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Anna ODROWĄŻ-COATES*

English: a neutral language of global communication? Sociopedagogical implications

Angielski: neutralny język komunikacji globalnej? Implikacje socjopedagogiczne

Abstract

Introduction. English, as a language of global communication, has become an element of social status and therefore connected to the issues of inclusion and exclusion. Within privileged social groups, its position has changed from a foreign language to a second language, which demonstrates a linguistic shift with long-term consequences.

Aim. The aim is to capture the cultural and individual implications of the observed phenomenon reported in Poland and Portugal.

Materials and methods. The methodological framework is based on institutional ethnography. It is accompanied by the concept of “soft power” and “positioning theory”.

Results. The research results indicate that English can be seen as a new tool for social stratification with an effect on language policies, impacting people’s lives and their opportunities. Whilst critical of the neoliberal, neo-colonial and imperialistic dimensions of English language hegemony, the author captures an original gender perspective on English as a language of opportunity, inclusion, and empowerment.

Keywords: social structure, soft power, language, inclusion, exclusion.

* e-mail: acoates@aps.edu.pl

Katedra Pedagogiki Społecznej im. Janusza Korczaka UNESCO, Akademia Marii Grzegorzewskiej, Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Polska

UNESCO Janusz Korczak Chair in Social Pedagogy, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0002-2112-8711

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. Angielski jako język globalnej komunikacji stał się elementem statusu społecznego, tym kojarzonym z problematyką włączenia i wykluczenia. W uprzywilejowanych grupach społecznych jego pozycja zmieniła się z języka obcego na język „drugi”, co wskazuje na zmianę językową o długofalowych konsekwencjach.

Cel. Celem artykułu jest uchwycenie kulturowych i indywidualnych implikacji obserwowanego zjawiska zauważonych w Polsce i Portugalii.

Materiały i metody. Ramy metodologiczne oparto na etnografii instytucjonalnej. Metodzie tej towarzyszą koncepcje teoretyczne „miękkiej władzy” i „teorii pozycjonowania”.

Wyniki. Rezultaty badań wskazują na to, że język angielski może być widziany jako nowe narzędzie stratyfikacji społecznej, mające wpływ na politykę językową, codzienne życie ludzi i ich możliwości. Krytykując neoliberalny, neokolonialny i imperialistyczny wymiar hegemonii języka angielskiego, zastosowano oryginalną perspektywę związaną z płcią, gdzie to angielski staje się językiem możliwości, integracji i upodmiotowienia.

Słowa kluczowe: struktura społeczna, miękka władza, język, inkluzja, wykluczenie.

Background and methodology

Language and power have been explored at length by classical writers such as Michele Foucault (1972), Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990), Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992), and, most of all, Norman Fairclough (1995, 2006, 2010, 2015), and even earlier by John French and Bertram Raven (1959). In this paper, one will find the novel idea coined by Anna Odrowąż-Coates (2018b, 2019) of connecting the concept of “soft power” with the influence of the English language on social inclusion and exclusion in two European cities: Warsaw and Lisbon. The term “soft power” is adopted from political sciences, where it refers to the persuasive influence of one political entity on another without military power, but through economic and cultural influences (Nye, 2004). It carries a notion of unspoken, indirect, and perhaps even hidden (symbolic: Odrowąż-Coates, 2017a), power potentiality. In the paper, soft power is assigned to language. The empirical data identifies the English language as a second language, and as a native tongue as heavily entangled in societal mechanisms for social inclusion or exclusion. The data comes from a 2-year field research study in Poland and Portugal based on Institutional ethnography as the main method of scientific enquiry.

Institutional ethnography (Campbell, 2004; Smith, 2005, 2006) provides methodological tools and techniques to investigate social interactions that have been institutionalized whilst shaping the everyday lives of people. It relies mainly on 54 expert interviews (27 in each country), 7 in-depth mixed nationality couples’ interviews, and prolonged field observations in the context of socially produced institutions but it also includes the language landscape method (visual ethnography) and quantitative

questionnaires with 564 completed in full (Table 1). Table 1 is placed at the end of the text, before references). A good example of institutionalized social practice influencing day-to-day relations at work is the necessity to carry out daily tasks in English. Another example is the use of Internet technology, which operates primarily in English. Among institutionalized forms of interpersonal relations is the functioning of education systems, commercialization of the public sphere, and access to new mass media.

Main research questions included: who is included or excluded due to the popularity of English in public spaces of Warsaw and Lisbon/ Can knowledge of English be regarded as a growing determinant of employment opportunities and class differences? Who is the main beneficiary of this phenomenon? Three hypotheses were formed: H1 not all social groups affirm the popularity of English in public spaces, H2 knowledge of English can be a determinant of social status, opening new areas of social exclusion, H3 people who affirm the popularity of English share a similar habitus and come from privileged environments. Research findings confirmed that solid knowledge of English has become an element of social status. There is a linguistic shift amongst privileged social groups from FL (foreign language) to L2 (second language). Opinion forming groups accept it and affirm it. There are similarities in attitudes towards English amongst particular social groups. English has the power to include or exclude. There were also some unexpected gender outcomes pointing to the empowering properties of English acquisition for women at work and in their relationships. Full research results can be found in Odrowąż-Coates (2019), enriched by later investigation into the position of English in higher education in Poland (Odrowąż-Coates, 2020).

The concept of “soft power of language”

The results of the presented study indicate that English, as a language of European integration and communication, has become an element of social status. In privileged social groups, its position has changed from a foreign language to a second language, which demonstrates a linguistic shift with long-term consequences for socio-educational inequalities and the reproduction of the societal structures. There is a dialectical argument to critically examine the cultural and individual implications of this phenomenon in the context of field studies in Poland and Portugal. As mentioned in the introduction, the methodology used for this investigation is institutional ethnography with a combination of theoretical constructs, including “soft power” and “positioning theory”, examining evidence of English as a new tool for social stratification and its effect on language policies, impacting people’s lives and their opportunities. Whilst critical of the neoliberal, neo-colonial, and imperialistic dimensions of the English

language hegemony, the study captured an original gender perspective on English as a language of opportunity, inclusion, and empowerment. It focused primarily on discourses that are shown to be products of, and the makers of, the material aspects of language. Using an ethical imperative not only to question, but also to participate in, the existing power structures in order to change the power dynamic. It becomes noticeable that language choices are not necessarily ours but are institutionally driven. This institutional drive can be explained by the soft power of language.

The theoretical underpinning uses the idea of soft power, the term coined by Joseph Nye (2004), which is a theoretical concept established to study the influence of political entities on one another. The study aims to demonstrate how soft power may be linked to language, which is connected to social norms, to Bourdieu's (1999) power to judge, and finally to Raymond Boudon's positional theory (1974), dedicated to self-positioning and positioning by others. His initial concepts on positioning were progressed by Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove (1999) as a relational phenomenon based on appropriate situational narration and redefined by Harré (2012, p. 193) as a "cluster of short-term disputable rights, obligations and duties" that place a person in a certain "position" in every social situation. Self-positioning and the positioning of the English language was analysed by Odrowąż-Coates (2019) using positional theory by Boudon (1974), Harré (2012), and Harré and Van Langenhove (1999), showing the changing status and therefore social positioning of English language in Poland and Portugal. This can be observed in the increasing popularity of choosing English as the second or foreign language in European schools, becoming a prerequisite of entering higher education, and being increasingly important in professional communication and science (Odrowąż-Coates, 2017b, 2018a, 2020).

Research results¹

Liquidized concepts of language boundaries (cultural and physical), and the renegotiation of language and cultural order in the capital cities of Poland and Portugal, were found. A language shift or an English-weighted linguistic turn has been observed in both cases and critically assessed in terms of redefined social positioning and language positioning, showing both opportunities and barriers for social participation, access, and inclusion. As part of the study process, participants were given a choice of the language in which they wished to interact with the researcher, who was a Polish female academic. This revealed interesting language practices, confirming that both the researcher's ethnicity and the first language of the participants had an impact on the language choices by the interviewees.

¹ This is a re-worked excerpt from the book Odrowąż-Coates (2019).

People with excellent English language skills may be considered the beneficiaries of the global economic system. They may be viewed as global market celebrities, free to work and live where they wish. It was observed that for some, English initially taught as a foreign language has become a second language in certain circumstances. In Poland and in Portugal, English is usually taught at school as a foreign language. However, in modern times, due to the constant and omnipresent exposure to English outside of the educational system, its position has been shifting from a foreign language to a second language. This was confirmed by participant interview language choices. A clear distinction can be made between the FL and L2 status of English, when one uses it every day and is surrounded by it. This was the case for the corporate employees that work and think in English every day as their companies' operations dictate the need for an English-speaking working environment.

Many native Polish or Portuguese people raised the issue that they were unable to switch English off in their heads and that it was functioning inside them even outside of work. This is not surprising. Omnipresent in public spaces, commerce promotes English adverts and slogans, considering the use of English to be trendy. Immersion continues through the music industry, film industry, internationalized mass media, the use of IT, and due to frequent visits by foreign visitors, attracted to capital cities as tourists. There are also exchange students or employees, researchers, business partners, artists, art consumers, and immigrant labourers.

Mixed language marriages often use English at home as a primary communication tool, even if it is not the first language for either of the couple. Being surrounded by the English language shifts the status of English from a foreign language (FL) to a second language (L2). This is especially true for many people living and working in Warsaw, and in Lisbon. There is a notion coherent with the issue of inclusion and exclusion that this language shift from FL to L2 does not happen to everybody, but only to a certain "privileged" social stratum.

Many questions emerge: will English bring us closer and should we strive for this opportunity, or should we attempt to burst the language dominance bubble? Does the shifting of symbolic and physical boundaries demean us? What do we lose when we gain fluency in another language? Can it be weighed on a scale to make rational decisions about the winners and the losers? Do we use and control the language or does the language use and control us? Finally, are we the language that we speak? Following the Freirean tradition, the dialectical relationship between the opposing empowering and disempowering dimensions of learning English is very much in evidence in this study. It is far from materialistic reductionism based on separate alternatives, but works as a form of dialectical synthesis of tensions and exchanges amongst ideals (ideologies) and their material representations.

Building on Raevyn Connell's (2013) concept of gender-based violence due to privilege, and violence due to deprivation, the idea emerges based on symbolic violence and English language acquisition. The privileged were subjected to the soft power of the second language, its standards and cultural influence, which may be labelled as symbolic violence due to privilege. The 'excluded' were subjected to the soft power of exclusion from the most popular second language in Europe, which may be labelled as symbolic violence through relative deprivation. Therefore, Connell's (2013) concept of privilege-based violence and deprivation-based violence finds a new area of meaning, the symbolic violence expressed by the soft power of a second language. This symbolic violence resonated in the negative views of English language popularity amongst respondents who were excluded from the privilege of knowing English. It was possible to distinguish two categories of interlocutors in this group, as people self-eliminated from learning English, and those who felt somehow disadvantaged due to a lack of English language skills. How does this interplay with the concept of cultural (linguistic) colonization through language?

Cultural hegemony is achieved by setting up institutionalized means of transmitting: "values, life-styles, cultural orientation..." states Carl Boggs (1984, p. 161), who noticed that to transform popular perceptions in a desired direction and to colonize people's minds, the hegemonic impressions should be incorporated into the structure of social relations and traditions. Moreover, it is the well-educated classes who aid such hegemonic transition and impose their deeply rooted worldviews on the wider public through their own favourable positions of power (Boggs, 1984). To act as counter hegemonic agents, the elites would be required to reject their own coherent worldview, which was instilled in their unconscious through years of education, rationalization, the will for participation, and eminent social privileges. The notion of "gate keeping" amongst native speakers of English can also not be ignored. They may be considered to have opportunities not possessed by non-native speakers and the chance of first-class global citizenship, leaving others behind. There is a second, aspiring class of ambitious, rationally programmed others, who want to achieve the same status and privileges as those gained by native speakers of English, in a global context. They seek to join the "gate keepers" and move the socio-linguistic boundary towards ESL and EFL. This language hierarchy race, based on English language skills was apparent throughout the investigation.

It was confirmed that English as a language of European integration and communication, is becoming increasingly important as an element of social status. Moreover, in privileged social groups, its status changes from a foreign language (FL) to a second language (L2), which may be considered a linguistic shift with serious long-term consequences. Based on the empirical data, the growing popularity of English in the public space of both capitals is apparent. There is also an acceptance and affirmation

of this phenomenon among opinion-forming groups and economic, social, and educational elites. There are similarities in attitudes towards English amongst particular social groups. In an environment with a lower social status, there are two prevailing attitudes. The first is self-eliminating, with a negative attitude towards the growing popularity of English, and the second is an awareness of a deprivation in terms of access to education, the labour market or information. This group recognizes the importance of English for life opportunities, but they do not possess the resources needed to gain inclusion. In groups with a privileged social status, the obviousness of English as a required educational standard led to the framing of this work with the Foucauldian perspective of governmentality and post-colonialism.

Conclusion

In the globalized, capitalist economy that both Poland and Portugal participate in, English maintains socially reproduced and socially assigned value and is positioned at the top of the language hierarchy. This privileged status fuels its potential to legitimize social inclusion or exclusion and other social hierarchies. Paradoxically, distortion of this power structure relies on its enabling capability. The empowerment comes from the linguistic shift experienced by individuals when their status is transformed from FL to SL users. As discussed, this language shift is not an innocent tool of empowerment; it comes at a price. This price is symbolic and is unconsciously paid by the users of ESL through the means of governmentality. It also has a visible representation, expressed by colonization through cultural and technological dominance, with explicit potential for enforcing subordination and linguistically controlled social exclusion.

We often depend on information delivered in English, produced by English speaking centres of knowledge production. Information from non-native entities may lack in some intercultural subtleties difficult to capture and to translate. It is interesting to consider how much may be lost, omitted, or misinterpreted in this exchange. Whilst native speakers of English are predestined to be independent from other language powers, non-native speakers must rely on what and how it is taught and therefore given to them from the language source (nations whose native tongue is English). This creates a situation of dependency and inequality from the start. Moreover, the age at which a second or foreign language acquisition takes place creates two-fold inequality. On one hand, those who start learning it at a very early age, in the majority gain fluency and come the closest to the native linguistic ideal. Simultaneously, in the context of socialization, early bilingualism has an impact on the personal worldview, and on the identity, of the user. This effect is considerably weaker when the second language is acquired later in life. Perhaps resistance to embrace the elements of an English-speaking culture combats the

dangers of adhering to governmentality and the trap of indiscernible colonization through language. The critical and suspicious attitudes towards the social realm we live in discovered during this research, should be viewed as obligation for critical pedagogues, in order to understand power mechanisms and tools of the reproduction of social order. One should be constantly, uncomfortably, aware of their own privilege to delegitimize curtailed influence of complicity in the linguistic power distribution.

Table 1

Research methodology

Mixed Methods of Field Research
Tools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaire forms • Visual aids (Photographs, newspapers, magazines) • Expert Interviews • In vivo interviews with couples • Observations
Samples:
<p><u>Quantitative methods:</u> Purposive, snowball sample of 564 valid questionnaires (2000 distributed) 440 in Poland (out of 900) and 130 in Portugal (out of 1100)</p> <p><u>Qualitative methods:</u> Purposive sample of experts: n = 54 (27 in each country) Purposive sample of mixed nationality couples: N = 7 (PL: 4, PT: 3)</p>
Key Questions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is included or excluded due to the popularity of English in the public spaces of Warsaw and Lisbon and how? • Can knowledge of English be regarded as a growing determinant of class differences? • Who is the main beneficiary?
Preliminary Hypothesis:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [H1] not all social groups affirm the popularity of English in public spaces • [H2] knowledge of English can be determinant of social status, opening new areas of social exclusion • [H3] people who affirm the popularity of English in public spaces share similar habitus and come from privileged environments
Summary of Research Findings:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English is an element of social status • A linguistic shift is privileged social groups: from (FL) to (L2) • Acceptance and affirmation among opinion-forming groups • Similarities in attitudes towards English amongst particular social groups • English language has a power to include and to exclude • Unexpected gender outcomes

Source: Own research; Odroważ-Coates (2019, p. 15).

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