

By reading this page, you are wielding a weapon that has fought its way to dominate the world. The English language is now the most successful the globe has ever known — with perhaps 1,500 million speakers. But pause before you celebrate, urges **David Crystal**: if its rise continues, it could kill the less powerful tongues



ILLUSTRATION: ELLIS NADEL

The language that took over the world

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 Global English exists as a political and cultural reality.

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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

pendent existence: it 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.

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? Maybe it is easier to

THE PROSPECT 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. Simi-

many places. Never has the need for more widespread lingualism been greater, the ease the burden placed on the professional few. And never has there been a more urgent need for a global language.

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

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A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role recognised in every country. This role will be most obvious where large numbers speak it as a mother tongue — in the case of English, the US, 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 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 it as early as possible. English now has some kind of special administrative status in over 70 countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore and Vanuatu — 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. Over 100

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In the 17th and 18th centuries, English was the language of the leading colonial powers — Britain. In the 19th century, 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 of new technologies brought about by linguistic opportunity, English emerged as a world language in the 20th century, which affected all aspects of society — the press, television, broadcasting, movies, records, sound recording, transport, and communication.

At the same time, there was forging fresh networks of international alliances. There emerged an urgent need for a common 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 which has to be appreciated. In 1945, the UN began life with 51 member states. By 1956, it had 80 members. Yet 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 were needing to talk to each other so much, or when so many people wished to travel to so

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world's population. How many of these actually speak the language? Those who have learned English as a first language are currently 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 a billion (by the British Council). A middle-of-the-road total estimate for all three categories would be 1,300-1,500 million: this is now commonly cited.

Why has no other language (not even Chinese) spread around the globe so extensively? There is the closest of links 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 inde-

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 over more or less the same period of time, regardless of the differences in the grammar of their languages.

A language becomes an international language 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.

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NOW that English has achieved such a global standing, what of the future? The chief issue here 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 recognise 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 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, 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 is to speak distinctively.

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). This has not happened. Difficulties of comprehension sometimes arise between first- and second-language speakers of Englishes, especially when the parties talk quickly; but they can usually be quickly resolved, and they seem to be diminishing, partly because of international television programmes via satellite. Also, the continuing presence of standard written English, in news-

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 which can guarantee international intelligibility.

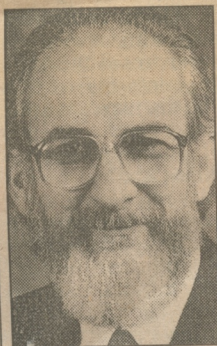
There has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English. There are therefore no precedents to help us see what happens to a language when it achieves genuine world status. The balance between the competing demands of intelligibility and identity is fragile, and can easily be affected by social change, such as a swing in immigrant 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 the 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 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 US, will have decreasing influ-

ence, and the world population is growing.

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, combined, a much greater growth rate: an average of 2.3 per cent compared with 0.8 per cent. So, if current population and learning trends continue, this balance will soon change. 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.



THIS WEEK'S essayist, David Crystal, is a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster based in North Wales. He published the first of his 50 or so books in 1964, and became known for his research in English-language studies, and in the application of linguistics to clinical and educational contexts. The books include *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and of the *English Language (CUP)*. He is also the editor of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia* and *The Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia*. His next book, *English as a Global Language*, is published by CUP in June

papers and other printed material, shows very little variation in the different English-speaking countries.

Even if the new Englishes did become increasingly different, the consequences for world 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-dialectal” 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 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 its pull. It takes the form, for example, of consciously avoiding a phrase which you know is not going 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.