American English’s localized expansion was the English Officialization Movement, born in early 1980s and active to this day, also known as the English-only Movement. This movement firstly achieved breakthroughs in establishing the law of English as official language successively in California, Arizona, Florida and Colorado, creating a trend to strengthen the official status of English, and then spread to other places. So far, nearly 30 states have established the law defining English as the official language. Plus the state which has already established the same law before the movement, the number adds up to 31, accounting for 62%. [15] During the founding of the United States, the founders didn’t explicitly stipulate English as the official language in the Constitution for political considerations. The English Officialization Movement failed to meet its purpose at the federal level, but succeeded immensely at the state level. Language assimilation and social functions unification become more prominent in an immigrant country like the United States, where more than 300 languages are spoken, with new immigrants flooding in to add more vitality to the related languages. On the surface, the Officialization Movement is just about language relations and policies, launched to affect the further adjustment and development of language relations and patterns, but behind the scenes, it is an attempt to highlight the language ideology of America’s social mainstream WASP culture. Excluding other languages, maintaining and protecting English language’s unique position is rooted in a long-standing monolingual culture of American society. It is the assimilation function of this language ideology that maintains English-centered language pattern in the United States and provides the source of thought and guarantee of success for this movement.

B. Overseas Expansion of American English

American English has been expanded to outside of the USA. After the WWII, when the USA became one of the superpowers, American English began to influence the whole world along with the country’s strategic expansion. The American government has always put the popularization of American English to a national-strategy level, making it effectively integrated with its political, economic and cultural macro-strategies.

Politically, the USA established the global political and economic order via the Bretton Woods System and American English accordingly became the dominant language in major international institutions. Economically, the country issued in 1947 the Marshall Plan under the name of recovering and revitalizing the European economy and formulated in 1949 the Point Four Program for improving economy and education in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These steps had not only facilitated the export of American capitals and commodity, but also made American English widely spread to those areas. Culturally, it made all efforts to propel cultural infiltration so as to build an all-round, multi-layered language communication system. First, it expanded the scope where American English works as an educational medium, including selecting and funding by means of the assistance projects the social elites from major areas of other countries to study in America, sending plenty of English volunteers to other countries for educational assistance, actively initiating education partnership with the key universities in other countries, and financially encouraging the local universities to reform their educational systems in the American way of teaching. For instance, based on the statistics by S. Li in [16], there were only 7,000 international students in the USA in 1943; the number rose to 140,000 in 1971 and 337,000 in 1983. There are no less than 150,000 Chinese students in the country at present. Second, the American academic circle controlled the education, academic research and development trends of the scientific fields and steered the mainstream ideology and development trends of the major research fields worldwide. Third, by taking advantage of different media, such as films, broadcast, TV and books, the USA brought American English and American values to all over the world. Fourth, the USA established a number of organizations for American English popularization. Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation provided great help for the education, scientific research and discipline construction of ESL and EFL. Established in 1961 by President Kennedy, Peace Corps particularly functioned as a messenger that carried forward the proper understanding of American citizens among the people in recipient countries by providing knowledge about American civilization and history in English. Peace Corps also strived to protect brotherhood between American educational organizations and their counterparts in developing countries, as introduced by C. Hagege in [17]. Such cultural infiltration supplemented and promoted the popularization of American English, and exerted positive impacts on people’s attitude to American English, and thus increased the demand for this language.

In the post-cold war era, the information revolution transferred the American economy to information economy,

transformed the American media into a super media group, and led to an unprecedentedly massive global expansion. Soft power, playing a salient role in American hegemony in that era, ultimately helped the country establish a new hegemony based on soft power by shifting focus from hard power in military, politics and economy to soft power in economy, science and culture. With this new hegemony, American English began to play a more important role in the international communication of information economy and American super media group and in the process of American-oriented cultural globalization. The established English language hegemony resultantly became a soft-power-dominated hegemony.

V. CONCLUSION

The evolution of English from an island language to lingua franca is attributed to the hard power of the UK and the US in politics, economy and military. The English language, being the cultural asset, economic factor and political tool for the two countries, can produce economic interests and intangible impacts regarding culture, values and national identity. It is one of the major elements of national soft power. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in [18] that “any language is produced by some symbol of power guaranteed by the state system”. The popularization of language depends on and also serves the execution of power. Nowadays, in the globalization context, American English as the most powerful language in the world has an increasing impact on the weak and minority languages. Nonetheless, globalization is not identified with Americanization. Sustainable development must be obtained on a dynamic and balanced basis. The diversity of world language is the foundation of the ecologically balanced development of human language, and thus it guarantees the inheritance and development of diverse human civilization. According to the French linguist Claude Hagege, “Diversity is essential in both living and non-living systems. ... the single linguistic form is a weak and weary consensus form... which identifies with the material advantages filled with illusory promises and the totally ready-made thinking models divorced from critical spirits, sober thought and creative meditation.” [19] If any other language dies out because of American English, it is a failure instead of success for English language. Without the diversity of language, human culture would disappear and the history of human civilization would be stagnant. Therefore, it is the shared responsibility and duty for human beings to treat

American English appropriately, comprehend the nature of language objectively, and protect our own national languages properly.

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