

It has happened so quickly. In 1950, any idea of English as a true world language was just a theoretical possibility, surrounded by the political uncertainties of the Cold War and lacking any clear definition or sense of direction. Fifty years on, "global English" is a political and cultural reality.

A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role recognized in every country. This role will be most obvious where large numbers speak it as a mother tongue — in the case of English, in Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States 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 in 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 an official language, to be used as a medium of communication in government, the law courts, the media and the educational system. To get on in such societies, people need to master the language as early as possible. English now has a special administrative status in over 70 countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore and Vanuatu — a far greater status than that achieved by any other language.

Second, the language can be made a priority in a country's foreign-language teaching. Over 100 countries treat English as "a foreign language", but most of these now see it as the chief foreign language in schools.

Because of this three-pronged development — of first-language, second-language and foreign-language speakers — a world language will eventually come to be used by more people than any other language. English has already reached this stage. The combined population of countries where English has been granted special administrative status is just passing 2 billion — over a third of the world's population.

How many of these people actually speak the language? Those who have learned English as a first language are thought to number 350-450 million, and those who have learned it as a second language 150-350 million. Estimates for those who have learned English as a foreign language vary from 100 million to as high as one billion. A middle-of-the-road total estimate for all three categories would be between 1.3 and 1.5 billion.

Why has no other language (not even Chinese) spread around the globe so extensively? There is a very close link between language dominance and cultural power. Without a strong power base — political, military or economic — no language can make progress as an international medium of communication. Language has no independent existence; it exists only in the brains, mouths, ears, hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails.

Many misleading beliefs have grown up about why a language should succeed internationally. It is often thought that there must be something inherently beautiful or logical about the structure of English. Maybe it is because it has no grammatical gender or because it is easier to learn.

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

A language becomes international for one chief reason: the political power of its people — especially their military power. The history of a world language can be traced through the successful expeditions of its soldier/sailor speakers; and English has been no exception.

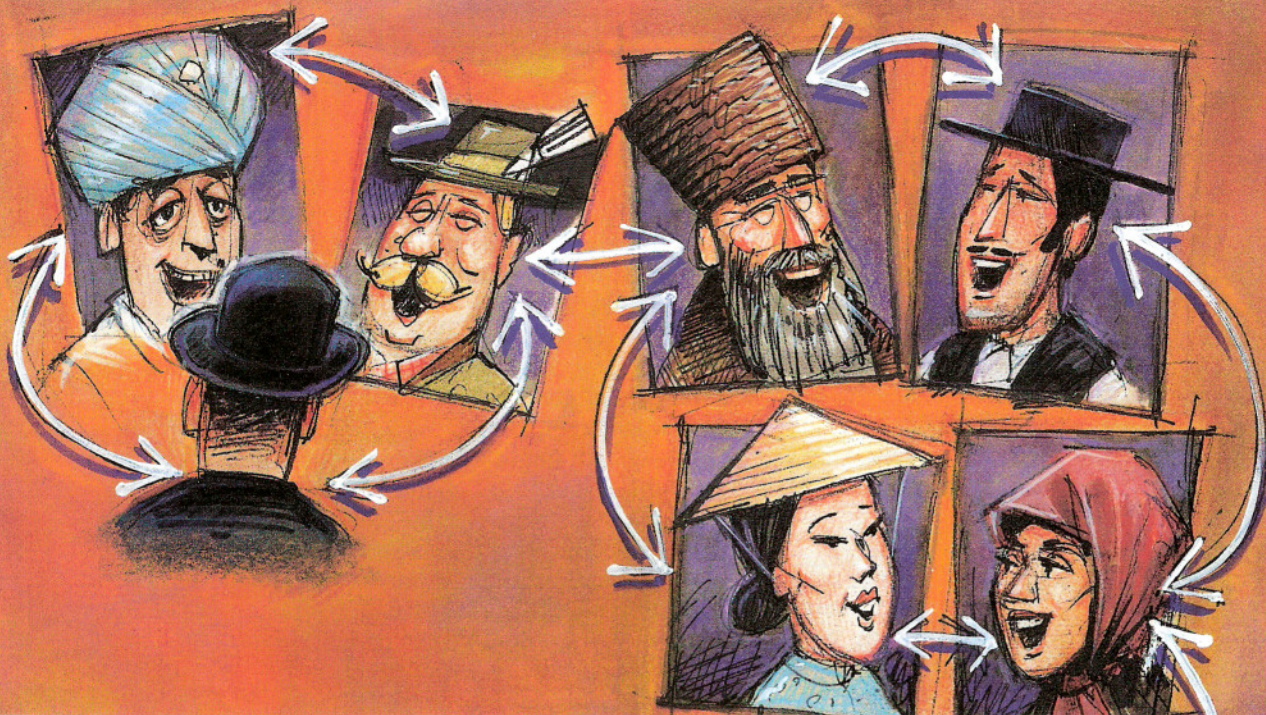
The idea that a lingua franca might be needed for the whole world is a post-war development. The chief international forum for political communication — the United Nations — dates only from 1945. Without a single lingua franca, expensive and impracticable multi-way translation facilities are needed. The business and academic worlds also demand a world language. A conversation over the Internet between academic physicists in Sweden, Italy and India is practicable only if a common language is available. Similarly, the technology of air transportation brings together international business contacts. The availability of both facilities in the 20th century has, more than anything else, provided the circumstances needed for a world language to grow. People have become more mobile, both physically and electronically. That is why people so often talk of the "global village".

It is the speed and the scale of the development that have to be appreciated. In 1945, the UN was established ➤

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● **Difficult**
genuinely ['dʒenjuɪnli] – wirklich
to get on – es zu etw. bringen (können)
administrative – hier: amtlich
to achieve – erreichen, erlangen
three-pronged – dreifach
eventually – irgendwann, schließlich
billion – Milliarde
estimate ['estɪmət] – Schätzung
middle-of-the-road – gemäßigt; hier: vorsichtig
link – Verbindung, Zusammenhang

misleading – irreführend
inherently – von Natur aus
gender – (gramm.) Genus, Geschlecht
to be misconceived – auf den falschen Gedanken basieren
regardless of – ungeachtet, trotz
lingua franca – Verkehrssprache
facility – Einrichtung; hier: Dienst
physicist ['fɪzɪsɪst] – Physiker(in)
to appreciate [ə'pri:ʃieɪt] – verstehen; hier: sich bewußt werden über



with 51 member states. By 1956, it had 80 members. Today there are over 180.

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 needed to talk to each other so much, or when so many people wished to travel to so many places. Never has the need for more widespread bilingualism been greater, to ease the burden placed on the professional few. Never has there been a more urgent need for a global language, either.

Why has English become that global language? The English language has repeatedly found itself in the right place at the right time.

On 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 US. As a result, when new technologies brought new linguistic opportunities, English emerged as a first-rank language in industries

precedent – exemplarisches

Beispiel

bilingualism [ˌbaɪˈlɪŋɡwəlɪzəm] –

Zweisprachigkeit

burden – Last

to emerge [ɪˈmɜːdʒ] – hervor-

treten, -gehen

motion picture – Film

to forge – schmieden

to ensure [ɪnˈʃʊː] – sichern

setback – Rückschlag

inevitably [ɪnˈevɪtəbəlɪ] – zwangs-

läufig

spectre – Schreckgespenst

fragmentation – Zersplitterung

dissolution – Auflösung

mutually – gegenseitig

unintelligible – unverständlich

to resolve – lösen, regeln

to diminish – weniger werden

via [ˈvaɪə] – über

to extend – sich erweitern

to meet demands – Ansprüchen

gerecht werden

informal – familiär

casual [ˈkæʒʊəl] – etwas lässig

colloquial [kəˈlɒkwɪəl] –

umgangssprachlich

turn of phrase – Formulierung

literate [ˈlɪtərət] – des Lesens und

Schreibens kundig

minor [ˈmaɪnə] – gering

vs. (versus) [ˈvɜːsəs] – im

Gegensatz zu

script – Text

that 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 became a leading language of international political, academic and community meetings. Since the 1960s, two events have ensured its global status. The first was the movement towards political independence, out of which English emerged with a special status in several new countries. The other was the electronic revolution, and here, too, English was in the right place (the US) at the right time (the 1970s).

About 80 per cent of electronic communication is thought to take place in English. The development of computers has been almost entirely an American affair. The biggest setback to English as a global language, it has been said with more than a little irony, would have been if Bill Gates (see SPOTLIGHT 9/94) had grown up speaking Chinese.

Now that English has achieved such a global standing, what does the future hold? The chief issue in this context has been the growth of new varieties of English in the different territories where the language has taken root. These “new Englishes” are like the dialects we all recognize within our own country, except that they are on an international scale, applying to whole countries or regions. They have emerged because they give identity to the groups that own them.

Inevitably, the emergence of new Englishes raises the spectre of fragmentation — the eventual dissolution of English into a range of mutually unintelligible languages

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(as happened when Latin gave rise to the various Romance languages, such as French, Italian and Spanish).

This has not yet happened. Difficulties of comprehension sometimes arise between first- and second-language speakers of Englishes, especially when the parties talk quickly; but these can usually be easily resolved, and they seem to be diminishing, partly because of international television programmes via satellite. The continuing presence of standard written English in newspapers and other printed material also shows very little variation in the different English-speaking countries.

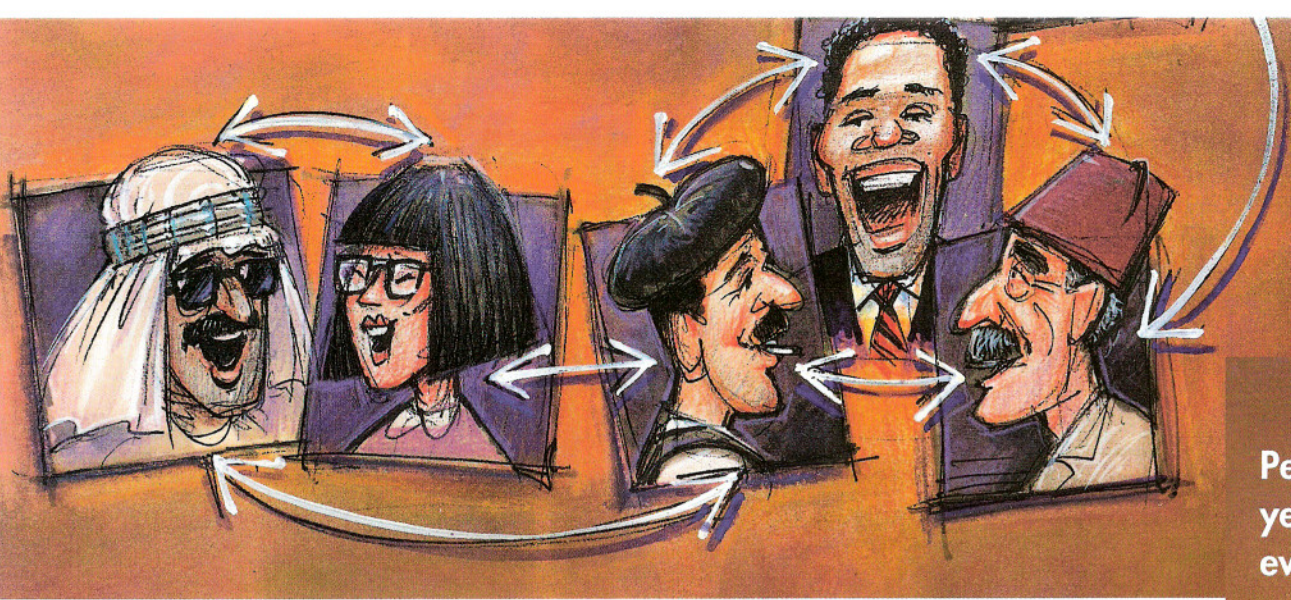
Even if the new Englishes did become increasingly different, the consequences for global English would not necessarily be fatal. Our current ability to use more than one dialect would most likely simply extend to meet the fresh demands of the international situation. A new form of English — call it World Standard Spoken English — would almost certainly arise.

Most people are already “multi-dialectical” to some 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 or interacting officially with others at work. This tends to be formal, 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 in which 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, who write scripts for an ▶



Perhaps in 500 years' time, everyone will automatically be introduced to English when they are born

international audience or who are "talking" on the Internet already use such a language. It takes the form, for example, of consciously avoiding a phrase that you know is not likely to be understood outside your own country. American English will probably influence it the most, for two out of three speakers of English as a mother tongue are from the US.

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: they have a dialect in which they can continue to express their national identity and one that can guarantee international intelligibility.

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 fragile and can easily be affected by social change, such as a swing in immigration policy 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 such an extent that it is now independent of social control. There may be a critical number or critical distribution of speakers beyond which it proves impossible for any single group to stop the growth of a language or even influence its future. If there were to be a major social change in Britain that affected the use of English there, would this have any real effect on the world trend? It is unlikely. Even the current chief player, the US, will have decreasing influence because of the way the world population is growing.

to supplement – ergänzen
to compete – konkurrieren
fragile ['frædʒaɪl] – empfindlich
to predict – vorhersagen
as opposed to – im Gegensatz zu
huge [hju:dʒ] – riesig
to be conceived – gezeugt werden
neonatal – Neugeborenen-

assessment – Beurteilung, Test
paediatrician [ˌpi:di'ɑ:triʃən] – Kinderarzt, -ärztin
disaster [di'zɑ:stə] – Katastrophe
editor – Herausgeber(in), Redakteur(in)
lecturer – Hochschuldozent(in)
application – Anwendung

Across the English-speaking territories, the number of first-language speakers is currently greater than the number of second-language speakers: if we take the higher estimates, 450 million, as opposed to 350 million. But the second-language countries have a much greater growth rate: an average of 2.3 per cent compared with 0.8 per cent. If current population and learning trends continue, within 10 years there will certainly be more second-language than first-language speakers. Within 50 years there could be up to 50 per cent more. Even the huge English-speaking population of the US will seem small by comparison.

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). Perhaps English-language teachers will one day play their part in neonatal assessment alongside paediatricians. 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. Either way, it may be that English will find itself in the service of the world community for ever. ♦

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Professor David Crystal is a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster based in North Wales. He is known for his research in English-language studies and in the application of linguistics to clinical and educational contexts. His books include *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. He is also the editor of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia* and *The Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia*. His latest book, *English as a Global Language*, was published in June (Cambridge University Press, ISBN 0-521-59247-X, price £12.95).



You can hear more from David Crystal on the SPOTLIGHT cassette.