

# Linguistic Evolution – from Cave drawings to Lingua Franca *status quo* of English Language

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**Abstract:** Darwinian linguists visualize evolution of human language to be like the psycho-lingual developmental stages of infantile babbles and coos to grown-up articulations. The present discourse is a brief overview of linguistic evolutionary theories to understand how, from vocal sounds, humans have evolved to listen, speak, read and write languages. Qualitative analysis of secondary data (research pdfs and websites) was done for chronological tracing of the evolutionary stages from pre-historic vocal sound capacity, speech production, cave-images and Phoenician alphabets to linguistic groups and pidgins with a special reference to English as the lingua franca of our times. The pidgin phenotype and global popularity of English language are a consequence of its lingua-cultural identity shift from being the EFL (English as Foreign Language) to being the ELF (English as Lingua Franca) of international society. The present study observes how the shift is due to its cultural proximity and lexical flexibility.

**Keywords:** linguistic evolution, vocal sounds, speech production, lingua franca, English language.

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

Darwinian linguists believe human languages to have emerged and evolved as per human needs. The evolutionary stages resemble child's cognitive developmental stages from infantile babbles and coos to grown-up articulations. The prehistoric stone age (200,000 BP to 6500 BP) of the *Homo Neanderthals* and *Homo sapiens* was defined by their nomadic needs to hunt and survive natural atrocities; communication, hence, was mostly through vocal sounds and cave-images to inform impending dangers and natural disasters. Then came the need to settle and flourish through trade and agriculture which necessitated alphabets – the Phoenician alphabets, mostly as symbols, for record-keeping among the ancient trading cities of Phoenicia, Canaan, Lebanon, Nubia, Punt and those located in the valleys of Nile (3000 BC to 5<sup>th</sup> century). By the end of 5<sup>th</sup> century, human need has outgrown simple survival instincts to curious gazings upon Nature for higher order understanding of the natural world. For instance, the Post-classical period (6<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century) of Islamic civilization and spread of knowledge impacted lexical structures; intermingling of languages gave birth to dialects and *pidgins*. Among these *pidgins*, a few gained the status of *lingua franca*. Humans, now intellectually well equipped, ventured out for political supremacy. Early conquests and, later, colonization, and Christianization altered the very fabric of language, mostly of English language. The invention of printing press (by William Caxton, 1446), compilation of first single-language English dictionary (by Robert Cawdrey in 1604), publication of King James Bible (1611) during European Renaissance and, later, Reformation (15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century) revamped the art of written language. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution, the 20<sup>th</sup> century World Wars and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Information & Communication Technology have been instrumental in giving English a 'non-controversial' global status of *lingua franca* (Jenkins 2009) as it is seen to meet some of the present worlds' global linguistic needs.

## 2. Significance of the study :

The advancements in each of the human evolutionary stages have impacted language development, and more so in the transition of Old English to Post-modern English. The present study, thus, chronologically, informs about the evolutionary stages with special reference to English language. English language, today, is one of the many keys to information storehouses across the globe. It is today, almost, impossible to effectively function in our tech-driven 21<sup>st</sup> century society without the possession of minimum English language skills. The present study has attempted to explore the reason for it. It has endeavored to understand how language, per say, has evolved and how, in the process, English has managed to outstrip many others in evolving into an indispensable linguistic knowledge of the present world.

### 3. Methodology :

The study focuses on human linguistic evolution to answer the research questions, *when and how did human beings learn to use language? And, among many others, how did English become the globalized lingua franca of Post-modern times?*

Secondary data (research pdfs and historical data) have been qualitatively analyzed and assembled to trace linguistic evolution from pre-historic to post-modern times, with a special reference to English language.

#### Key assertions

Since human capacity for word production is an output of higher cognitive functions, materialist approach equates language evolution with human evolution. It believes that the capacity to speak and, later, write has originated in the advanced stages of human evolutionary growth; and that in the initial stages humans or the 'hominids', as the Darwinian linguists would prefer, were incapable of using their vocal system for speech production.

The following discourse is a brief overview of linguistic evolution, as perceived by the Darwinian linguists, from vocal sound production, speech formation and Phoenician alphabets to linguistic groups, pidgins and *lingua franca*, with special reference to the *lingua franca* status quo of Post-modern English.

#### Vocal sound production

Like human evolution, evolutionary linguists record our ancestors' ability to communicate to have evolved with their expanding cranial size which took place mostly among the *Homo Neanderthals* (Johansson, 2013; Dediu & Levinson, 2013) of the Upper Paleolithic Age (200,000 – 20,000 BP). Their predecessor, the *Homo erectus* who were incapable of phonemes, had "less than 1,000 cubic cm (61 cubic inches)", compared to 1,350 cubic cm endocranial capacity of modern *Homo sapiens* (Britannica, 2006). It was the *Neanderthals* who, in their attempts to identify their surrounding animate and inanimate objects, showed early signs of vocal communication. Since their primary focus was to "hunt and survive", they used sounds to identify animals, for example, "cats would be referred to as 'Meows'..." (Chandwani, 2019) and all the other animals were identified by means of same logic.

#### Speech formation

Until the early 2000s, it was widely accepted that the *Neanderthals* could only produce sounds and were incapable of spoken language. In the late 1980s, paleontological studies of "the hypoglossal canal (one of two small openings in the lower part of the skull) and a hyoid (the bone located between the base of the tongue and the larynx) from the paleoanthropological site at Kebara, Israel," suggested *Neanderthals'* vocal organs might have been similar to that of modern man. The hypothesis has further been predicated upon genetic studies of *Neanderthal* FOXP2 gene (a gene believed to control language and speech capacities) and their complex social behaviors – such as their "advanced stone tool technology, the burial of the dead, and the care of injured social group members." It is, however, unknown if their speaking capacity included the full range use of phonemes and morphemes, as in languages of modern humans. A certain 'handedness' (the ability to use one hand, instead of both, to perform activities which determines persons as right/left-handed), observed through *Neanderthal's'* "dental wear resulting from items held in the mouth for processing", suggested "lateralization (functional separation) of the brain that is fundamental to language." (Williams, 2023). However, there are studies that refute the hypothesis on the basis that although the *Neanderthals* had the aural capacity for speech and genetic mapping with enlarged endocranial system, these are not sufficient for speech production (Tattersall, 2012). Evolutionary linguistic theories are, however, unequivocal in accepting the developed capacity for speech production amongst *Neanderthals'* successive primates, the *Homo sapiens*.

#### Pictographs & Cave Symbols

Along with the ability to speak, the art of *pictographs* (pictorial representations of words ) through cave drawings as a communication means, is believed to have also developed with the *Homo sapiens* of the Mesolithic (20,000 – 8,000 BP) and Neolithic (12,000 – 6500 BP) Ages. The cave paintings of lions, bison, horses, rhinos, mammoths and giant bulls on the cavern walls in France (the caves of *Pech Merle*, *Font-de-Gaume* & *Rouffignac* in southern France) and Spain testify to "our hunter-gatherer" ancestors' sophisticated depictions of the natural world. Scientific re-visitations to these underground galleries have, however, drawn fresh insights into the signs that have always accompanied these pictographs and have missed attention of early paleontologists. These signs, rarely mentioned in the early sciences of cave art, appear often in groups, often in ones or twos and often mixed with animal images. They are more like "triangles, squares, full circles, semicircles, open angles, crosses and groups of dots" (McKie, 2012). Latest paleontological researches interpret these signs as 'symbols', they have a database of 30 'symbols' which show how our ancestral primates had evolved from realistic representation to symbolic representations of the world where truncated animal images came to represent the whole animal; for example "a wavy line, used to depict the back of a

horse”, came to represent the entire horse (Petzinger, 2016). Communication at this stage was limited to cave drawings, the alphabetic writing system was yet to appear.

### *The Phoenician Alphabets*

The 3<sup>rd</sup> century *Phoenician alphabets*, named after the Phoenician traders of Byblos, a trade city in the eastern coast of Mediterranean which corresponds to modern Lebanon, are believed to have been the first set of alphabetic writing system (Britannica, 2022). Archaeological findings record Byblos to be one of the oldest and most extensively inhabited places of the world, dated back to the Neolithic Age, and chief harbor town for wood export to Egypt. Trade reliance necessitated writing scripts where transaction records could be preserved in papyrus. Commercial and social needs possibly gave rise to the Phoenician alphabets which were originally North Semitic alphabets. This early writing system had 22 consonants (no vowels) and moved from right to left like any modern Semitic languages (e.g. Hebrew, Arabic). The trade which brought Byblos in close relation with the people of the Nile river valley, was also instrumental in spreading the Phoenician alphabets beyond the borders of Egypt. It reached Syria in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and is believed to have been, either direct or indirect, ancestor of Greek, European, Semitic and Indian alphabets, with possible exception of South Semitic scripts, e.g. Ethiopic and Sabeian. The Phoenician alphabets have thus, directly or indirectly, given rise to myriad languages across time and space which later have been clustered into linguistic groups – language members in each of these linguistic groups were seen to influence each other which altered their lexical patterns, giving rise to *pidgins* and *lingua francas* like French, Aramaic, Malay and English.

### *Formation of linguistic groups*

There are 5000 languages being spoken in the world, today (one third of it in Africa.). These 5000 languages, scholars believe, have been grouped into linguistic groups. The grouping is done on the basis of shared words, sounds and grammatical constructions. Some linguistic groups had occupied one distinct self-contained territory while few others had spread across the globe either because of trade, religion or colonization, e.g. the Indo-European & the Semitic linguistic groups.

The Indo-European Linguistic Group is the most widespread linguistic group, today, spoken by half the world population. The linguistic group is believed to have descended from the language of the nomad tribes, roaming the plain of Eastern Europe & Western Asia. In 2000 BC, these nomads had spread through Europe and had entered Asia, spreading through Iran and India. Its spread, later in history, has been because of European colonization. The Indo-European linguistic group thus ranges from Hindi & Persian to Norwegian & English (Gascoigne, 2001). The Semitic linguistic group, unlike the Indo-European, did not spread. It was rather limited to one distinct and self-contained territory – mostly the Middle East. This linguistic group has derived its languages from the nomads of Southern Arabia. Languages of the Babylonians & Assyrians to the Hebrews & Phoenicians come under the Semitic linguistic group. Aramaic (modern Arabic) was the *lingua franca* of the Middle East.

It needs mention that these linguistic groups were not racially founded. The Indo-European linguistic family had a smaller Indo-Iranian group of languages, the Aryan language which is spoken from India to Persia. The same is true for the Semitic language group.

Linguistic groups have also been formed as a result of conquests. An apt example for this process would be the “Romance languages” (“Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian”), grouped as result of the Roman conquest in 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and the “Germanic group” (English, Dutch, Flemish, German, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and Icelandic) uninfluenced by the Roman rule. These two 5<sup>th</sup> century linguistic groups exhibit the impact of Roman Empire on language divisions. Both these linguistic groups which came in close proximity in the British Isles, either due to conquest or mercenary purposes, were instrumental in shaping Old English language into English as we speak today. Languages have thus conjoined or have been divided into groups by means of “conquest, empires, trade, religion, technology or, in modern times - through global entertainment” (Gascoigne, 2001).

### *Rise of pidgins and lingua franca*

One major consequence of linguistic group formation has been the emergence of *lingua franca* which is Italian for “Frankish language”. They are never vernaculars but pidgin languages where European and non-European languages have infiltrated into each other due to trade or conquest. But all pidgin language are not *lingua franca*. A pidgin language becomes *lingua franca* only when it is being used for communication by a large population “speaking vernaculars that are mutually unintelligible” (Encyclopedia Britannica). The term, *lingua franca*, was first used for a French and Italian based pidgin, used by the Crusaders and traders of eastern Mediterranean as “simplifications of the Romance languages” (discussed earlier). Since *lingua franca* could bring together a large population with diverse vernacular, it was very popular in large empires and trade centers with various native speakers. Aramaic, in 7<sup>th</sup> century, was the *lingua franca* in Southwest Asia. Classical Latin was Europe’s *lingua franca* till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Malay was a significant *lingua*

*franca* of Southeast Asia and was being used by Arab and Chinese traders in the area much before the Europeans arrived. Though modern *lingua francas* have not been officially designated, UNO employs Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish as the six official languages.

#### *English as a lingua franca*

From being the Old English of the Anglo Saxons and, later, a part of the Indo-European linguistic group, English became the ‘non-controversial’ *lingua franca* of Post-modern times. It managed to be so because, for the first time in history, a global language was needed for multilingual societies and practical purposes by international scientists, software engineers and airline pilots, though the necessity has not always been explicitly verbalised (Jenkins, 2009). The global *lingua franca* status of English refers to both its pidgin phenotype and its usage in the Inner Circle of native English speakers and the Outer Circle of non-native English speakers (Kachru, 1985).

ELF (English as *lingua franca*) researchers have, however, taken two opposed stands – the monolithic and the pluralistic images of English - towards its growing popularity among the non-native speakers. The ‘monolithic’ image of English is often promoted in derision of the local variations, observed in Indian, Chinese or Korean English. They view EFL as ‘deficient’ (Sobkowiak, 2005; Prodromou, 2006) in being a mere intercultural ‘communication tool’ and not a typical language (Nagy, 2016). The criticism is because ELF has both a “common ground and local variations” (Jenkins, 2009). While the morpho-syntactic structure of English, used in both the Inner and Outer circles, are same, the variations are a result of code-switching, paraphrasing, localization of English phonic sounds and English translations of local idioms which are often viewed as ‘errors’ by the native English speakers.

However, supporters of a pluralistic image of EFL (Hulmbauer *et. al.*, 2008; Jenkins, 2009) recognize the benefits of being bilingual speakers in a world where English has acquired the status of either being the First or Second Language in school education systems across the globe (mostly in the Post-colonial nations). This has shifted its *lingua-cultural* identity from being the EFL (English as Foreign Language) to being the ELF (English as *Lingua Franca*) of the global society. The shift is due to its cultural proximity and lexical flexibility.

Cultural proximity of English language has been the consequence of prolonged colonization and Western modernization which made English easily available as a common alternative in Post-colonial multilingual societies of the Outer Circle. With British colonization and America, gaining world dominance after World War II, English gained prominence in the global linguistic forum. While British colonization created a socio-economic necessity among the colonized to learn English, America’s world politics created political necessity to know English. The consequent infiltration of oriental and occidental words into modern English gave the language a creole phenotype. English seized to be just a foreign language because the infiltration was on both ends. English words found their way into native tongues and *vice versa*. This further took place in regions where English was making inroads into native education and administrative structures. For example, in Indian multilingual administrative structure, English is an ‘associative language’ which accompanies Hindi in the national level for official purposes and gazette notifications. In State school education system, English is the second language or L2 (though its L2 status has been considerably challenged in the National Policy of Education, 2022).

Technology, inventions and innovations, mostly by American companies, have further polarized and popularized global use of English language. English, today, has cultural, economic and knowledge utilities. Encyclopedia Britannica, Wikipedia, World History, the leading world news channels, English translations and other information and entertainment storehouses, being in English, are able to access global consumers. International policies for global trade, finance, organizations, committees, sports and entertainment boards are framed and communicated in English. Digital tools for online information and entertainment, engineered in English and popularized by COVID-19 pandemic, have further reinforced its global *lingua franca status quo*.

In this context, it needs mention that English, though, like its predecessors, has gained the *lingua franca* status by conquer and trade, it has managed to retain its *status quo* because of its syntactic flexibility for linguistic creation, alteration and accommodation. It has been able to create and alter, within its structures, English words as well as appropriate non-English words, as per communication needs. The inherent linguistic flexibility has allowed English to meet the global need for interethnic, interregional and international communications.

#### **4. Conclusion :**

The paper, thus, elaborates on the Darwinian evolution of human language to the stage in history where English emerges to be the *lingua franca*. The evolutionary linguistic theories visualize evolution of human language to be almost like the psycho-lingual stages of development of infantile babbles and coos to grown-up articulations. The chronological tracing, in the present study, hence, starts from the point of vocal sound capacity of the Neanderthals, speech production and cave paintings by *Homo sapiens*, the Phoenician alphabets as the first set of written symbols ever developed by mankind, and meanders through the various linguistic groups and intercultural communications to finally zero in on the

lingua franca status of modern English. The pidgin phenotype and global popularity of English has, however, not just been a consequence of trade and conquests. It's much criticized lingua franca *status quo* is also because of its cultural proximity and lexical flexibility. As for the former, prolonged British colonization and post-war American world dominance have allowed English to make itself readily available as a common alternative to multilingual cultures in Kachru's Outer Circle as well as a popular means for global participation. Its lexical flexibility has allowed English to evolve with time as well as to be appropriated by cultures across globe to meet the Post-modern global need of a common language for intercultural communications.

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