

INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CO-EVOLUTION OF A GLOBALLY SHARED LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the prospects for the co-evolution of a Globally Shared Language (GSL). It presents the new phrase GSL in the context of the well-known phrase International Auxiliary Language (IAL). The paper emphasizes that GSL co-evolution is unrelated to constructed IAL proposals such as Esperanto. A key concept in the paper is that information and communication technologies (ICT) now make possible, for the first time in human history, a linguistic process that formerly was virtually impossible. It discusses the roles of the One Laptop Per child Program (OLPC), Basic English (BE), World Englishes (WE), language preservation and multilingualism. Finally, the paper suggests that the GSL concept can restructure existing academic frameworks regarding language education.

INTRODUCTION

In the decades since Marshall McLuhan popularized the concept of 'the global village' (1964), new technologies have steadily expanded and reinforced communicative links between the world's peoples. Despite these advances, no globally shared language permits universal communication on equal terms. Recently, however, remarkable reductions in computing costs and rapid technological convergence have fostered powerful new online social networks, including virtual reality locales. Such networks make the co-evolution of a globally shared language (GSL) a compelling concept for the 21st century.

GSL co-evolution significantly updates and refines the International Auxiliary Language (IAL) concept (Wikipedia, 2009). GSL refers to a co-evolving language constructed of and from existing natural scaffolding languages, and used on equal terms by all the peoples of the world. Everyone helps to co-evolve

the GSL, learning it alongside native languages and regional auxiliary languages. In contrast to constructed IALs such as Esperanto, well known but peripheral to modern linguistics, GSL co-evolution is an unexplored and potentially seminal idea.

Co-evolution refers to a cooperative and collaborative process that ideally includes all of the nearly 7,000 documented world tongues. GSL co-evolution consciously embraces multilingualism and language preservation (Britten, 2009). Linguists and educators are well placed to facilitate GSL co-evolution.

A simple visualization suggests the process: one can imagine the co-evolving GSL as a translucent, hemispheric dome above a circular plane containing all world languages. These languages are the scaffolding from which the dome expands and evolves. The well-known and expanding role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and the large

population of World Englishes users, makes Englishes the most plausible central scaffolding component and nexus for linguistic mixing.

Other dominant regional *linguae francae* are primary scaffolding components surrounding the Englishes. By no means, however, does this visual metaphor imply a permanent dominance for any of the major languages. The GSL matrix, containing and including all languages, synergistically becomes far more than the sum of its parts, encouraging linguistic adaptation and innovation.

Toward the periphery of the dome are a myriad of minority and endangered languages. Marginalized, mutually incomprehensible, and threatened by expanding major tongues, the peripheral languages nevertheless contribute to the GSL once speakers are connected by any mutually acceptable *lingua franca*. In many instances this might be Basic English (BE) or one of its variants.

Proposed nearly 80 years ago by linguist Charles Kay Ogden (Ogden, 1930), BE is alive and well. (Basic English Institute, 2009). A recent variation on Ogden's work, Basic Global English (BGE), might serve as alternative scaffolding (Basic Global English, 2009). Another English-based contender is the much-publicized Globish (Globish, 2009). Linguists can help to initiate GSL co-evolution by choosing and using one of the BE contenders.

To appreciate the BE role, one can imagine narrow BE scaffolding components that span the GSL dome, passing through the center. Speakers of !Kung in Africa, for example, might communicate via the Internet with speakers of Moklen in Thailand, initially in BE (and perhaps higher registers of English), gradually including words from their native languages and regional *linguae francae*. Low-cost hardware and software and expanding online social networks make such communication increasingly plausible. BE can thus empower minority languages and facilitate GSL

co-evolution, which would otherwise scarcely be imaginable.

Application of new pedagogical tools and techniques to accelerate BE education, a longstanding goal of the World Language Process, (WLP, 2009) makes GSL co-evolution even more feasible. This is particularly so if the One Laptop Per Child Program (OLPC, 2009) is used to help teach BE, to preserve marginal languages, and to connect speakers of diverse marginalized languages via built-in 'meshware' (Britten, 2009). Speakers of various minority languages may thus begin to co-evolve many new varieties of World Englishes (WE), which in turn can gradually mix and merge with other World Englishes, and with other world languages.

The well-established field of WE (IAWE, 2009) provides many examples of English/native language interplay. Viewed from the GSL perspective, World Englishes can be seen as important components of GSL scaffolding. World Englishes speakers, some of whom routinely engage in remarkably fluid code-switching, are superbly positioned to contribute to the GSL and would likely be among the most influential early architects.

Although GSL co-evolution will be a chaotic, bottom-up process, top-down participation -- by educators, language policy-makers, politicians, and computer hardware and software experts -- can facilitate, moderate, and perhaps accelerate the process (Britten, 2005). Linguists and educators, collaborating with ongoing projects such as OLPC, will make invaluable contributions to GSL co-evolution. Persons involved with global efforts to document and protect minority languages will be important contributors, as will speakers of endangered languages seeking to include some essential parts of themselves in the co-evolving GSL dome.

A spirit of exploration and playfulness will infuse the co-evolution process. Some rebelliousness might help, too: teenagers' tendency to use language in new ways use will make them important contributors to GSL co-evolution. Children also will have a major influence on GSL co-evolution (Britten, 2007). Poets, novelists, musicians, moviemakers and others will also make contributions.

The concept of GSL co-evolution can restructure existing academic and social frameworks of language education and policy, particularly in regard to English language education. Whether one considers English expansion negatively -- as a vehicle of socio-linguistic hegemony -- or positively -- as a beneficial force for international exchange and cooperation -- the notion of English as a GSL scaffolding component changes the discussion. English, rather than being an end, becomes a means to an endless process of unifying evolution. The GSL educational process will thus be conceptually different from any ordinary language education, and especially from the process of mastering any language as a dominant lingua franca. GSL co-evolution can lead to a fantastically rich global tongue, with fascinating grammatical, lexical, orthographic, and syntactical features.

Educators and language policy-makers can facilitate GSL co-evolution now, especially by involving children, whose role in linguistic change is protean (Lightfoot, 2006). If encouraged by teachers, and by interaction with other youngsters worldwide, children will make enduring and fascinating contributions. Interaction will include face-to face communication, Internet social network exchanges, and eventually virtual interaction in venues such as Second Life. Elements of natural play and directed, game-like educational activities will further facilitate GSL co-evolution.

Specialists in elementary education worldwide can play a crucial role in catalyzing GSL co-evolution

simply by introducing the concept of GSL co-evolution to children, in their native languages. Encouraging children to become part of a GSL co-evolution will be a powerful impetus to that process, accelerating and facilitating the co-evolution, however chaotic and erratic it may be, of a Globally Shared Language.

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