

Saudi English. A Sociolinguistic View

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Abstract:

This short study sets out to tackle a few issues regarding the sociolinguistic status of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the third millennium. We analyse a few books bearing on the status of English and use our personal observations which reinforce the conclusions in the books.

The approach is sociolinguistic as it briefly addresses the issue of what is Saudi English that we define only within the framework of World Englishes outlined by Brutt-Griffler (2002) and Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008). The study also answers who the speakers are and when and where the Saudi speakers use English in KSA. We consider that the spread of English in KSA is coordinated with the sweeping process of modernisation and globalisation of KSA and the Middle East, in general.

The spread of English within the globalization process describes a philosophical paradigm called “the invisible hand”, a concept which originates in Adam Smith’s “The Wealth of Nations” (Smith, 2009). This is what we call the unintentional side of the process. Basically, the Saudi speakers learn English for climbing up the social and professional ladder, for better jobs and business opportunities, for international communication and information, thus maximising their Happiness Principle from a utilitarian point of view (Bentham, 1988).

Saudis do not learn English for its intrinsic qualities. But by learning and using English, they unwittingly contribute to its global spread and this spread is the spin-off effect of this type of human action. Apart from this, there is, of course, a lot of accurate planning regarding the teaching of English done by the respective institutions in KSA. This is the intentional side of the process. All these actions prove the high status of English in KSA, a status which helps Saudis achieve their professional goals without any loss of their identity.

Keys words: World Englishes, Saudi Arabian English, globalisation, “the invisible hand”, spin-off, Happiness Principle, sociolinguistic status of English, speakers of English in Saudi Arabia, expatriates, sociolinguistic reasons for teaching and learning of English

The present paper answers some fundamental questions regarding the sociolinguistic status and challenges of English in Saudi Arabia within the context of the 21st century. The data underpinning this research come from the conclusions of the books mentioned under ‘References’ and from my personal observations.

The approach is sociolinguistic aiming at outlining the speakers’ status and situations concerning the use of English in KSA. We consider that the spread of English in KSA marches in step with the wholesale process of modernisation and globalisation sweeping across KSA and the Middle East, in general.

The spread of English within the globalization process follows a philosophical paradigm called “the invisible hand”, a concept which harks back to Adam Smith’s “The Wealth of Nations” (Smith, 2009). This is what we call the unintentional side of the process. Apart from this, there is, of course, a lot of accurate planning regarding the teaching of English done by the respective institutions in KSA. This is the intentional side of the process.

What is Saudi English?

We define Saudi English here from the perspective of World Englishes (Brutt-Griffler, 2002 and Mesthrie and Bhatt, 2008) as we take the postmodern view that there are several Englishes rather than one English spoken across the world. Saudi English is the language spoken in Saudi Arabia with its typical phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features by the inhabitants of Saudi Arabia in their interaction with expats living in Saudi Arabia and foreigners, in general. Saudi Arabia belongs to the 14 countries that form the geopolitical unit called Middle East. Kachru et alii (2006) include the Middle East region in the Expanding Circle.

If the Inner Circle roughly comprises the countries where English is a mother tongue, the Outer Circle countries, where English struck roots during the colonial period, the countries in the Expanding Circle are those where English has developed since the 20th century. The Expanding Circle takes in many countries from South East and East Asia, Europe, South America, some African countries, and what we call the Middle East.

Even though we call this region Middle East, it may be wrong to assume a too deep similarity among all these countries, which have undergone different developments from the economic, historical and cultural point of views. Saudi Arabia has its own history within the Middle East and so has English. When the Americans struck oil in Saudi Arabia and American economic interests in the region grew visibly, the interest for English as a foreign language displayed by the Saudis got kindled up and English subsequently established itself as the mainstream language for conducting business in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. The high status of English as the language of international business has found its counterpart in the educational curriculum which seeks to promote English as an important subject (Al-Seghayer, 2011:8 and Hajailan, 2006:2))

What is the sociolinguistic status of English in Saudi Arabia?

The privileged status of English is also enshrined (Al-Seghayer, 2011:10) in “ARTICLE 50 of the Educational Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that states that students should learn at least one foreign language so that they may interact with people of other cultures for the purpose of contributing to the message of Islam and serving humanity. This sets forth the rationale for English

teaching in Saudi schools, where the learners’ ability to communicate with international language users ranks as a priority.”

This legal anchor is where all the specialists in education set out from in order to flesh out wholesale policies promoting English as a language of international communication and research and as a language of communication among the expatriates and between the expatriates and the Saudis.

Who speaks English in Saudi Arabia?

English has established itself as the language of communication between Saudis and the variegated multitude of non-Arab expatriates working for Saudi public institutions and private companies. English has become the lingua franca for almost eight million expatriates stemming from sundry countries with sundry mother tongues who work in KSA (Al-Seghayer, 2011:12).

The present day requirements of a modern Saudi economy are such that it has now become common practice for the Saudi companies especially in the private domain of hospitality, health-care and many branches of industry to seek applicants who can prove some mastery of English.

There are many bilingual boards or inscriptions which bear witness to the extent of the spread of English in Saudi public life. Advertisements run in the newspapers or on the internet or visual media may be written out in Arabic and English and they target applicants proficient in English.

Both national and international companies look for candidates who have a good command or at least some operational knowledge of English. Globalisation has reached the Middle East and this phenomenon requires capable communicators in the world language which is English. From rank and file employees to mid-level managers and further on, to top level managers, everybody is expected to be able to communicate efficiently in English if they want their business to thrive or if they aim at promotions and climbing up the social or professional ladder.

What is the Invisible Hand Theory in connection with the spread of English?

Taking the above mentioned facts into reckoning, we deem the phenomenon of the spread of English to be one abiding by the philosophical paradigm of classical liberalism called “the invisible hand” drawing upon Adam Smith’s concept from “The Wealth of Nations” (Smith, 2009) and later on,

from the Scottish Enlightenment School represented by Adam Ferguson and Dugald Stewart. The applications of this invisible hand theory run deep into economy events, game theory problems, political sciences dilemmas, sociology issues and even linguistic processes.

An invisible hand process is one in which the result we want to explain or comprehend comes about in a decentralized way, with no explicit agreement between the actors. Another important part of the theory is that the process is not intentional. The actors' goals are not coordinated and they do not coincide with the actual result, which is a spin-off of those goals. The process should be able to go on even without the actors being aware of it. That is why the process is called invisible.

Following the algorithm from the theory above, we view the spread of English as an unintentional outcome of the whole process of globalization. Saudis, exactly like other professionals from other countries aim to climb up the social or professional ladder and seek promotions, welfare, social interaction and self-development.

Here, in our demonstration, we leave out the intentional side of the process: i.e. all the specialists’ planned activity for teaching and spreading English in an intentional way, which comes as a natural desideratum following the tidal wave of Saudi professionals aiming at

promotions, better jobs, better business opportunities etc.

In other words, if we were to use Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian line of reasoning (Bentham, 1988), we would say the professionals seek to maximise their Happiness Principle. The actors of the process do not have any previous agreement. They do not want explicitly to spread English as a language; they merely strive for the aims I have mentioned.

But by doing so, i.e. learning English, using English in every possible way, communicating in English, they contribute to the spread of English unwittingly. The spread of English is the spin-off or the outcome of their learning endeavour and this will be going on without the actors' awareness and this will unfold in an invisible way.

Why is English taught in KSA?

This is the intentional side of the process: the planned teaching of English. According to Al Hajailan (2006:3), there are eleven sociolinguistic "reasons for teaching English in KSA:

- 1- English is considered the first international language used in the east and west; especially during the occupation of many countries in the world.
- 2- It is the language for the international research and most printed materials in the world.

- 3- It is the language for international aviation.
- 4- It is the language used for international trade, economy and contracts.
- 5- It is the first and official language in the United Nations.
- 6- It is the prevailing language, widely used in all countries in the world.
- 7- People need it nowadays to interact with people from other countries.
- 8- Students need it for higher studies.
- 9- Moslems need it to contact their Moslem brothers in Non-Arab speaking countries
- 10- 10.Moslems need it to inform non-Moslems about Islam.
- 11- 11.Developing countries need it to transform progress."

This is a comprehensive overview of the reasons why English is taught in KSA schools and universities. Thus English holds this dominance position in the Saudi educational system. If French used to be taught in KSA in the past alongside English, now it is English the only foreign language taught in Saudi Arabian public and private schools. English is taught in all Saudi universities as a major subject or an elective. Practically all Saudi students, irrespective of their field of study, learn English. English is employed as a language in which tuition is imparted in many faculties of science, medicine,

engineering, etc. Excellent cases in point are King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, founded in 1975, and King Abdullah University of Science and Technology founded in 2009, which teach only in English. Private universities have adopted English as a language of instruction for certain domains, too (see also Al-Seghayer, 2011:14)

Why do Saudis learn English?

It is now clear to Saudis that knowing English can help them obtain better and more varied jobs, can ease their way to deeper knowledge, can enable them to communicate with foreigners, can empower them to get scholarships abroad, can enhance their comprehension of otherness, can make their travelling plans manageable and can heighten their understanding of other cultures and peoples.

What Saudis think of English flows from their beneficial attitude towards English. They deem it as an element that paves the way for the advancement of science, technological progress, national and international business expansion, institutional modernization and also for international communication. Most of them are convinced that learning English will not change their identity and they use English as a mere tool of communication without losing their sense of national allegiance.

What is the English media presence in KSA?

The mass media in English that we can find in KSA cover the internet, printed matters and broadcasting. Saudi Arabia owns Channel 2, which is broadcast in English. It features cultural programmes, documentaries, non-Arabic motion pictures and news in English. There is a radio station that broadcasts in English and, to a lesser extent, in French. KSA brings out two English daily newspapers. Satellite broadcasting and the Internet access portals were launched in 1995. (Al-Seghayer, 2011:12).

We can conclude that English enjoys a high status in Saudi Arabia. It is the key to modernization, better job opportunities, more thriving business, more and deeper knowledge, and more information in a globalized world.

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