

The American embrace of global English since 1945

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Various theories exist about why English is today the leading global language of travel, commerce, and science, from those that frame it as a form of linguistic imperialism to others that emphasize bottom-up demand for a lingua franca. Historians of the twentieth century have recently stressed that English, despite initially spreading outside Europe through British imperial expansion, attained global preeminence only after the waning of British Empire, suggesting the importance of post-1945 U.S. influence to this history. However, from an empirical and archival perspective, American involvement in the field remains surprisingly understudied.

This talk draws on my recent research to explore the American embrace of global English in the mid- to late twentieth century, and its relationship to U.S. global power. From producing textbooks and radio broadcasts to designing teacher-training programs to administering courses for allied military personnel, Washington and powerful American foundations committed to reinforcing the role of English around the world during the Cold War. The talk will address the intertwined strategic, developmentalist, and market-based justifications that American policy elites offered for this support. It will also consider how the rise of global English has benefitted the United States, and in what ways it might be said to have disadvantaged the country.