

World English: Past, Present, Future

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Abstract

English is now a global language, but how did it get there, and what are the consequences of this newfound status for the future development of the language? The paper reviews ten historical reasons for the present position of English, in the domains of politics, economics, the press, advertising, broadcasting, motion pictures, popular music, travel and safety, communication systems, and education. The consequences of being a global language are also addressed, notably the trends which are already affecting English world-wide, in the form of 'new Englishes'. Reasons for rejecting any scenario of fragmentation are given. Reference is also made to the role of international lingua francas and the position of other (especially minority and endangered) languages.

Any conference dealing with the theme of globalization must at some point address the question of language; and these days, the language which must be chiefly considered is English. I say 'these days', because only a relatively short time ago the prospect of English becoming a genuinely global language was uncertain. I never gave talks on English as a world language in the 1960s or 1970s. Indeed, it is only in the 1990s that the issue has come to the fore, with surveys, books, and conferences trying to explain how it is that a language can become truly global, what the consequences are when it happens, and why English has become the prime candidate. But, in order to speculate about the future of English – or, as I shall say later, Englishes – we must first understand what has happened in the past.

I begin with some definition. When does a language become 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 first language – in the case of English, this would mean the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, several Caribbean countries, and a scattering of other territories. 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 (or semi-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 (French being closest).

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. Those who have learned it as a first language are now estimated to be around 400 million. Those who have learned it as a second language are more difficult to estimate, for now we must take into account the levels of fluency achieved. If we take a basic level of conversational ability as the criterion – enough to make yourself understood, though by no means free of errors, and having no command of specialised vocabulary – the figure is also some 400 million. The significance of these two figures should not be missed. The population growth in areas where English is a second language is about three times that in areas where it is a first language. This means that second-language speakers of English will soon hugely exceed first-language speakers – a situation without precedent for an international language. And when the number of people who speak English as a foreign language is taken into account, this contrast becomes even more dramatic. The British Council estimates that by next year roughly a billion people will be learning English around the world. Excluding the complete beginners, it would seem reasonable to take two thirds of these as a guess at the number of foreign learners with whom it would be possible to hold a reasonable conversation in English – say 600 million.

If, now, we add the three totals – the 400 million who use it as a first language, plus the 400 million who use it as a second language, and the 600 million who use it as a foreign language, we will end up with a grand total of 1,400 million or so – which in round terms is a quarter of the world's population (currently passing 6 billion). No other language is used 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. Of course, we must not overstate the situation. If one in four of the world's population speaks English, three out of four do not. We do not have to travel far into the hinterland of a country – away from the tourist spots, the airports, the hotels, the restaurants – to encounter this reality. But even so, one in four is impressive, and unprecedented. And we must ask: Why? It is not so much the total, as the speed with which this expansion has taken place, very largely since the 1950s. What can account for it?

An obvious factor, of course, is the need for a lingua franca – a concept probably as old as language itself. 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, and then it had only 51 member states. By 1960 this had risen to over 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 has continued steadily into the 1990s. There are now 185 members of the UN – nearly three times as many as there were 50 years ago. The need for lingua francas is obvious, and the pressure to find a single lingua franca is a consequence, the alternative being expensive and often impracticable multi-way translation facilities.

But why English? There is of course nothing intrinsically wonderful about the English language that it should have spread in this way. Its pronunciation is not simpler than that of many other languages, its grammar is no simpler – what it lacks in morphology (in cases and genders) it certainly makes up for in syntax (in word-order patterns) – and its spelling certainly isn't simpler. A language becomes a world language for one reason only – the power of the people who speak it. But power means different things: it can mean political (military) power, technological power, economic power, cultural power. Political power, firstly, in the form of the colonialism that brought English around the world from the 16th century, so that by the 19th century, the language was one 'on which the sun never sets'. Secondly, technological power, in the sense that the industrial revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries was very significantly an English-language event. The 19th century saw the growth in the economic power of the United States, rapidly overtaking Britain as its population hugely grew, and adding greatly to the number of world

English speakers. The point was recognized by Bismarck as early as 1898: asked by a journalist what he considered to be the decisive factor in modern history, he is said to have replied, 'The fact that the North Americans speak English'. And in the 20th century, we have indeed seen the fourth kind of power, cultural power, manifesting itself in virtually every walk of life through spheres of American influence.

I will now look more closely at these different kinds of power, and their consequences, recognizing ten domains in which English is now pre-eminent.

1 Politics

Most 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. This legacy carried over into the 20th century. The League of Nations was 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. I have already mentioned the UN, which replaced it. But English now plays an official or working role in the proceedings of most other major international political gatherings, in all parts of the world. The extent to which English is used in this way is often not appreciated. According to a recent issue of the Union of International Associations' Yearbook, there are about 12,500 international organizations in the world. A sample showed that 85% made official use of English - far more than any other language. French was the only other to show up strongly, with 49% using it officially.

International politics operates at several levels and in many different ways, but the presence of English is usually not far away. A political protest may surface in the form of an official question to a government minister, a peaceful lobby outside an embassy, a street riot, or a bomb. When the television cameras present the event to a world audience, it is notable how often a message in English can be seen on a banner or placard as part of the occasion. Whatever the mother tongue of the protesters, they know that their cause will gain maximum impact if it is expressed through the medium of English. A famous instance of this occurred a few years ago in India, where a march supporting Hindi and opposing English was seen on world television: most of the banners were in Hindi, but one astute marcher carried a prominent sign which enabled the voice of his group to reach much further around the world than would otherwise have been possible. His sign read: 'Death to English'.

2 Economics

By the beginning of the 19th century, Britain had become the world's leading industrial and trading nation. Those were the days! 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% per 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'. Over half of the scientists and technologists who made that revolution worked in English, and people who travelled to Britain (and later America) to learn about the new technologies had to do so through the medium of English. Steam technology revolutionised printing, generating an unprecedented mass of publications in English. The early 19th century saw the rapid growth of the international banking system, especially in Germany, Britain and the USA, with London and New York becoming 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. 'Money talks', then as now, was the chief metaphor - and the language in which it was talking was chiefly English.

3 The press

The English language has been an important medium of the press for nearly 400 years. The 19th century was the period of greatest progress, thanks to the introduction of new printing technology and new methods of mass production and transportation. It 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 2000 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. Today, about a third of the world's newspapers are published in countries where English has special status, and the majority of these will be in English.

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. 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, the majority of the information being transmitted along the telegraph wires of the world was in English.

4 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. In the USA, publishers realized that income from advertising would allow them to lower the selling price of their magazines, and thus hugely increase circulation. Two-thirds of a modern newspaper, especially in the USA, may be devoted to advertising. 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. Many products which are now household names received a special boost in that decade, such as Ford, Coca Cola, Kodak, and Kellogg. The media capitalized on the brevity with which a product could be conveyed to an audience - even if the people were passing at speed in one of the new methods of transportation. 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. American English ruled: by 1972, only three of the world's top 30 advertising agencies were not US-owned.

5 Broadcasting

It took many decades of experimental research in physics, chiefly in Britain and America, before it was possible to send the first radio telecommunication signals through the air, without wires. Marconi's system, built in 1895, carried telegraph code 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. Within 25 years of Marconi's first transmission, public broadcasting became a reality. The first commercial radio station, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, broadcast its first program in November 1920, and there were over 500 broadcasting stations licensed in the USA within two years. A similar dramatic expansion affected public television 20 years later. We can only speculate about how these media developments must have influenced the growth of world English. There are no statistics on the

proportion of time devoted to English-language programmes the world over, or on how much time is spent listening to such programs. But if we look at broadcasting aimed specifically at audiences in other countries (such as the BBC World Service, or the Voice of America), we note significant levels of provision – over a thousand hours a week by the former, twice as much by the latter. Most other countries showed sharp increases in external broadcasting during the post-War years, and several launched English-language radio programmes, such as the Soviet Union, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany. No comparative data are available about how many people listen to each of the languages provided by these services. However, if we list the languages in which these countries broadcast, it is noticeable that only one of these languages has a place on each of the lists: English.

6 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 this 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. And despite the growth of the film industry in other countries in later decades, English-language movies still dominate the medium, with Hollywood coming to rely increasingly on a small number of annual productions aimed at huge audiences. It is unusual to find a blockbuster movie produced in a language other than English, and about 80% of all feature films given a theatrical release are in English. The influence of movies on the viewing audience is uncertain, but many observers agree with the view of director Wim Wenders: 'People increasingly believe in what they see and they buy what they believe in. ... People use, drive, wear, eat and buy what they see in the movies'. If this is so, then the fact that most movies are made in the English language must surely be significant, at least in the long term.

7 Popular music

The cinema was one of two new entertainment technologies which emerged at the end of the 19th century: the other was the recording industry. Here too the English language was early in evidence. 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 (from 1898). Radio sets around the world hourly testify to the dominance of English in the popular music scene today. Many people make their first contact with English in this way. By the turn of the century, Tin Pan Alley (the popular name for the Broadway-centred song-publishing industry) was a reality, and was soon known worldwide as the chief source of US popular music. Jazz, too, had its linguistic dimension, with the development of the blues and many other genres. And by the time 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 International travel and safety

The reasons for travelling abroad are many and various. 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. 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 chiefly 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 increasingly 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 safety 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. English has emerged as the international language of the sea, 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. There is now 'Emergencyspeak', trying to cope with problems of ambiguity at the two ends of the Channel Tunnel. And of course there is 'Airspeak', the language of international aircraft control. This did not emerge until after the Second World War, when the International Civil Aviation Organization was created. Only then was it agreed that English should be the international language of aviation when pilots and controllers speak different languages. Over 180 nations have since adopted its recommendations about English terminology - though it should be noted that there is nothing mandatory about them.

9 Education

English is 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. Sridath Ramphal, writing in 1996, provides a relevant anecdote:

Shortly after I became Secretary-General of the Commonwealth in 1975, I met Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Colombo and we talked of ways in which the Commonwealth Secretariat could help Sri Lanka. Her response was immediate and specific: 'Send us people to train our teachers to teach English as a foreign language'. My amazement must have showed, for the Prime Minister went on to explain that the policies her husband had put in place twenty years earlier to promote Sinhalese as the official language had succeeded so well that in the process Sri Lanka - so long the pearl of the English-speaking world in Asia - had in fact lost English, even as a second language save for the most educated Sri Lankans. Her concern was for development. Farmers in the field, she told me, could not read the instructions on bags of imported fertiliser - and manufacturers in the global market were not likely to print them in Sinhalese. Sri Lanka was losing its access to the world language of English.

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 widely taught in English. No African country uses its

indigenous language in higher education, English being used in the majority of cases. The English language teaching (ELT) business has become one of the major growth industries around the world in the past 30 years.

10 Communications

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. It is thought that three-quarters of the world's mail is in English. But as no-one monitors the language in which we write our letters, such statistics are highly speculative. Only on the Internet, where messages and data can be left for indefinite periods of time, is it possible to develop an idea of how much of the world's everyday communications (at least, between computer-owners) is actually in English. There, it is thought that some 80% of usage - at least on the World Wide Web - is in English. This is because the Internet is yet another American invention. It began as ARPANET, the Advanced Research Projects Agency network, in the late 1960s, conceived as a decentralized national network, its aim being to link important American academic and government institutions in a way which would survive local damage in the event of a major war. Its language was, accordingly, English; and when people in other countries began to form links with this network, it proved essential for them to use English. The dominance of this language was then reinforced when the service was opened up in the 1980s to private and commercial organizations, most of which were (for the reasons already given) already communicating chiefly in English. There was also a technical reason underpinning the position of the language at this time. The first protocols devised to carry data on the Net were developed for the English alphabet, and most browsers are still unable to handle multilingual data presentation. However, the number of non-English language users on the Internet is growing all the time, and probably now exceeds the number of new English-speaking users. In particular, minority languages are finding that the Net gives them a louder and cheaper voice than is available through such traditional media as radio, and Usenet groups are now ongoing in several hundred languages. This is good news for those worried by the global trend in language loss, but it is also good news for those concerned that global intelligibility should not lose out to local identity. On the Net, all languages are as equal as their users wish to make them, and English emerges as an alternative rather than a threat.

When a language becomes a world language, what happens to it? There are no precedents, because no language has ever been spoken by so many people in so many countries before. Two questions need to be briefly addressed. Will English fragment into mutually unintelligible languages, as it spreads around the world? Will English kill off other languages?

The answer to the first question is: probably no - at least, not in the foreseeable future.

We have to recognize, of course, that there are now many new varieties of spoken English developing around the world, in such countries as India, Singapore, and Ghana. They have been called 'New Englishes' - and it is because they are so many and so widespread that I have given my talk the title it has. Why have they arisen? Because of the need to express national identity. Put yourselves in the place of one of the newly independent nations of the 1950s and 1960s. With newfound independence comes an urge to manifest your identity in the eyes of the world. And the most convenient way of manifesting this identity is through the medium of the language you use. Many of the new countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria, found that they had no alternative but to continue using English - the alternative was to make an impossible choice between the many competing local ethnic languages - over 400, in the case of Nigeria. However, we can also appreciate their view that to continue with English would be, in the eyes of many, an unacceptable link with the colonial past. How could this dilemma be resolved? The answer was to continue with English, but to shape it to meet their own ends - adding local vocabulary,

focussing on local cultural variations, developing fresh standards of pronunciation. It is not difficult to quickly accumulate several thousand local words, in countries which have a wide range of local fauna and flora, diverse ethnic customs, and regular daily contacts with different languages. The emerging literatures of the Commonwealth countries - the novels from various parts of West Africa, the poetry from the countries of the Caribbean - illustrate how quickly new identities can emerge. The term 'New Englishes' reflects these identities.

So, is the future one of mutually unintelligible Englishes – an English family of languages, as some have put it? The history of language suggests that fragmentation is a regular phenomenon (as in the well-known case of Latin); but the history of language is no longer a guide. One of the consequences of globalization is that through the media we have immediate access to other languages, and to varieties of English, in ways that have come to be available but recently; and this is having a radical effect. A British Council colleague told me recently that he had just come back from India where he had seen a group of people in an out-of-the-way village clustering around a television set, where they were hearing CNN News beamed down via satellite. None of these people, he felt, would have heard any kind of English before - at least, not in any regular way - other than the Indian variety of English used by their school-teacher. But with a whole range of fresh auditory models becoming routinely available, it is easy to see how the type of English spoken in India could move in fresh directions. And satellite communication being, by definition, global, it is easy to see how a system of natural checks and balances - also well-attested in the history of language - could emerge in the case of world English. The pull imposed by the need for identity, which has been making Indian English increasingly dissimilar from British English, will be balanced by a pull imposed by the need for intelligibility, on a world scale, which will make Indian English increasingly similar. And this could happen anywhere.

As to the remaining question, the effect of English on other languages, here the situation is much gloomier. The surveys which have taken place since the 1970s have shown us that, of the 6000 or so languages in the world, at least half are likely to become extinct in the next 100 years. One of the chief reasons is, of course, the way small rural communities have been affected by globalization processes. Ninety percent of the world's languages are located in equatorial and tropical regions – a thousand in Africa, over 700 in Papua New Guinea alone. One of the consequences of colonialism has been the way in which many of these cultures have assimilated to the dominant one, with an inevitable shift in use away from the indigenous language. In Australia and North America, for example, the shift has been to English. Because of its worldwide spread, English is undoubtedly the language which many of these peoples will eventually speak. But the issue of language death goes well beyond English, for the same effects have been noted in parts of the world where English is not historically a major influence. The indigenous languages of South America are also rapidly disappearing – but there the shift has been to Spanish and Portuguese. In the area covered by the countries of the former Soviet Union, the shift has been to Russian. Chinese, French, Swahili, Arabic, and a few other languages have played similar roles. There is a massive imbalance of language use in the world: some 96% of the world's population speak only 4% of its languages.

There is of course very little that can be done to preserve the world's linguistic diversity – any more than it has been possible to prevent the extinction of so many biological species. On the other hand, the ecological movement has had its major successes, in conservation, and there is no reason why there should not be successes too, in relation to language. Governments can do a great deal by introducing sensible bilingual policies, and protection measures for minority languages. These can be reinforced by international statute, and the fostering of a generally positive climate of opinion. The Barcelona Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996), currently being taken forward by UNESCO, is a step in the right direction. The European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages illustrates another positive development. But measures of this kind take many years to have any effect. In the meantime, languages are dying at the rate of one every two weeks or so. Linguists are urgently trying to record these dying languages before they disappear for

ever - for we must recognize that, when a spoken language dies which has never been written down, it is as if it has never been, and the loss to the human race is permanent. But it is an expensive business, getting languages recorded. Organizations have grown up in several countries to try to help – in Britain we have the Foundation for Endangered Languages; in Germany there is the Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen, founded in Cologne in 1997 [address: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Universität zu Köln, 50923 Köln] - but they are very limited by shortage of funds. It seems to me, though, that if we are concerned by the processes of globalization, as they affect language, then one of the ways in which we can actually do something is to work towards preserving our world linguistic heritage. While recognizing the importance of world languages as a means of fostering international intelligibility, we must not forget the importance of indigenous languages as a means of fostering community identity. We need both. A world in which there was only one language left (probably English) – a scenario which could in theory obtain within 500 years - would be an ecological intellectual disaster of unprecedented scale. It is our responsibility to work towards ensuring that this does not happen.

Further reading

The points dealt with in this paper are developed in the following sources (the first four published by Cambridge University Press): the historical background in my *English as a Global Language* (1997); illustrations of new Englishes in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995) and Tom McArthur, *The English Languages* (1998); the issue of endangered languages in my *Language Death* (2000). A socioeconomic and demographic perspective, which raises questions about the future status of English as a world language, is provided in David Graddol, *The Future of English* (London: The British Council, 1997).