

## [SLIDE 1] Capital and the Hegemony of English in a Capitalist World-System

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[SLIDE 2] I will start with an anecdote. On June 27, 1615, Richard Wickham, the English East India Company's Factor at Firando in Japan, wrote to his fellow Company agent, Mr Eaton, in Macao. In his letter Wickham begs Eaton to send him, 'a pot of the best sort of chaw'. Wickham was referring to tea, and the mention of it is thought to be the first written reference to tea in the English language (Ukers, 1935: 14-15). It is now four hundred and four years almost to the day since Wickham wrote his letter, and in that time English has advanced its position to become the most sought after and dominant language in the world. I want to argue that the reasons why it has achieved this dominance are not to be found in the recent past but go back several hundred years to the birth of capitalism itself. I would like to reset our thinking about the chronology and the manner of English spread, and as part of that to ask why (and how) the dominance of particular centre forms of English in the present-day world arises and persists. My basic argument is this: that at some time in the sixteenth century a profound transformation occurred in Europe which had long-term effects for English in the world. It was a change in the mode of production from one based on bonded tribute to one based on capital. The birth of capitalism initiates an unconstrained and endless drive for capital accumulation, in which the English of England and later of the United States was able to act as a 'free rider' on capital (Olson, 1965).

[SLIDE 3] I have five points to make, [1] I will say something further about the historical transition to a capitalist mode of production. As part of this [2] I will detail the English 'free-rider' mechanism as I see this applying to capital accumulation and the circulation of capital in a capitalist world-system. [3] I will then say something about the British and American world-economies and what made them hegemonies in the world-system. [4] I will then say something about how the different realizations of English in the world – for example, local vernaculars, outer- and expanding-circle Englishes, translanguaging, ELF etc. – fit into this schema. And to conclude, [5] I will give you my take on what the future may hold for the Englishes of the centre in the remainder of this century.

To begin then, in the sixteenth century there is a change in the mode of production in Europe from one based on bonded labour and tribute to one based on free labour and the movement of capital. Commerce was separated from industry, such that by 1650 they could be carried on as distinct activities. This permitted the formation of 'a special class of merchants' (Marx & Engels, 1998 [1845/6]: 75) whose business was commerce alone, and whose interest was the movement of capital for speculative purposes.

[SLIDE 4] Mobile capital leads in Marx and Engel's words to 'the possibility of commercial communications transcending the immediate neighbourhood' (ibid). This is given a still greater boost between 1650 and 1750 through the creation of banks, national debts, paper money, speculation in stocks and shares, and the development of finance in general. This transition enables a significant speed up in processes of British capital accumulation and spread. In the longish struggle between powers for preponderance in the world-system, not only did capital begin to circulate more widely, it also began to take on a particular hue. This was *effected* by the nation that had incrementally advanced by 1763 to become the new hegemonic power: England, which had not only become the world's foremost maritime power, overtaking Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and France in the process, but over the next fifty years with the outright defeat of France in 1815, also became the foremost arbiter of capital in the world. It was in the circumstances of the English commercial, financial and military-industrial expansion of the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that the ‘court-based’ English of England was able to act as a ‘free rider’ on capital (Olson, 1965), and by means of capital’s global spread to lay the foundations or ‘footings’ for the linguistic structuration of the capitalist world-system in English (Althusser, 1996 [1965]; Hall, 1996).

**[SLIDE 5]** Point 2: free-riding. Fontaine, following Olsen (1965), describes this as ‘the action or practice of benefiting (or seeking to benefit) in some way from the effort, sacrifice, financial outlay, etc., of others, without making a similar contribution’ (cited in Fontaine, 2014: 361). In economics it often refers to profits which are made in the absence of any financial outlay, but a more everyday understanding would be the use of public services while avoiding or evading the taxes which fund those services, for example watching television without a TV license, or travelling on a train without having paid for a ticket. I propose that English has acted as a free rider on capital since the early seventeenth century and that it has done so by symbiotically attaching itself to the components of capital at no cost to itself. **[SLIDE 6]** These components are threefold: 1) investment (the raising of money), 2) trade (in commodities), and 3) the return (on the money originally invested). Marx gave this the formula  $M-C-M^1$ . M is Money, C is the Commodity, and  $M^1$  is the ‘surplus value’ accrued in the sale (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 251). If  $M-C-M^1$  is the general formula for capital in circulation, then we may propose that  $M^E-C^E-M^{1E}$  is the general formula for the ‘free riding’ of English on capital – where superscript <sup>E</sup> stands for English, since this highlights its presence at every point in the capital circuit: in investment, in commodity production and exchange, and in the financial return. Similarly, if in trading capital the free riding of English is  $M^E-C^E-M^{1E}$ , then in money-dealing or financial capital –  $M-M^1$  – where the production of increased value is unmediated by commodities – the free riding of English is  $M^E-M^{1E}$ . In these processes, English acts as a *transactional lingua franca*. In general terms, in the period from 1600 to 1850 the dominant form of this relationship was  $M^E-C^E-M^{1E}$ . After 1850, with the increased dominance of financial capital, led by the City of London, the algorithm shifted more decisively towards  $M^E-M^{1E}$  as trade in goods was overtaken by finance as the leading means of British global capital accumulation.

**[SLIDE 7]** Point 3: Britain and the United States as consecutive world hegemon. The first thing to note is that England, or Britain as it became after 1707, had an informal empire in addition to a formal empire, and these together constituted the British world-economy. By 1850, the British world-economy extended well beyond Britain’s territorial possessions, into the Americas, Africa and Asia. Informal empire in the British context refers to ports, hinterlands, territories and zones which lay outside Britain’s formal possessions, but which were from the seventeenth century directly or indirectly incorporated into British global capital networks of investment and trade. Through the seventeenth century for example, English East India Company expeditions sought opportunities to establish trading outposts in economically strategic locations, and so also to establish networks of trade. In the 1600s, factories were, for example, founded in Bantam (1602), Surat (1612), Hirado (1613), Siam (1613), Madras (1640), Bombay (1668), and Bengal (1668) as well as at a number of locations in the Persian Gulf and along the Red Sea coast. This is followed in the eighteenth century by the establishment of the British Factory at Canton in 1751 and the subjugation and colonization of India after the Indian defeat at Plassey in 1757. The nineteenth century marks the high point of the development of Britain’s informal empire as well as its more well-documented formal empire. The one constant was the movement of British capital, not only through the formal colonies in India, Africa and Asia, but also through other parts of the world, such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Japan. It is from the networks of Britain’s informal empire, and the flows of capital which sustained it, that the global spread of English from 1600 up to at least 1914 can most readily be explained: this is because it was through Britain’s drive to trade (in goods and in finance) that English

became a free rider on the movement of capital, and due to the present hegemony of the United States remains so today.

**[SLIDE 8]** The American century begins around 1919 with the defeat of Germany and the Treaty of Versailles, and is then consolidated from 1944 with the Bretton Woods currency and trade accords which after 1945 re-configured the international financial and trading system along US lines, and then was further consolidated again after 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The US world-economy has mostly been based on an informal empire rather than a formal one although in its rise to hegemonic supremacy it too has had acquisitional and colonizing tendencies (e.g. Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Panama, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea etc). The driving force of the US world-economy, as with the British world-economy, was and still is the endless accumulation of capital. **[SLIDE 9]** US capital accumulation has been unique in being characterized by *autocentrism*, which is the ‘internalization’ of US corporate practices within the organizational domains of giant business corporations and the world’s global governance institutions. Coca Cola, McDonalds, Goldman Sachs and Apple are examples of the former. The IMF, the World Bank, the WTO and the US Federal Reserve are examples of the latter. The US made the world-system in its image far more successfully than Britain ever managed to do, and this accounts for the advanced structural power of the US in economic and cultural production, in global credit (IMF, Federal Reserve) and security institutions (NATO, Asian security pacts), in military reach (air, land and sea), and in the extent of its control over the global knowledge base and the knowledge that is valued within it (i.e. technological knowledge over social knowledge; empirical knowledge over theoretical knowledge; and paywalled knowledge over free knowledge).

**[SLIDE 10]** Point 4. How do different realizations of English in the world fit into this schema? Here I am thinking of, for example, vernacular inner-circle Englishes, outer- and expanding-circle Englishes, translanguaged, translingual and superdiverse realizations of English, and of course ELF. All of these may be understood in one way or another as Englishes in different kinds of peripheries: peripheries in the centre as well as peripheries external to the centre. In addition, they can also be conceived of as ‘challenges to central norms’, to use the wording on the conference website. That is all well and good. From the perspective of global capital and the free riding of English upon it however, certain observations may be made. **[SLIDE 11]** The commodification of English suggests that language can be assigned value and also that some kinds of language can have more value than others. In this we may distinguish between the exchange value and the use value of language, and note that some kinds of language in a capitalist world-system appear as more exchangeable than other kinds of language – to draw an analogy, you can get a good deal more done with US dollars in Cambodia than you can do with the Cambodian Rial. I would argue then that when English appears to have *exchange value*, primacy is usually given to standard forms, and when it appears to have *use value* – for example, for group bonding, doing identity work, easing social fluidity, creativity, and fun – the possibility is opened up for primacy to be given to non-standard forms. Historically in the modern world-system it has been the standard form which has tended to be most closely attached to capital. This is simply because amongst all the realizations which circulate it is the standard form which is most associated with power and financial gain. In the period up to approximately 1965 standard British English was that dominant form, and in Europe and in many parts of the postcolonial world standard British English, or something closely approaching standard British English, still occupies that position. Since 1965 or so that dominant form has been standard American English, particularly in East Asia and South America. These two forms have been given added impetus and legitimacy by a billion dollar global ELT industry and by international examinations such as IELTS, TOEIC and TOEFL. It is of course an impetus which confirms the bond between circulating capital and the standard form. Economic modelling suggests that the ability to speak a national standard language increases earnings (Choi, 2002). In the circumstances of English as a global language, and the learning of a standard, it matters less whether this is really true than that people and

governments perceive it to be true. Game theory analyses of the relationship between economics and language also tend to bear this out – low income countries orient themselves to the languages of high income countries (Rubenstein, 2000; Reksulak, Shughart & Tollison, 2004: 233n). It follows from this that so long as standard forms associated with the centre continue to be bonded to a global circulating capital whose hub is the United States, then the dominant global form of English in relation to internal and external peripheries will be either that standard form or forms which are not dissimilar to it, in for example, Ireland, the UK, Canada and Australia.

**[SLIDE 12]** Point 5, and my concluding point. What does the future hold for English, or better still, for a standard English which is referenced to Anglo-American norms? From the perspective of capitalism and the American world-economy, we appear to be in the midst of a structural crisis of the historical world-system. With the rise of the BRIC nations, particularly China, the centres of world power seem more diffuse and the US-configured global system more unstable. Struggles over maintaining or increasing global shares of capital accumulation have brought second-order global economies (Europe, Canada, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea) and rising ones (Brazil, Russia, India, China) into contention with the US. The problem that the US faces is that the system established after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is proving much more costly than the government wishes to bear, and with too many nations being able to become exporters of capital in their own right in contexts where the spaces for accumulation have contracted: in these spaces the US now wants a bigger share. This is why the US is currently determined to re-define the global system more decisively in its interests, as it did with some success after 1919, 1944 and 1991. In short, it wants greater contributions to regional military defence from its allies and a permanent rebalance in trade with the rest of the world, particularly China. The advantage that it has is that despite its current travails the US retains most of its global structural power.

**[SLIDE 13]** It still has massive global edge in military-industrial production, in finance and in knowledge preponderance (most of the highest-ranked research output in the world is still mediated by English). Its oversight of the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO and the Federal Reserve is undiminished. The close parasitic/symbiotic relationship of global capital with US dollars and with English means that while this relationship persists, or until such a time as the structures of US hegemony collapse and are swept away, it seems likely that the Anglo-American standard will remain the default *lingua franca* and transcendental signified for global communication in English, and most particularly in the written form. **[SLIDE 14]**

Thank you ☺ **[SLIDE 15]** References.