Contemporary societal perspectives on English in Europe

By Dr. Janet Enever

Introduction

The central theme of this paper is the societal presence of English in Europe, as it occurs beyond the school and educational institution setting. Whilst English is increasingly selected as a first foreign language taught in primary and secondary schools in Europe today, it is interesting to note the varied range of competency levels that are achieved by the age of 16+. Whilst some of this variety may be attributable to the quality or techniques of teaching, it seems possible that other societal factors may also have a significant impact. Some reasons for this are explored here.

Historically in Europe, from the 17th century onwards language has been employed as a means both of identifying and uniting communities and of marking out the boundaries of nation states. Thus, the construct of one language, one country has operated as a defining measure of national identity. As for additional languages, broadly speaking, the most widely spoken second or foreign languages in Europe have been French in southern parts of Europe, German towards the east and English in the northern and north-western countries of Europe (de Swaan, 2001: 147). However, increasingly during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first, English has become widespread throughout Europe, often replacing French or German. Data from the Eurobarometer 386 (2012) indicates that English is now the most widely spoken foreign language in 19 of the 25 Member States where it is not an official language (i.e. excluding the UK and Ireland). The survey data reports that 67% of Europeans say English is one of the two most useful languages for themselves. In contrast, the figures for German (17%); French (16%); Spanish (14%) and Chinese (6%) are considerably lower.

Reviewing the presence English today, the picture across Europe is more nuanced than the above data indicates. Unsurprisingly, in rural areas English is far less widely spoken than in urban areas. Following historical patterns, it also tends to be less present in parts of southern Europe than northern Europe. In the next section a brief snapshot of one or two countries is provided as an illustration how such patterns have emerged.

---

1 Professor of Language Teaching and Learning. Umeå University, Sweden.
English – from southern to northern Europe

English in Spain

Today in Spain there is a huge demand for the improvement of levels of English across society which is currently receiving a strong emphasis throughout the education system. Much of this change is in contrast to very different political perspectives held earlier in the twentieth century and to the growth of the Spanish medium film and TV industry during the latter part of the twentieth century.

The end of the Civil War in Spain marked a period of strong national focus, led by the dictatorship of General Franco. During this period minority/regional languages were perceived as low status and standard Spanish was the required medium of instruction throughout schooling. Relationships with the United States were often quite difficult. All these factors contributed to the development of a home-grown film and TV industry, further stimulated by many Latin American TV imports. Given the large Spanish-speaking audiences, it proved economically viable to dub any media imports where English was used. This pattern of dubbing, rather than the cheaper option of subtitling is maintained to this day and the resultant lack of exposure to English is considered to have had a marked effect on fluency levels in English (Sylvén 2013: 310), as compared to the experience in other parts of Europe. Added to this, a high volume of music is available in Spanish (substantially Latin American), which may have further limited young people’s exposure to the ‘global’ pop music widely prevalent in other parts of Europe.

English in Germany

In Germany, English is much more widely used than in Spain. The long history of trading links with the UK and the proximity of language distance between the two languages has no doubt contributed to this (German and English have Germanic roots). Hilgendorf (2007: 138) reports that English in Germany today is widely used for international business and increasingly for intranational communication – particularly for advertising. Pop music in English is very dominant in the chart rankings (Hilgendorf, op cit). Although foreign film and TV programmes provide limited exposure to English since these generally are dubbed, in the growing domain of internet and digital games English is now dominant and likely to continue to grow. This factor may well be contributing to an increase in the use of English in German society with many Anglicisms appearing in everyday language. The influence of computers and music on young people’s fluency in English was clearly reflected in a study by Berns et al (2007). This study of 2000 15-year olds in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France recorded the substantial social use of English with young people themselves claiming that little of their learning (of English) occurred within the classroom. Whilst the impact of such exposure is difficult to quantify it seems evident that when a language is used for social purposes the user is making a shift towards authentic usage. Nonetheless, as Sylvén (2013) reports, exposure to English is not on the scale experienced in Nordic countries today.
English in the Nordic countries

Whilst each of the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Denmark) has a distinctive historical association with English there exist today many similarities across the region in their access and use of English. Two illustrative examples are discussed here.

Finland

Exposure to English in Finland has become extensive, increasingly since the end of the Second World War. Factors contributing to the position of English in Finnish society today include: urbanization, the influence of Anglo-American culture, technological developments, together with TV and films widely available in English with Finnish subtitles. These trends are further supported by a general awareness of the need to speak an additional, international language since Finland is a small country with a language that is not widely spoken elsewhere. The extent of the spread of English is reflected in Sjöholm’s (2004: 685) assertion that English is “the dominant language in a large number of domains such as commerce, industry, sport, youth culture, tourism, and especially the language of advertising for consumer goods”. It can be said that English in Finland now holds the position of a second rather than foreign language.

Further evidence of the extensive use of English in Finnish society is highlighted in a recent national survey (Leppänen et al, 2011). This unusually large-scale study aimed to provide up-to-date, quantitative information about the status, significance and functional range of English in Finland, reporting on Finns’ use of English and their attitudes towards it. Figure 1 provides a sample of data illustrating where respondents typically came across English in their daily lives.

Figure 1: Where do Finns see/hear English? (Pitkänen-Huhta, 2012)
As shown, much exposure to English is simply a part of daily life. Figure 2 sheds further light on Finns use of English during their free time. Here, overwhelmingly, the usage centres on music and the internet – both influences which are more often described as a part of youth culture, yet here we can see that this trend now relates also the general adult population, given that the survey comprised a statistically selected random sample across adult population aged 15-79 years.

![Figure 2. Purposes for using English during free time (at least monthly) (Pitkänen-Huhta, 2012)](#)

**Sweden**

As reflected in the evidence from Finland, similarly in Sweden encounters with English are a daily occurrence. Sylvén (2013), in her study of young people using computer games finds that studies have shown that students at upper-secondary level have some kind of experience of English outside school for up to 40 hours per week in Sweden. Further data from the Eurobarometer survey (2012) confirms that 91% of Swedish people say that they are able to speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongue. Mainly, this language is English.

Accounting for the contemporary spread of English in Sweden invites a lengthy historical perspective. With the limitations of space this summary focuses on the twentieth century developments only. A key influence began in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century when mass migration to the United States occurred as a result of large-scale crop failure over a period of years. During this time approximately one fifth of the Swedish population migrated to the United States. The subsequent arrival of letters and parcels from the US, bearing stamps and labels, in English, together with inter-generational contact with relatives and friends has established a pattern of communication and continued contact with the language. From the beginning of the movie era this pattern was extended, as silent movies with captions in English proved popular with a highly literate Swedish audience. From then, the growth of the Hollywood film business led to a preference for subtitling...
rather than dubbing. This tradition was continued with the development of TV, which nowadays is often viewed by Swedish audiences who make little or no reference to subtitles in Swedish.

Today in Sweden fluency levels of English have reached a point where it can even be difficult for a foreigner to attempt any communication in Swedish. All too frequently, the native Swede will switch to English on hearing the attempts of a foreigner to speak in Swedish, such is the ease with which the population below the age of 50 or so are comfortably able to move between the two languages. Whilst this contemporary position may have its roots in migration and the early days of the media, the more recent influences include a highly successful global pop music business, a high level of digital inter-connectivity with computers in almost all homes (even in the most isolated rural areas of the country). Added to this, with economic success and stability many Swedes have become accustomed to extensive global travel opportunities, making good use of their fluency in English to facilitate this. English has become consolidated with a core position in the Swedish education system, which can now count English as a compulsory part of schooling through four generations of the Swedish population. Indeed, Hult (2012: 244) even goes so far as to propose that contemporary policy discourses characterize “Swedish and English together as Swedish languages, languages (…) crucial to Swedish society”.

Conclusion

This short summary of the contemporary position of English in European society illustrates a quite varied picture, attributable to differing historical and educational influences, language distance, the role of the media and the more recent influence of digital technologies. It seems likely that with continued growth in access to and the use of digital media, English for social purposes will maintain, or even increase its significant position in the daily lives of Europeans.

References


