

Introduction to *English Language Guide*, 1997

Something is going on. I can smell it. In the last ten years, like many academics, I have become used to getting a couple of enquiries a week from the media about questions to do with language in general, and the English language in particular. In the first half of 1997, I have had to field more media enquiries about English than in the whole of that decade, and from a much wider range of sources. The interest is real, and urgent. What is happening? What will happen?

It seems that suddenly people have begun to be aware of the dramatic and unprecedented growth of English on a global scale. Although real statistics are conspicuous by their absence - which is why the English 2000 fact-finding initiative by the British Council is so welcome - some reasonably precise accounts are now beginning to be written. And at least most of the theoretical issues have been thoroughly raised and debated in books and journals. Phrases such as World English, Global English, New Englishes, and Global Language are everywhere.

The essential facts seem to be threefold. English now has some kind of favoured status in almost every country in the world - that is, either as a first, second, or preferred foreign language. As a consequence, there are now more people able to communicate in English (though not always to native-speaker levels) than in any other language - the average of several current estimates is 1.5 billion. And within the next generation, there will be more people speaking English fluently as a second or foreign language than as a first language - a dominance which, given the differential in population growths between first- and second-language countries, is going to steadily grow. There are no precedents for what happens to a language, under such circumstances.

For such reasons, we have come to a point in history where we have to say that English is now owned by - no-one. Whatever the historical reasons which make many British feel that the language is theirs; whatever the military, economic, and cultural reasons which make many Americans feel that it is theirs; the fact remains that, with so many people now using English, even American English - with 'only' 226 million speakers - is rapidly becoming a local dialect of Global English. Teachers for whom the main cause of angina is the choice between British and American English will before too long find that this is a dated issue. But it is difficult to say what will replace it, for the English of the future - what I have called World Standard Spoken English - is still in the process of being born.

There are two ways in which people react to these points. Some talk happily about empowerment and about the benefits of mutual intelligibility on a world scale. Some talk gloomily about fragmentation, as new varieties emerge, and about the danger to linguistic identities within communities. All agree that the issue is not going to go away. Stances have to be taken, policies adopted. It is no good pretending the problem does not exist. A body such as the European Union, as it grows towards 25 or more members, must make decisions about its lingua francas soon, as an Italian politician recently argued. Common currency? A simple matter, compared with the debate still to come over a common EU language.

In the business world, the decision has already been taken, with over 80% of international organizations using English as an official or working language. That is why protectionist stances - most famously, in France; most recently, in Poland - seem curiously out-of-tune with the climate of the times. Indeed, it is a real issue whether any language planning measures can do much, in the face of spontaneous language growth on such a global scale. But all countries need to take a leaf out of the French or Polish books, and think seriously about the way things are going, in order to decide how best to assimilate new trends and protect minorities. Every country needs its Language Council.

What I hope is that our future becomes increasingly bilingual. I hope that the need for intelligibility on a global scale will continue to foster a world language. We need a world language. And the other modern contenders - Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese are most often cited - are a long way behind. At the same time, I hope that the need for identity will continue to foster local varieties of English, and the survival of as many languages as possible. We also need a diverse linguistic world - and not just for the reason that, without it, the need for an ELT Guide would disappear!