

# OPENING PLENARY TALK

## **World English: How? Why? When? Where? Which? Whither?**

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It has all happened so quickly. In 1950, any notion of English as a true world language was but a dim, shadowy, theoretical possibility, surrounded by the political uncertainties of the Cold War, and lacking any clear definition or sense of direction. Fifty years on, and World English exists as a political and cultural reality. How could such a dramatic linguistic shift have taken place, in less than a lifetime? Before we can answer this question, we first need to ask just what it means to say that a language is a world language. We may then move on to ask why English has taken on this role, when and where it all happened, and what is likely to happen to the language in the future.

### **How?**

So, how does a language get to be a world language? A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. This role will be most obvious in countries where large numbers of the people speak it as a mother tongue – in the case of English, this would mean the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and several Caribbean countries. However, no language has ever been spoken by a mother-tongue majority in more than a dozen or so

countries, so mother-tongue use by itself cannot give a language world status. To achieve such a status, a language has to be taken up by other countries around the globe. They must decide to give it a special place within their communities, even though they may have few (or no) mother-tongue speakers.

There are two main ways in which this can be done. First, the language can be made the official language of a country, to be used as a medium of communication in such domains as government, the law courts, the media, and the educational system. To get on in such societies, it is essential to master the official language as early in life as possible. This role is well illustrated by English, which now has some kind of special administrative status in over 70 countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore, and Vanuatu. This is far more than the status achieved by any other language.

Second, the language can be made a priority in a country's foreign-language teaching. It becomes the language which children are most likely to be taught when they arrive in school, and the one most available to adults who – for whatever reason – never learned it, or learned it badly, in their early educational years. Over 100 countries treat English as just a foreign language; but in most of these, it is now recognized as the chief foreign language to be taught in schools.

Because of this three-pronged development – of first-language, second-language, and foreign-language speakers – it is inevitable that a world language will eventually come to be used by more people than any other



language. English has already reached this stage. If we take the countries where English has been granted special administrative status, we find that their combined population in 1996 (i.e. of people who are in theory routinely exposed to English in a country), is just passing 2 billion, which is over a third of the world's population. But of course, only a proportion of these people actually have some command of English.

Those who have learned English as a first language have been estimated at between 325 million and 400 million. The variation exists because we do not know the totals for every country – especially in such areas as West Africa, where many use a creole variety of English as a first language.

Those who have learned English as a second language have been estimated at between 150 million and 350 million. The variation here is also because local totals are often not available, and because there is uncertainty about levels of competence. In some countries (notably India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ghana, Malaysia, Philippines, and Tanzania, which have a combined total of over 1.5 billion people), even a small percentage increase in the number of speakers thought to have a reasonable (rather than a fluent) command of English would considerably expand the grand total.

Estimates for those who have learned English as a foreign language also vary enormously – as low as 100 million and as high as a billion. Here too, everything depends on just how great a command of English is considered acceptable to count as a 'speaker of English'.

If we are cautious by temperament, we will add these statistics together by choosing the lowest estimates in each category: in this way we shall end up with a grand

total of nearly 600 million people with a native or native-like command of English. If we go to the opposite extreme, and use a criterion of 'reasonable competence' rather than 'native-like fluency', we shall end up with a grand total of 1,750 million. A 'middle-of-the-road' estimate would be 1,200–1,500 million, and this is now commonly encountered.

No other language has spread around the globe so extensively. Even Chinese, found in eight different spoken languages, but unified by a common writing system, is known to only some 1,100 million. But what is impressive is not so much the grand total but the speed with which the expansion has taken place since the 1950s. Within fifty years – a mere eyeblink in the history of a language – there has been a massive change in the reach and stature of English. What happened?

### Why?

Why a language becomes a world language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are. There is the closest of links between language 'dominance and cultural power. Without a strong power-base, whether political, military, or economic, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication. Language has no independent existence, living in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it. Language exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails.

This point may seem obvious, but it needs to be made at the outset, because over the years many popular and misleading beliefs have grown up about why a language should become internationally successful. In particular, it is often thought that there must be something inherently beautiful or logical about the structure of English, in order to explain why it is now so widely used. In 1848, a reviewer in the British periodical *The Athenaeum* wrote:

In its easiness of grammatical construction, in its paucity of inflection, in its almost total disregard of the distinctions of gender excepting those of nature, in the simplicity and precision of its terminations and auxiliary verbs, not less than in the majesty, vigour and copiousness of its expression, our mother-tongue seems well adapted by *organization* to become the language of the world.

Such arguments are misconceived. Latin was once a major international language, despite its many inflectional endings and gender differences. French, too, has been such a language, despite its nouns being masculine or feminine. Ease of learning has nothing to do with it. Children of all cultures learn to talk over more or less the same period of time, regardless of the differences in the grammar of their languages.

A language does not become a global language because of its intrinsic structural properties, or because it has been a vehicle of a great literature in the past, or because it was once associated with a great culture or religion. These are all factors which can motivate someone to learn a language, of course, but none of them alone, or in combination, can ensure a language's world spread. A language becomes an international language for one chief

reason: the political power of its people – especially their military power. The explanation is the same throughout history – whether we are talking about Greeks, Romans, Spanish, Portuguese, French, or British. The history of a world language can be traced through the successful expeditions of its soldier/sailor speakers. And English has been no exception.

The concept of a lingua franca to help local communities and empires communicate is ancient indeed. But the prospect that a lingua franca might be needed for the whole world is something which has emerged strongly only in the 20th century, and since the 1950s in particular. Recall that the chief international forum for political communication – the United Nations – dates only from 1945. Never before have so many countries (over 180, in the case of some UN bodies) been represented in single meeting-places. At a more restricted level, multinational regional or political groupings have come into being, such as the Commonwealth and the European Union. The pressure to adopt a single lingua franca, to facilitate communication in such contexts, is considerable, the alternative being expensive and impracticable multi-way translation facilities.

The need for a world language is particularly appreciated by the international academic and business communities, and it is here that the adoption of a single lingua franca is most in evidence, both in lecture-rooms and board-rooms, as well as in thousands of individual contacts being made daily all over the globe. A conversation over the Internet between academic physicists in Sweden, Italy, and India is practicable only if a common language is available. A situation where a Japanese company director arranges to



meet German and Saudi Arabian contacts in a Singapore hotel to plan a multinational deal would not be impossible, if each plugged in to a three-way translation support system, but it would be infinitely more complicated than the alternative, which is for each to make use of the same language.

As these examples suggest, the growth in international contacts has been largely the result of two separate developments. The physicists would not be talking so conveniently to each other at all without the technology of modern communication. And the business contacts would be unable to meet so easily in Singapore without the technology of air transportation. The availability of both these facilities in the 20th century has, more than anything else, provided the circumstances needed for a world language to grow.

People have, in short, become more mobile, both physically and electronically. Annual airline statistics show that steadily increasing numbers are finding the motivation as well as the means to transport themselves physically around the globe, and sales of faxes, modems, and personal computers show an even greater increase in those prepared to send their ideas in words and images electronically. It is now possible, using electronic mail, to copy a message to a hundred locations all over the world virtually simultaneously. It is just as easy for me to send a message from my house in the small town of Holyhead, North Wales, to a friend in Washington as it is to get the same message to someone living just a few streets away from me. In fact, it is probably easier. That is why people so often talk, these days, of the 'global village'.

These trends would be taking place, presumably, if only a handful of countries were talking to each other. What has been so impressive about the developments which have taken place since the 1950s is that they have affected, to a greater or lesser extent, every country in the world, and that so many countries have come to be involved. There is no nation now which does not have some level of accessibility using telephone, radio, television, and air transport, though facilities such as fax, electronic mail, and the Internet are much less widely available.

The scale of the development has to be appreciated. In 1945, the United Nations began life with 51 member states. By 1956 this had risen to 80 members. But the independence movements which began at that time led to a massive increase in the number of new nations during the next decade, and this process continued steadily into the 1990s. There were over 180 member states in 1996 – nearly three times as many as there were 50 years ago.

There are no precedents in human history for what happens to languages, in such circumstances of rapid change. There has never been a time when so many nations were needing to talk to each other so much. There has never been a time when so many people wished to travel to so many places. There has never been such a strain placed on the conventional resources of translating and interpreting. Never has the need for more widespread bilingualism been greater, to ease the burden placed on the professional few. And never has there been a more urgent need for a global language.

## When and where?

'Why, then, is English the global language, and not some other?' In relation to so many of the major socio-cultural developments of the past 200 years, it can be shown that the English language has repeatedly found itself 'in the right place at the right time'. No single one of these developments could have established the language as a world leader, but together they have put it in a position of pre-eminence, and together they maintain it. I can identify ten such developments.

### 1 In politics

Most of the pre-20th-century commentators would have had no difficulty giving a single, political answer to the question 'Why world English?' They would simply have pointed to the growth of the British Empire. They would have thought it self-evident that the civilizing influence of Britain was a desirable goal, anywhere in the world, and that the English language was an essential means of achieving this end. William White, talking in 1872 about the many languages of India, comments:

As we link Calcutta with Bombay, and Bombay with Madras, and by roads, railways, and telegraphs interlace province with province, we may in process of time fuse India into unity, and the use and prevalence of our language may be the register of the progress of that unity.

The register of the progress of that unity. That is the vision which is repeatedly encountered as we trace the path of English around the British Empire: the language as a guarantor, as well as a symbol, of political unity; the language on which the sun never sets. It is a vision, moreover, which continued to prove

compelling a century later. We see it in the League of Nations, the first of many modern international alliances to allocate a special place to English in its proceedings: English was one of the two official languages (the other was French), and all documents were printed in both. We see it in the United Nations, an organization which now consists of over 50 distinct organs, programs, and specialized agencies, and where English is one of the official languages within all of these structures. We see it in those newly independent multilingual countries since the 1960s which have chosen English as their official language to enable speakers of their indigenous communities to continue communicating with each other at a national level.

The extent to which English plays an official or working role in the proceedings of major international political gatherings is often not appreciated. In 1995–6, according to the Union of International Associations' *Yearbook*, there were about 12,500 international organizations in the world. About a third use only English to carry on their affairs – a reliance especially noticeable in Asia and the Pacific, where about 90% of international bodies carry on their proceedings entirely in English. And in Europe, in 1995, according to the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages, 42% of European Union citizens claimed to be able to converse in English – well ahead of German (31%) and French (29%).

### 2 In economics

The British colonial links brought immediate access to a culture which more than any other had been responsible for the Industrial Revolution. By the beginning of the 19th century, Britain had become the world's leading industrial and trading



nation. Its population of 5 million in 1700 more than doubled by 1800, and during that century no country could equal its economic growth, with a gross national product rising, on average, at 2% a year. Most of the innovations of the industrial revolution were of British origin. By 1800, the chief growth areas, in textiles and mining, were producing a range of manufactured goods for export which led to Britain being called the 'workshop of the world'.

The linguistic consequences of this achievement were far-reaching. Those from abroad who wished to learn about the innovations would need to learn English – and learn it well – if they wished to benefit. Especially after the French Wars (1792–1815), missions of inquiry arrived in Britain from several continental countries, and foreign workers were seconded to British factories. The magnet of opportunity in Britain attracted several inventors from the Continent who subsequently became leaders in their field, such as the civil engineer Marc Isambard Brunel, the steel manufacturer William Siemens, and radio pioneer Marconi. It was not long before similar developments were taking place in America which, by the end of the century, had overtaken Britain as the world's fastest growing economy, and was attracting such European scholars as glaciologist Jean-Louis Agassiz, electrical engineer Nikola Tesla, and industrial chemist Leo Baekeland. When the American research is added to the British, it is possible to suggest that about half of the influential scientific and technological output in the period between 1750 to 1900 would have been written in English.

The nature of the Industrial Revolution would have been very different if it had

not been supported by developments which made the new knowledge widely available. In particular, steam technology revolutionized printing, generating an unprecedented mass of publications in English – technical manuals and leaflets, books of instructions, specialized and popular periodicals, advertisements, and proceedings of learned societies. Access to the new knowledge was also much helped by the growth of new transport systems, especially the steamship and the railway, and by the growth of new communication systems, especially the telegraph and telephone. In 1815, it took four days for news of the Battle of Waterloo to reach London. In 1915, news from the Gallipoli campaign in the Dardanelles was arriving by the hour.

The early 19th century had seen the rapid growth of the international banking system, especially in Germany, Britain, and the USA. The new organizations supported the fortunes of the developing industrial companies, handled government securities, and facilitated the growth of world trade and investment. In particular, the less wealthy countries of Europe, as well as the new colonies further afield, urgently needed to attract foreign investment. Firms such as Rothschilds and Morgans grew in response to these needs, and London and New York became the investment capitals of the world.

In 1914, Britain and the USA were together investing over \$10 billion abroad – three times as much as France and almost four times as much as Germany. The resulting 'economic imperialism' brought a fresh dimension to the balance of linguistic power. 'Access to knowledge' now became 'access to knowledge about how to get financial backing'. If the

metaphor 'money talks' has any meaning at all, those were the days when it was shouting loudly – and the language in which it was shouting was chiefly English.

### 3 In the press

The English language has been an important medium of the press for nearly 400 years. As early as the first decades of the 17th century, several European countries were publishing rudimentary newspapers, but censorship, taxation, wars, and other constraints allowed little growth. Progress was much greater in Britain, especially in the 19th century. This century also saw the development of a truly independent press, chiefly fostered in the USA, where there were some 400 daily newspapers by 1850, and nearly 2,000 by the turn of the century. Censorship and other restrictions continued in Continental Europe during the early decades, however, which meant that the provision of popular news in languages other than English developed much more slowly.

The high profile given to English in the popular press was reinforced by the way techniques of news gathering developed. The mid-19th century saw the growth of the major news agencies, especially following the invention of the telegraph (they were long known as 'wire services'). Paul Julius Reuter started an office in Aachen, but soon moved to London, where in 1851 he launched the agency which now bears his name. By 1870 Reuters had acquired more territorial news monopolies than any of its Continental competitors. With the emergence in 1856 of the New York Associated Press (which later developed into the Associated Press), the majority of the information being transmitted along the telegraph wires of the world was in English.

The same biases can be seen in other genres, such as academic periodicals. As a visit to any university library shows, in any country, most academic journals with an international readership are published in English. The journal *Linguistics Abstracts* reviews the content of some 160 linguistics journals worldwide: nearly 70% are published entirely in English. In the physical sciences, the figure may reach 80% or more.

### 4 In advertising

Towards the end of the 19th century, a combination of social and economic factors led to a dramatic increase in the use of advertisements in publications, especially in the more industrialized countries. Mass production had increased the flow of goods and was fostering competition; consumer purchasing power was growing; and new printing techniques were providing fresh display possibilities. English in advertising began very early on, when the weekly newspapers began to carry items about books, medicines, tea, and other domestic products. An advertising supplement appeared in the *London Gazette* in 1666, and within a century advertisements had grown both in number and in style – so much so that Dr Johnson was led to comment caustically about their 'magnificence of promise and ... eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic'. During the 19th century the advertising slogan became a feature of the medium, as did the famous 'trade name'. 'It pays to advertise' itself became a US slogan in the 1920s. American English ruled: by 1972, only three of the world's top 30 advertising agencies were not US-owned (two in Japan and one in Britain).

The media capitalized on the brevity with which a product could be conveyed to an



audience. Posters, billboards, electric displays, shop signs, and other techniques became part of the everyday scene. As international markets grew, the 'outdoor media' began to travel the world, and their prominence in virtually every town and city is now one of the most noticeable global manifestations of English language use. The English advertisements are not always more numerous, in countries where English has no special status, but they are usually the most noticeable.

### 5 In broadcasting

Marconi's system of wireless telegraphy, built in 1895, carried signals over a distance of one mile. Six years later, his signals had crossed the Atlantic Ocean; by 1918, they had reached Australia. English was the first language to be transmitted by radio, when US physicist Reginald A Fessenden broadcast music, poetry, and a short talk to Atlantic shipping from Brant Rock, USA, on Christmas Eve 1906.

Within 25 years of Marconi's first transmission, public broadcasting became a reality. The first commercial radio station was KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which broadcast its first programme in November 1920 – an account of the Harding–Cox presidential election results. By 1922, in the USA, over 500 broadcasting stations had been licensed; and by 1995, the total was around 5,000 (each for AM and for FM commercial stations). In Britain, experimental broadcasts were being made as early as 1919, and the British Broadcasting Company (later, Corporation) was established in 1922. And during the early 1920s, English-language broadcasting began in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. A similar dramatic expansion later affected public television. The world's

first high-definition service, provided by the BBC, began in London in 1936. In the USA, the National Broadcasting Company was able to provide a regular service in 1939. Within a year there were over 20 TV stations operating in the USA, and although the constraints imposed by the Second World War brought a setback, by 1995 the total number of stations had grown to over 1,500.

A more specific indication is broadcasting aimed specifically at audiences in other countries. Such programs were introduced in the 1920s, but Britain did not develop its services until the next decade. The international standing of BBC programs, especially its news broadcasts, achieved a high point during the Second World War, when they helped to raise morale in German-occupied territories. The World Service of the BBC, launched (as the Empire Service) in 1932, though much cut back in recent years, in early 1996 was still broadcasting over 1,000 hours per week to a worldwide audience of 140 million in over 40 countries – nearly a third in English. BBC English Radio produces over 100 hours of bilingual and all-English programs weekly. London Radio Services, a publicly funded radio syndicator, offers a daily international news service to over 10,000 radio stations worldwide, chiefly in English.

Although later to develop, the USA rapidly overtook Britain, becoming the leading provider of English-language services abroad. The Voice of America, the external broadcasting service of the US Information Agency, was not founded until 1942, but it came into its own during the Cold War years. By the 1980s, US output from this and other sources was amounting to nearly 2,000 hours a week.

Most other countries showed sharp increases in external broadcasting during the post-war years, and several launched English-language radio programs, such as the Soviet Union, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden. And if we list the languages in which these countries broadcast, it is noticeable that only one of these languages has a place on every list: English.

### 6 In motion pictures

The new technologies which followed the discovery of electrical power fundamentally altered the nature of home and public entertainment, and provided fresh directions for the development of the English language. The technology of the motion picture industry has many roots in Europe and America during the 19th century, with England and France providing an initial impetus to the artistic and commercial development of the cinema from 1895. However, the years preceding and during the First World War stunted the growth of a European film industry, and dominance soon passed to America, which oversaw from 1915 the emergence of the feature film, the star system, the movie mogul, and the grand studio, all based in Hollywood, California. As a result, when sound was added to the technology in the late 1920s, it was the English language which suddenly came to dominate the movie world, as it still does. It is unusual to find a blockbuster movie produced in a language other than English. In 1994, 80% of all feature films given a theatrical release were in English. By the mid-1990s, according to film critic David Robinson in an *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1995) review, the USA controlled about 85% of the world film market, with Hollywood films dominating the box offices in most countries.

### 7 In popular music

When in 1877 Thomas A Edison devised the phonograph, the first machine that could both record and reproduce sound, the first words to be recorded were 'What God hath wrought', followed by the words of the nursery-rhyme 'Mary had a little lamb'. Most of the subsequent technical developments took place in the USA. All the major recording companies in popular music had English-language origins, beginning with the US firm Columbia, the oldest active record label (from 1898).

Radio sets around the world hourly testify to the dominance of English in the popular music scene today. It is a dominance which is a specifically 20th-century phenomenon. During the 19th century, popular music was embedded within the dance halls, beer halls, and popular theatres of innumerable European cities, and the British music hall was a major influence on popular trends. The USA developed its own music hall traditions, in the form of vaudeville. Songwriters such as Stephen Foster found their works (such as 'Old Folks at Home') circulating on an unprecedented scale through the rapidly growing network of theatres. By the turn of the century, Tin Pan Alley (the popular name for the Broadway-centered song-publishing industry) was a reality, and was soon known worldwide as the chief source of US popular music.

A similar trend can be seen in relation to the more 'up-market' genres. During the early 20th century, European light opera (typified by Strauss and Offenbach) developed an English-language dimension. Several major composers were immigrants to the USA, such as Czech-born Rudolf Friml and Hungarian-born Sigmund Romberg, or they were the children of



immigrants (such as George Gershwin). The 1920s saw the rapid growth of the musical, a distinctively US product, and the rise to fame of such composers as Jerome Kern and George Gershwin, and later Cole Porter and Richard Rodgers.

The rapidly growing broadcasting companies were greedy for fresh material, and thousands of new works each year found an international audience in ways that could not have been conceived of a decade before. The availability of mass-produced gramophone records allowed the works of these composers ('songs from the shows') to travel the world in physical form. Soon the words of the hit songs were being learned by heart and reproduced with varying accents in cabarets and music halls all over Europe – as well as in the homes of the well-to-do. Jazz, too, had a contribution to make. Blues singers such as Bessie Smith were part of the US music-hall scene from the early years of the 20th century. The vocal element in the dance music of such swing bands as Glenn Miller's swept the world in the 1930s and 1940s. And, in due course, the words and beat of rhythm and blues grew into rock and roll.

When modern popular music arrived, it was almost entirely an English scene. The pop groups of two chief English-speaking nations were soon to dominate the recording world: Bill Haley and the Comets and Elvis Presley in the USA; the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in the UK. Mass audiences for pop singers became a routine feature of the world scene from the 1960s. No other single source has spread the English language around the youth of the world so rapidly and so pervasively.

## 8 In travel and safety

The reasons for travelling abroad range from routine business trips to annual holidays, and from religious pilgrimages and sports competitions to military interventions. Each journey has immediate linguistic consequences – a language has to be interpreted, learned, imposed – and over time a travelling trend can develop into a major influence. If there is a contemporary movement towards world English use, therefore, we would expect it to be particularly noticeable in this domain. And so it is.

In the tourist industry, for example, worldwide international arrivals passed 500 million in 1993. The leading tourism earner and spender is the USA. In 1992, according to the World Tourism Organization, the USA earned over \$50 billion from tourism – twice as much as its nearest rival, France; it also spent nearly \$40 billion on tourism – ahead of Germany and Japan. Money talks very loudly in tourism – if only because the tourist has extra money to spend while on holiday. In the tourist spots of the world, accordingly, the signs in the shop windows are most commonly in English. Restaurant menus tend to have a parallel version in English. Credit card facilities, such as American Express and Mastercard, are most noticeably in English. And among the destitute who haunt the tourist locations, the smattering of foreign language which is used to sell artefacts or to beg money from the passing visitor is usually a pidgin form of English.

For those whose international travel brings them into a world of package holidays, business meetings, academic conferences,

international conventions, community rallies, sporting occasions, military occupations, and other 'official' gatherings, the domains of transportation and accommodation are mediated through the use of English as an auxiliary language. Safety instructions on international flights and sailings, information about emergency procedures in hotels, and directions to major locations are now very largely in English alongside local languages. Most notices which tell us to fasten our seatbelts, find the lifeboat stations, or check the location of the emergency stairs give us an option in English.

A special aspect of travel is the way that the language has come to be used as a means of controlling international transport operations, especially on water and in the air. As world travel has grown, more people and goods are being transported more quickly and simultaneously to more places than ever before. The communicative demands placed on air and sea personnel, given the variety of language backgrounds involved, have thus grown correspondingly. In such circumstances, the use of a lingua franca has proved of great worth.

English has long been recognized as the international language of the sea, and in recent years there have been attempts to refine its use to make it as efficient as possible, in the form of Essential English for International Maritime Use – often referred to as 'Seaspeak'. Progress has also been made in recent years in devising systems of unambiguous communication between organizations which are involved in handling emergencies on the ground – notably, the fire service, the ambulance service, and the police (Emergencyspeak). But the greatest challenge has been encountered in relation to air

transportation, where far more nations are forced to make routine daily communications with each other than ever occurs on the sea. Only a handful of nations are truly seafaring; but all nations are nowadays airborne. And the pace of change here has been truly phenomenal. In 1994 the number of passengers worldwide exceeded 1.2 billion.

The official use of English as the language of international aircraft control did not emerge until after the Second World War. Allied leaders organized a conference in Chicago in 1944 at which they laid the foundations for the post-war global civil aviation system, creating the International Civil Aviation Organization. Seven years later they agreed that English should be the international language of aviation when pilots and controllers speak different languages. This would have been the obvious choice for a lingua franca. The leaders of the Allies were English-speaking; the major aircraft manufacturers were English-speaking; and most of the post-war pilots in the West (largely ex-military personnel) were English-speaking.

Over 180 nations have adopted the recommendations of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) about English terminology. However, there is nothing mandatory about them. Even the US Federal Aviation Administration uses wording which differs from ICAO's in many instances. The problem is plain: it is relatively easy to set up a working party which will compile a single terminology for world use; the difficulty comes in persuading everyone to comply with it.

## 9 In communication systems

If a language is a truly international medium, it is going to be most apparent in those services which deal directly with the



task of communication – the postal and telephone systems and the electronic networks. Information about the use of English in these domains is not easy to come by, however. About 60% of the world's mail in 1992 was being handled by English-status countries – but no-one monitors the language in which we write our letters; there is no-one noting the language we use when we talk on the phone. Only on the Internet, where messages and data can be left for indefinite periods of time, is it possible to develop a reliable sense of how much of the world's everyday communications (at least, between Net-surfers) is actually in English – and that figure is thought to be about 80%. It is likely to become proportionally less, as other Net languages grow, but I cannot see its dominance disappearing. The development of 20th-century computers has been almost entirely an American affair, with programming languages very much English influenced. The biggest setback to English as a world language, it has been said with more than a little irony, would have been if Bill Gates had grown up speaking Chinese.

### 10 In education

We have seen that English has emerged as the medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge, especially in such areas as science and technology. And access to knowledge is the business of education. When we investigate why so many nations have in recent years made English an official language or chosen it as their chief foreign language in schools, one of the most important reasons is always educational – in the broadest sense.

Since the 1960s, English has become the normal medium of instruction in higher education for many countries – including several where the language has no official

status. Advanced courses in The Netherlands, for example, are often taught in English, and many students write their doctoral theses in English. If most students are going to encounter English routinely in their monographs and periodicals, it is suggested – an argument which is particularly cogent in relation to the sciences – then it makes sense to teach advanced courses in that language, to better prepare them for that encounter. But these days there is also a strong lingua franca argument: the pressure to use English has grown as universities and colleges have increasingly welcomed foreign students, and lecturers have found themselves faced with mixed-language audiences.

The English language teaching (ELT) business has become one of the major growth industries around the world in the past 30 years. According to The British Council, it is likely that by the year 2000 there will be over a billion people learning English. The Council alone administers over 175,000 English-language qualification exams overseas each year. In 1993, over 380,000 candidates worldwide sat the University of Cambridge English language examinations for foreign learners.

In a 1995 global consultation exercise initiated by *English 2000*, a British Council project, people professionally involved in ELT in some 90 countries were asked to react to a series of statements concerning the role and future of the English language. Responses used a five-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Nearly 1,400 questionnaires were returned. One of the statements was: 'The global market for English language teaching and learning will increase over the next 25 years'. Over 93% agreed or strongly agreed. A particular growth area is

central and eastern Europe, and the countries of the former Soviet Union, where it is thought that nearly 10% of the population – some 50 million in all – are now learning English.

Certain other statements in the Council questionnaire were also given an unequivocal response. I cite three of them:

1. English will retain its role as the dominant language in world media and communications. 94% agreed or strongly agreed.
2. English is essential for progress as it will provide the main means of access to high-tech communication and information over the next 25 years. 95% agreed or strongly agreed.
3. English will remain the world's language for international communication for the next 25 years. 96% agreed or strongly agreed.

### Overview

I have identified ten major factors explaining why English has come to be used in the modern world. Is there a common theme? One answer is that it is a language which has repeatedly found itself in the right place at the right time.

In the 17th and 18th centuries English was the language of the leading colonial nation – Britain. In the 18th and 19th centuries it was the language of the leader of the industrial revolution – also Britain. In the late-19th and early-20th centuries it was the language of the leading economic power – the USA. As a result, when new technologies brought new linguistic opportunities, English emerged as a first-rank language in industries which affected all aspects of society – the press, advertising, broadcasting, motion pictures, sound recording, transport, and

communications. At the same time, the world was forging fresh networks of international alliances, and there emerged an unprecedented need for a lingua franca. Here too, there was a clear first choice. During the first half of the 20th century English gradually became a leading language of international political, academic, and community meetings.

By the 1960s, the pre-eminence of the language was established, but it could not at that time have been described as a genuine world language. Since then, however, two events have together ensured its global status. The first was the movement towards political independence, out of which English emerged as a language with special status in several new countries. In most of these, the role of English had come to be so fundamental that no other language could compete, when the moment of independence arrived. The other event was the electronic revolution, where here too English was in the right place (the USA) at the right time (the 1970s).

### Which?

In speculating about the future of English as a world language, we need to pay careful attention to factors which might impede the future growth of English. The chief issue here has been the growth of new varieties of English in the different territories where the language has taken root. The change has become a major talking point only since the 1960s, hence the term by which these new varieties are often known: 'new Englishes' – not only mother-tongue varieties, such as British and American, but second-language varieties, such as in several countries of Asia and Africa. These new Englishes are somewhat like the dialects we all recognize



within our own country, except that they are on an international scale, applying to whole countries or regions. Instead of affecting mere thousands of speakers, as is typically the case with rural or urban regional dialects, they apply to millions. They are an inevitable consequence of the spread of English on a world scale. They have emerged because they give identity to the groups which own them. If you wish to tell everyone which part of a country you are from, you can wave a flag, wear a label on your coat, or (the most convenient solution, because it is always with you) speak with a distinctive accent and dialect. Similarly, on the world stage, if you wish to tell everyone which country you belong to, an immediate and direct way of doing it is to speak in a distinctive way.

Inevitably, the emergence of new Englishes raises the spectre of fragmentation – the eventual dissolution of English into a range of mutually unintelligible languages (as happened when Latin gave rise to the various Romance languages, such as French, Spanish, and Italian, over 1,000 years ago). This has not happened. Difficulties of comprehension are sometimes encountered between speakers of L1 Englishes and those of L2 Englishes, especially when the parties talk quickly; but they can usually be quickly resolved, and they seem to be diminishing, partly because the availability of international television programmes via satellite is familiarizing everyone with the existence of other norms. Also, the continuing presence of standard written English, in the form of newspapers, textbooks, and other printed material, shows very little variation in the different English-speaking countries.

Even if the new Englishes did become increasingly different, as years went by, the consequences for world English would not necessarily be fatal. A likely scenario is that our current ability to use more than one dialect would simply extend to meet the fresh demands of the international situation. A new form of English – let us think of it as 'World Standard Spoken English' – would almost certainly arise. Indeed, the foundation for such a development is already being laid around us.

Most people are already 'multidialectal' to a greater or lesser extent. They use one spoken dialect at home, when they are with their family or talking to other members of their local community: this tends to be an informal variety, full of casual pronunciation, colloquial grammar, and local turns of phrase. They use another spoken dialect when they are away from home, travelling to different parts of their country or interacting officially with others at their place of work: this tends to be a formal variety, full of careful pronunciation, conventional grammar, and standard vocabulary. Those who are literate have learned a third variety, that of written standard English which (apart from a few minor differences, such as British vs. American spelling) currently unites the English-speaking world.

In a future where there were many national Englishes, little would change. People would still have their dialects for use within their own country, but when the need came to communicate with people from other countries they would slip into World Standard Spoken English. People who attend international conferences, or who write scripts for an international audience, or who are 'talking' on the Internet have probably already felt the pull

of this new variety. It takes the form, for example, of consciously avoiding a word or phrase which you know is not going to be understood outside your own country, and of finding an alternative form of expression. But it is too soon to say anything definite about the way this variety will develop, or which regional variety will have the greatest influence upon it – though it will probably be American English.

Developments of this kind can be predicted because they enable people, yet again, to 'have their cake and eat it'. The concept of a World Standard Spoken English does not replace a national dialect: it supplements it. People who can use both are in a much more powerful position than people who can use only one. They have a dialect in which they can continue to express their national identity; and they have a dialect which can guarantee international intelligibility, when they need it.

### Whither?

There has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English. There are therefore no precedents to help us see what happens to a language when it achieves genuine world status. The balance between the competing demands of intelligibility and identity is especially fragile, and can easily be affected by social change, such as a swing in immigrant policy, new political alliances, or a change in a country's population trends.

If we cannot predict the future, we can at least speculate, and there are some fascinating speculations to be made. For example, it may be that the English language has grown to the extent that it is now independent of social control. There may be a critical number or critical

distribution of speakers (analogous to the notion of critical mass in nuclear physics) beyond which it proves impossible for any single group to stop its growth, or even influence its future. If there were to be a major social change in Britain which affected the use of English there, would this have any real effect on the world trend? It is unlikely. And even the current chief player, the USA, will have decreasing influence in this respect, as the years go by, because of world population growth.

If we work our way through the list of English-speaking territories the number of first-language (L1) speakers is currently greater than the number of second-language (L2) speakers – if we take the higher estimates, 400 million, as opposed to 350 million. But the L2 countries have, combined, a much greater growth rate than those of L1 countries: an average of 2.3% compared with 0.8%. So, if current population and learning trends continue, this balance will change. Within ten years, there will be more L2 speakers than L1 speakers. Within 50 years, there could be up to 50% more. Even the huge English-speaking population of the USA will then seem small, by comparison.

This is a symposium (Greek *syn* + *pinein*, 'drink together'), and I take this to imply (apart from its literal application) that this keynote address will be able to benefit from the ideas of others. In particular I ask you to consider the implications of the World Standard Spoken English scenario for ELT. My first thoughts are as follows:

- Despite the long-standing recognition of the difference between American and British English models, there seems little doubt that any world standard must eventually be influenced more by the former than the latter. There are,



after all, four times as many speakers of US English as UK English. Many grammatical issues in contemporary British usage show the influence of US forms, US spellings are increasingly widespread (especially in computer contexts), and there is a greater passive awareness of distinctively US lexicon in the UK (because of media influence) than vice versa.

- The question of models is going to be complicated by the emergence on the world scene of new linguistic features derived from the L2 varieties, which will in due course become numerically dominant. I do not know of any feature of L2 English which has yet become a part of standard US or UK English, but as the balance of speakers changes, there is no reason why L2 features should not become part of World Standard Spoken English. This would be especially likely if there were features which were shared by several (or all) L2 varieties – such as the use of syllable-timed rhythm.
- An important index of linguistic fluency is one's ability to command a range of varieties in a language. This is true for the native speaker (one sees it as a major theme of contemporary work in the British National Curriculum), and it is therefore not surprising to see this trend influence goals in foreign language teaching. Already textbooks and (especially) dictionaries are systematically introducing the main features of formal/informal, spoken/written, and UK/US English, and varieties enter the world of EST in another way, through the notion of English for Special Purposes. If variety differences do increase, one wonders just how much

variety awareness it will be necessary or practicable to include in a language teaching course. Eventually, I imagine, we will all be teaching World Standard Spoken English, once it exists, rather than British, American, or any other regional English, unless there are strong grounds for not doing so.

I conclude that we are about to enter a new era of ELT, in which previously held and comfortably familiar values are going to be replaced. There will need to be a broadening of perspectives all round, and I would very much appreciate hearing from any symposium member who has already encountered this pressure to broaden perspectives, and who has had to adapt to them professionally.

As the reception beckons, the speculations get wilder and wilder. Perhaps, in 500 years time, everyone will automatically be introduced to English as soon as they are born (or, by then, very likely, as soon as they are conceived). A new role for ELT therefore, presumably as part of routine assessment in obstetrics and gynaecology. If this is part of a rich multilingual experience for our future newborns, this can only be a good thing. If English is by then the only language left to be learned, it will have been the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known.

And lastly, if there is a critical mass, does it mean that the emergence of a global language is a unique event, in evolutionary terms? Could any other language conceivably supplant it? What kind of revolution in the social order would be necessary in order to provide the conditions for such a change to take place? It may be that English – and thus IATEFL and the British Council – will find itself in the service of the world community for ever.