Introduction

Language is an unquestionable prerequisite for human communication. Language is an “indispensable and universal component of the cultural system of all societies” (Barber 1982:3). As such language is an intrinsic element of sociology (cf. Hertzler 1965; Mesthrie et al. 2000), indeed an excellent exemplar of Durkheim’s “social representations” (Durkheim 1938). This paper will explore briefly the importance of language study to sociology. In the course of this discussion, we will also explore the claims of some who believe the dominance of English as an international language is only transitory. We will then turn to this paper’s principal focus, which is to examine English as an international language (or perhaps the international language). We will focus especially on the attitudes about English as an international language of non-English language speaking peoples and of peoples who speak English only as a second (or even third, and so on) language. Extensive empirical findings will be examined in an effort to predict the future direction of the spread of English as international language.

There is extensive literature on language and this literature has myriad foci, ranging from social, to political, to economic; even to military, and beyond. And it is easy to see that a major consideration in much of the discussion of language concerns language dominance. What makes one language become dominant over others? What drives language dominance? Certainly political and economic circumstances play a major role as one language emerges over others throughout history (see, e.g., Bailey 1985; Barber 1982; Crystal 1997; Firth 1970; Hertzler 1965; Kachru 1986). At the same time, this paper is considering the question of international language dominance in the context of globalization, a phenomenon which has changed things very distinctly from the time of the Roman Empire for instance, or even the era of British colonialism. In terms of direct communication, for example, the telephone and the internet (email in particular) have made daily
communication throughout the world a simple, straightforward, even incidental means of human communication. Such communications require language, and most often they require a common language, for convenience if for no other reason.

*English as International Language*

English is undeniably the dominant “international language,” at least at present. Indeed, Kachru (1986) pointed out that there are more non-native than native users of English in the world. According to Power (2005), non-native English speakers now outnumber native ones 3 to 1 (also see Strevens 1982; Smith 1983; and Quirk and Widdowson 1985). We will discuss later the potential for English to remain dominant. How did English get where it is today? Brumfit (1982:1; also cf. Lieberson 1982; Noss 1983; Bryson 1990; Pennycook 1994; and Crystal 2004) summarizes well the source of English’s present dominance in the following:

> English is an international language in that it is the most widespread medium of international communication, both because of the number and geographical spread of its speakers, and because of the large number of non-native speakers who use it for part at least of their international contact. The predominance of English is mainly the result of two periods of world domination by English speaking nations: British imperialism in the nineteenth century, and the economic influence of the United States in the twentieth century. The combination of political influence and technological superiority acquired through these two successive movements has given English an advantage over other major imperial languages such as French or Spanish, while the relative geographical restrictions of Russian, Chinese in its many forms or Arabic have made these languages less influential internationally.

There is a difference between English as international language and previous languages that had dominant characteristics (such as Latin (see Wright 2004)), and of course that difference arises because we are now dealing with the context of globalization. The extraordinarily widespread use of daily international communication in this context means that the dominant language at present is used on a much more universal and widespread scale than ever before.

The worldness of English, in both its global and local senses, implies relationships to the larger world and to the local context different from those of other languages. Given the dominant position of English in