

An Analysis of the Overseas Dissemination Mechanism of American English in the Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract

The overseas dissemination of American English is the result of conscious language promotion. During the colonial era, the broadcasting of American English relied on compulsory promotion and church education. During World War I, the rise of American products, personnel, technology, and mass media spread American English to all corners of the world; after World War I, English gained the status of the official language of the international system, organizations, and conferences. During World War II, the contribution of the United States in the war spread American English to all parts of the world on an unprecedented scale; after World War II, the United States led the establishment of an international security and economic system, and American English subsequently became the dominant language in the new order of international relations. During the Cold War, the United States planned and implemented many cultural strategies to promote each other with American English promotion activities. In the 1990s, the information technology revolution, the wave of globalization, and the development of global media groups made the overseas dissemination of American English faster, more effective, and deeper. American English in the post-Cold War era is an important component of American soft power and the most important tool for the export of American culture,

ideology, and values. It occupies a special position in the construction of the comprehensive strength of the United States and maintains a post-Cold War US-led international order.

Key words: Post-Cold War era; American English; Overseas dissemination; Soft power

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, there are about 6000 existing human languages, among which the spread, circulation and number of speakers of English exceed that of any other language. “English has become the most important lingua franca in the history of mankind today. It has achieved the dominance of space and time at the same time.” (Hagene & Chen, 2015, p.27) “Almost all the views you can imagine, almost all human emotions are expressed in English, and there is no other language that fully reflects the diversity of human experience.” (De Swaan, 2002, p.192) “Any educated person in the world who does not understand English will suffer the pain of want.” (Burchfield, 1985, p.15) The widespread use of English worldwide has led to the emergence of English country-specific variants, among which British English and American English are the most influential. After World War II, the United States became the world’s number one power, playing a dominant role in world politics, economy, military, culture, technology, diplomacy and other fields. Taking this advantage, American English has become the most widely used and most influential international lingua franca. According to statistics, among the approximately 450 million native English speakers,

about 70% use American English. (Niu, et al., 2001, p.95)

Generally speaking, the degree of human acceptance of a certain language depends on the degree of recognition of the civilization of the country to which the language belongs, which reflects the status of this country in the world and its overall national strength. The global dissemination of American English is the result of the conscious promotion of the language by the United States relying on its strong comprehensive national power and with the help of various means of dissemination. The spread of American English, in turn, has further strengthened the dominant position of American English, spread American values and ideologies, and maintained the dominant position of the United States in various fields. This article will review the overseas dissemination history of American English, analyze the overseas dissemination mechanism of American English in the post-Cold War era, and examine the relationship between the overseas dissemination of American English and the construction of American soft power.

2. A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF AMERICAN ENGLISH OVERSEAS DISSEMINATION

2.1 Overseas Dissemination in the Colonial Era

From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the United States successfully completed the second industrial revolution and quickly became a world power. After the victory of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States turned into a colonial empire, controlling the former Spanish colonies such as Cuba and the Philippines, occupying Pacific island countries such as Hawaii and Samoa, and forcibly promoting American English to these areas.

In addition to the colonies established by the United States around the world, American mission schools also played an important role in promoting the spread of American English overseas. Many American missionaries established mission schools in their mission areas to provide free English education to local people. These mission schools started by teaching elementary English, using the original American English textbooks, and implemented almost completely closed western-style education for students in mission schools, which greatly promoted the spread of American English.

2.2 Overseas Dissemination During and After World War I

World War I of 1914-1918 was a disaster for all mankind, but it provided the United States with a rare historical opportunity and created conditions for its development. The First World War brought American goods and American soldiers to all parts of the world on a large scale, and also spread American English to all corners of the world. The refreshing American ideas and advanced

technology made people all over the world begin to admire everything about the United States and its representatives, including American English of course.

When World War I was over, in view of the important contributions of the United States in the war, the status of English in international organizations began to change dramatically and it began to keep pace with French. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson insisted that English and French should be used together as the official languages for discussion and document drafting. The meeting finally adopted the suggestion, which was the beginning of English gaining the status of the most important official language in the international system, organizations and meetings.

More importantly, the First World War also witnessed the rise of American radio, film and other mass media. The rise of popular culture and its media had a profound influence on the spread of American English. Whether it was mass culture or mass media, language was the basis for its spread. The rise and development of mass culture and mass media in the United States after the First World War laid a solid foundation for American English as the universal language of mass culture and mass media in the world.

2.3 Overseas Dissemination During World War II and the Cold War

World War II from 1939 to 1945 completely changed the old power structure of the world and established the status of the U.S. as a superpower. During the Second World War, the United States fully mobilized its political, economic, military, technological, and human resources, and ascended to the pinnacle of power in the international system, while spreading American English to all parts of the world on an unprecedented scale. After World War II, the United States established a security and economic system led by the United States through a series of international conferences and international organizations, and American English had subsequently become the dominant language in the new order of international relations. For example, although the United Nations and its affiliated agencies had six working languages, the daily working languages of the United Nations Secretariat were limited to English and French, with English being the main language; a series of international financial and trade organizations established after the war all set English as common language.

During the Cold War from 1947 to 1991, the United States planned and implemented many cultural strategies, and carried out a peaceful evolution offensive against the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe through the Fulbright Project, the Peace Corps, Overseas Information Centers, and the Voice of America Broadcasting. In particular, the development of public diplomacy was conducive to transcending sensitive forbidden areas in international relations, enhancing the national

image of the United States, and enhancing the “mutual understanding” between the United States and the people of other countries. The cultural penetration and ideological offensive in American public diplomacy and the promotion of American English were two sides of the same coin and mutually promoted each other, and became a special tool for realizing American national interests.

With the advent of the post-Cold War era, the information revolution and globalization wave swept the world, and the global spread and expansion of American English entered a new stage. The United States has begun to adopt new mechanisms to promote American English and American culture overseas, and to strengthen the recognition of the American social system and way of life among countries around the world.

3. THE OVERSEAS DISSEMINATION METHODS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

After the Cold War, “one superpower, multiple powers” became the overall feature of the international strategic pattern. Military and political confrontation gradually gave way to economic and cultural competition, and peace and development became the world trend. In the 1990s, the information technology revolution, the wave of globalization, and the development of global media groups greatly promoted the overseas dissemination of American English. American English in the post-Cold War era is the most important tool for the export of American culture, ideology, and values. It is an important means for the United States to gain and maintain its cultural hegemony. It is an important component of American soft power, and its global spread is faster, more effective and deeper.

3.1 The Information Technology Revolution

In the 1990s, advances in the emerging fields of information and communication technology triggered a profound transformation based on information and knowledge. The information technology revolution heralded the arrival of a new era completely different from the past economic, social and cultural development. Its significance was as Joseph Nye said, “This rapid change in computer and communication technology is changing the essence of government and sovereignty; information technology has strengthened the role of non-government roles and increased the importance of soft power in foreign policy.” (Nye, Zheng, et al., 2002, p.47)

In 1993, as soon as President Clinton took office, he immediately appointed the National Information Infrastructure Advisory Committee headed by Vice President Al Gore to guide the construction of the U.S. Information Superhighway and shift the focus of scientific and technological work from military to civilian use. Since then, the Internet using American English as a

medium, invented and used by the United States, began its journey to conquer the world. By 2000, the Internet had developed into a global network connecting more than 120 million computers. The United States used almost 3/4 of all Internet sites. With the expansion of the Internet throughout the world, the Internet has begun to open up to sectors such as industry, mass media, scientific research, culture and education, and has become the main driving force for information globalization. Because the development of computer technology was originally carried out entirely by the Americans, the computer network programs designed by the United States have used English as the information exchange codes since its birth. Due to technical reasons, other languages are not compatible with American computer network systems. American English has naturally become the dominant language of the Internet. In the field of Internet, the United States is in a technologically dominant position and plays a leading role in global network communications.

Different from other traditional communication media, the Internet uses the advantages of digital communication to include voice, pictures, texts, and videos. While expanding the types of information, it also improves the speed of communication and the quality of the contents. This technological change has profoundly affected the communication methods and cultural connotations of countries around the world. Human life has entered the Internet age: people use computers and the Internet to send and receive mail, obtain and release information, work, shop, and entertain. A computer plus a network cable can allow people in any corner of the world to keep in touch with the outside world. In the era of knowledge explosion, proficiency in English, especially American English, is a prerequisite to ensure that people can obtain knowledge from the vast information resources on the Internet. As Anatoly Voronov, director of Glasnet, a Russian Internet service provider, said, “The Internet is the ultimate act of intellectual colonialism. The product comes from the United States, so we must adapt to English or stop using it.” (Crystal, 1997, pp.107-108) The more the use of the Internet, the more people will learn English, and the position of English as the dominant language of the Internet will be consolidated. The relevance of language as an important soft power factor and science and technology has never been so prominent as in the information age.

3.2 Globalization and Americanization

Since the beginning of the 20th century, with the establishment of its hegemony based on its political, military, economic, and cultural advantages, through advanced communication technology, a large amount of capital and commodity exports, and the overseas expansion of multinational companies, the United States has gradually risen to the center of globalization and made globalization gradually begin to have obvious characteristics of Americanization. “Since at least the end

of the 19th century, the United States has been exporting certain products, technologies, fashion, investment, and art forms, as well as people, systems, and ideas. All of these are strongly regarded as equivalents to the United States by Americans and non-Americans. Many of these export varieties can be broadly classified as characteristics of mass culture or consumer society. Both mass culture and consumer society have been fully developed or actively transformed by Americans on a global scale.” (Kuisel, 2000, p.511)

After the Cold War, with the advent of the information technology revolution, globalization, driven by the global economic expansion and technological innovation of the United States and using American English as the medium of communication, has developed to a new stage. Globalization has moved forward at an unprecedented speed and scale with an increasingly obvious trend of Americanization. “The Americanization of the world mainly refers to a global phenomenon caused by the spread of American popular culture centered on media products.” (Wang, 2003, pp.87-104) Richard Pells pointed out, “Americanization always means American movies, Jazz, rock music, popular magazines, bestsellers, advertisements, comic strips, theme parks, shopping malls, fast food, and TV shows. In the eyes of many foreigners, this is a culture created not for the nobility but for the common people. The voice, image, and message of this culture are so powerful and entertaining that they almost drown out competing voices in other countries.” (Pells, 2000, pp.171-172) The scope of American popular cultural products exported overseas has not only greatly expanded, but people in other countries consciously or unconsciously tend to pursue American-style lifestyles, values, and language habits when enjoying or appreciating these cultural products.

The major areas of globalization in the post-Cold War era have greatly promoted the spread of English. First of all, multinational companies are currently the dominant force in the world economy. Both the operations of multinational companies and the global sales of products have greatly promoted the breadth and depth of use of English throughout the world, especially in third world countries. The business expansion of multinational companies has established a knowledge-intensive, fluent English-speaking talent market on a global scale. Secondly, Western countries led by the United States rely on the financial system established after World War II to implement their financial operating rules throughout the world, and English has long become the universal language in the operating rules of the global financial system. In addition, technological globalization is embodied in the research and development of global resource allocation, the global management of scientific and technological activities, and the global sharing of research and development achievements. The

current technological globalization characterized by the information industry, electronic technology and the Internet is based on English. It can be said that the process of globalization is more like a process of globalization of American culture, or a process of colonization of American culture with American English as the medium of communication.

3.3 Super media Groups

Since the 1990s, under the impetus of the information technology revolution, the process of globalization has greatly accelerated and expanded to all areas of human social life. In terms of cultural globalization, it has long since been an indisputable fact that the integrated American powerful transnational super media groups have carried out an unprecedented global expansion using English as the medium, and easily dominated the global media markets. The super media groups represented by AOL-Time Warner, News Corporation, and National Broadcasting Corporation have gradually developed into cross-country and cross-industry global information industry groups, through mergers and purchases of other countries’ radio and television and other information dissemination sectors or through information technology such as satellite TV and the Internet accesses, and they can quickly spread information around the world. The expansion of the American super media groups since the 1990s has gradually established a new global media order around the world, constituted an important soft power resource of the United States, and has become an important driving force for American cultural hegemony.

At present, the four major western news agencies, namely Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, and Agence France-Presse, account for 4/5 of the world’s news releases every day; more than 90% of news spread around the world is monopolized by western countries such as the United States; 50 western media multinational companies occupy 95% of the world’s media market; the United States controls 75% of the world’s TV program production; 60-80% of the contents of the TV programs in many third world countries come from the United States; American film output only accounts for 6.7% of global film output, but it occupies more than 50% of the world’s total screening time. (Jiang, 2005, pp.93-94) What’s more, American super media groups have achieved a great integration of computers, telecommunications, audio-visual and Internet technologies; digital compression technology has greatly reduced information flow and saved transmission time; continuous breakthroughs in electronic components and declining costs have made the integrated media unparalleled in terms of information transmission flow and speed, as well as the diversity, convenience, and low cost of media playback methods. As the common language of the American media, American English has a huge global spread and can reach any corner of the world

instantly. People from all over the world can watch their favorite Hollywood movies at any time, listen to VOA radio, watch CNN's 24-hour rolling news report, browse the news and information of the "New York Times" on the Internet, and enjoy American rock music or NBA basketball games. As the current media has realized the transformation from unilateral transmission of information to interactive media, people have strengthened their use of English while accepting English through the media. The higher the proficiency in the use of English, the more American cultural elements that people accept through English. With the help of super media groups, American English has penetrated American culture into the whole world, which is an important aspect of the development of English's global influence.

With the development of globalization, when people consume American goods and services, they are also subtly affected by American English and the cultural factors such as the ideology and values that it carries. In other words, "capitalism sells not only commodities and goods. It also sells logos, sounds, images and connections. This not only fills up the room, but also rules the realm of imagination and occupies the space of imagination." (Wang & Yang, 1998, p.26)

4. THE OVERSEAS DISSEMINATION OF AMERICAN ENGLISH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN SOFT POWER IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

Power is the ability of people to take actions to pursue their own goals and interests. It is also the ability to control others and mobilize various resources. (Xin, 2003, pp.1-6.) Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University creatively put forward the concept of "soft power" on the premise of comparing the traditional "hard power", that is, the dominant power based on economic power, military power, and technological power. In his view, soft power is the ability to achieve one's desires through attraction rather than coercion or bribery. It stems from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas and policies. (Nye, Wu, & Qian, 2005, p.2) The reason why language can become one of soft powers and a comprehensive national power resource actually reflects the important reaction force of language to thinking and culture. German linguist and philosopher Wilhelm Humboldt was the first to raise the issue of the relationship between language and worldview. He believed that "every language contains a unique worldview". (Wilhelm Humboldt, 1988, p.45) The difference in languages is not only the difference in sounds and symbols, but the difference in the worldviews. Accepting a language means accepting a set of ways of thinking and values. It is precisely because languages have this special and irreplaceable cultural value and

social function that languages have always been a fierce competition for power and interests. "The most subtle, least noticeable, and therefore the most irresistible way of oppressing people is the control and oppression of language." (Shen, 1992, p.23) The control and oppression of language is the beginning of the establishment of ideological and cultural hegemony and the development of ideological and cultural colonization.

American futurist Alvin Toffler believes that power has three basic forms, namely "violence, wealth and knowledge." In the post-Cold War era, "knowledge" is the most important, and it has caused a profound change in the nature of power. Toffler believes that the advantages of the United States in the 1990s included: "language—the first great advantage that the United States currently has", "a strong scientific and technological foundation", and "the influence of the United States on global culture—a key source of American global power" (Toffler, Liu, et al., 1996) All three belong to "knowledge" power, and "knowledge" is soft power. American English, American technology and American culture were the core elements and decisive forces for the United States to maintain its dominance in the international system at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The above argument has summarized the vital role of American English in the construction of American soft power in the post-Cold War era.

American English is at the core of the global language system, and is directly connected with the use of power in the process of its overseas dissemination. After the Cold War, the construction of a new world order brought about a change in the theme of world competition, that is, from confrontation in the political and military fields to competition in the economic and cultural fields. The information revolution and the wave of globalization have caused a change in the center of gravity of U.S. hegemony—from relying mainly on political and military hegemony to gradually relying on informationized new economic and cultural hegemony. In the era of information technology revolution and globalization, American English occupies a special position in the construction of the comprehensive strength of the United States after the Cold War. As a soft power factor, American English has naturally spread American culture and values in the context of globalization, which in turn has affected the way of thinking and ideology of people in various countries, and maintained the post-Cold War international order dominated by the United States.

5. CONCLUSION

In the post-Cold War era, the widespread dissemination and great influence of American English in various fields are an important source and embodiment of American soft power. Its global dissemination mainly depends

on the information technology revolution, the wave of globalization and the development of global media groups. First of all, in the 1990s, changes in information technology profoundly affected the communication methods and cultural connotations of countries around the world, and human life entered the Internet age. The Internet that emerged in the United States has become the main driving force of information globalization, and American English has naturally become the dominant language of the Internet. Secondly, driven by the information technology revolution, globalization spread to the world at an unprecedented speed and scale, and expanded to all areas of human social life after the Cold War. The process of globalization was more like a process of American cultural colonization with American English as the medium of communication. Thirdly, since the 1990s, the powerful multinational super media groups in the United States have used English as the medium to expand globally, dominate the global media market and become an important driving force for American cultural hegemony. As the common language of American media, American English can reach any corner of the world instantly.

However, the dominant status of American English in the world needs to be objectively examined. The direction of the world's language and culture development should be diversification, not singularity. Otherwise human thought will be caught in the yoke of the dominance of English, and be enclosed in a cage of anti-evolution. French linguist Claude Hagene once pointed out: "Whether it is in the biological or non-biological world, diversity is the essence....A single language form is a weak and sluggish consensus form....What it identifies with is those material advantages full of illusory promises, and those completely ready-made thinking modes that bid farewell to critical spirit, sober contemplation, and creative meditation." (Hagene & Chen, 2015, pp.1-2) All human languages are the products of historical development and the products of various evolutionary processes. Regarding the languages and cultures of others, nations should follow the principle of mutual respect and seeking common ground while reserving differences, and learn from each other's needs and complement each other. The diversity of language and culture is not only the ideal and expectation of mankind, but also the responsibility and action of all mankind.

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