

# The Future of English as a World Language

David Crystal debates the future of the English language

Imagine we are at the beginning of a new millennium – the last one, that is – Y1K. We are in the year 999, attending the triennial meeting of the Anglo-Saxon Speaking Union, held in Winchester. Its theme might well have been: building bridges to the new millennium. So let us speculate: what would have been our Anglo-Saxon forebears' evaluation of the global linguistic scene in Britain, Europe, and the Mediterranean countries?

It is safe to say that most of the discussion would have been in Latin, and about Latin – or rather, Latins, for in Europe at that time there were many varieties of the language. There was the prestige variety – the classical literary Latin written throughout the Roman Empire (chiefly in the West). Then there were the everyday spoken varieties of the language, referred to now as Vulgar Latin. Cicero, writing in the first century BC, commented on the provincial pronunciation heard in the Latin spoken in Cisalpine Gaul. By the eighth century, there is evidence of considerable shift, so much so that the way of referring to the language was changing: the “lingua latina” was being described as “lingua romana” or “rustica romana lingua”. Certainly, by c.900, when we find the first texts representing the spoken language of Gaul, we can no longer talk of Latin, but of Old French; and the other Romance languages begin to emerge at around the same time.

The debate of the ASU, in 999, would have surely had these changes as the main talking point. There would certainly have been a paper on The Future of Latin as a World Language. They would have been able to see the problem. On the one hand, there was written Classical Latin, apparently alive and well and

being taught in a standard way throughout the civilised world. On the other hand, there was now clear evidence of unintelligibility among communities, with those who had once spoken Vulgar Latin in Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Romania, and elsewhere increasingly diverging from each other. Conference members would certainly have speculated about the future of Latin, given these already existing trends. Would the language fragment totally? Would Latin remain as a world lingua franca? Would there be anyone still learning the standard form in a thousand years?

A thousand years on, and we see what happened. The standard forms of these languages are now indeed mutually unintelligible. Standard Latin is still used, but only by small numbers of clerics and scholars, chiefly within the Roman Catholic Church. A body of stalwart classicists, in universities and schools, try to maintain a tradition of Latin teaching, but do not find it easy. Latin, for most intents and purposes, is a dead language now. But its daughter-languages are very much alive.

## Latin and English

Could this scenario happen to English? For certainly, there are some striking parallels. English spread around the modern world in a time-frame not too dissimilar from that which must have affected Latin. Rome became a Republic in 509 BC, and the First Punic War (264-241 BC) resulted in the acquisition of her first overseas province, Sicily. Some two centuries later, Augustus established the Empire (31 BC), which lasted in the West until 476 AD. So basically, we are talking about a period of almost 1000 years, with something like 750 years as

the period of real expansion.

Now consider English from the time of Aelfric. Another period of almost 1000 years. And signs of language change very early on. During the eleventh century, a new variety of English began to develop in Scotland, much influenced by the refugees who had fled north in the years following the Norman Conquest; this Middle Scots was the basis of the very distinctive Scots English we know today. But the first overseas development was not until the end of the twelfth century, when English rule was imposed on Ireland by Henry II in 1171; the influence of Irish Gaelic on English must have been heard not long after. And from then until the twentieth century, covering the major period of English expansion around the world, we have – just like Latin – 750 years.

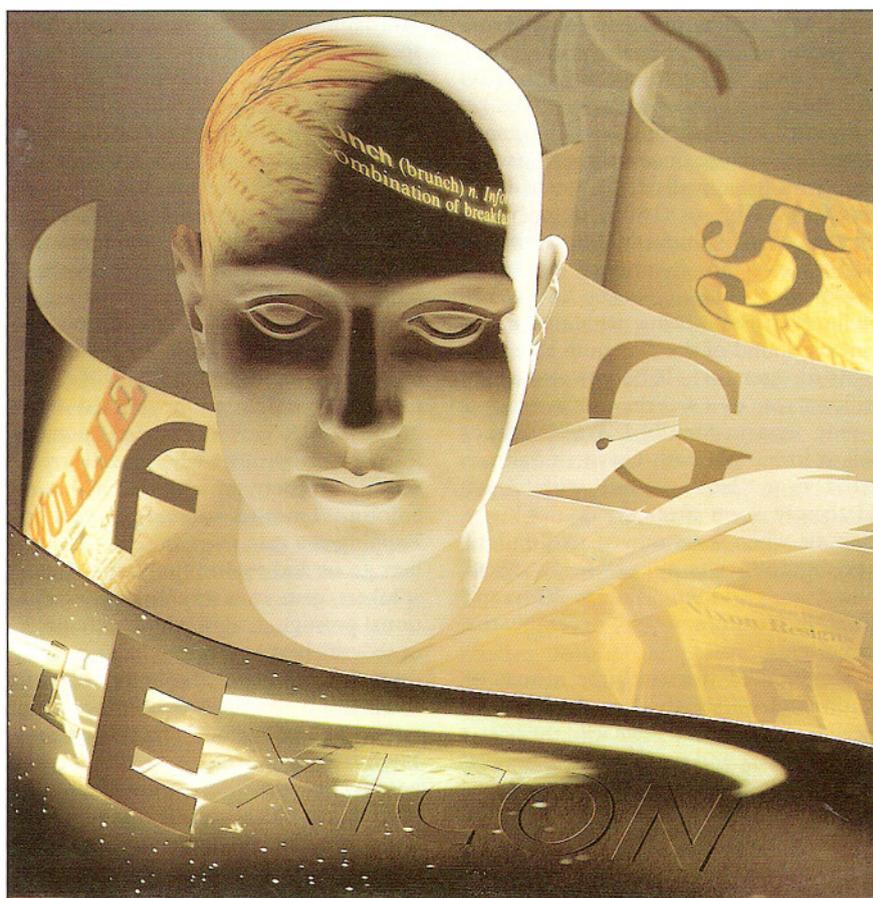
We can push our parallel a little further. What we consider to be the “classics” of Latin literature – the “Golden Age” of Augustus, with Ovid, Virgil, Horace, Livy, et al – emerged during the first century BC, some 400 years after the beginning of the Republic and some 200 years after the First Punic War. The first “classic” of English literature, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, was written some 400 years after our Y1K starting-point, and some 200 years after the Irish expedition.

Let us move on another 200 years. This was a very significant century for both languages. During the third century AD the barbarian invasions began throughout Europe, becoming incessant in the next hundred years, and eventually leading to the decline of the Western Empire. Classical Latin became increasingly an elite language, and as lines of communication with Rome became more tenuous, so speech differences on

the ground increased. Latin began its period of decline, as a spoken *lingua franca*.

Another 200 years in England also brought a turning point. We are now at the end of the sixteenth century. This was a time when the merits of English vs other languages, especially Latin, were being hotly debated, and there was much talk of decline. Richard Mulcaster, the headmaster of Merchant Taylors' School, was one of the strongest supporters of English, arguing for its strengths as a medium of educated expression, alongside Latin. But even he saw that English could not compete with Latin as an international language. Writing in 1582, he says: "Our English tongue is of small reach – it stretcheth no further than this island of ours – nay, not there over all." And he reflects: "Our state is no Empire to hope to enlarge it by commanding over countries". There was no real literature to be proud of, either, not since the time of "Father Chaucer", as people would say, 200 years before – and that, thanks to the major pronunciation changes which had taken place in the early fifteenth century, was becoming virtually unintelligible.

1582. What a time to be saying such a thing. In the course of the next generation, things changed totally, both in politics and literature. Within two years, Walter Raleigh's first expedition to America was to set sail, and although this was a failure, the first permanent English



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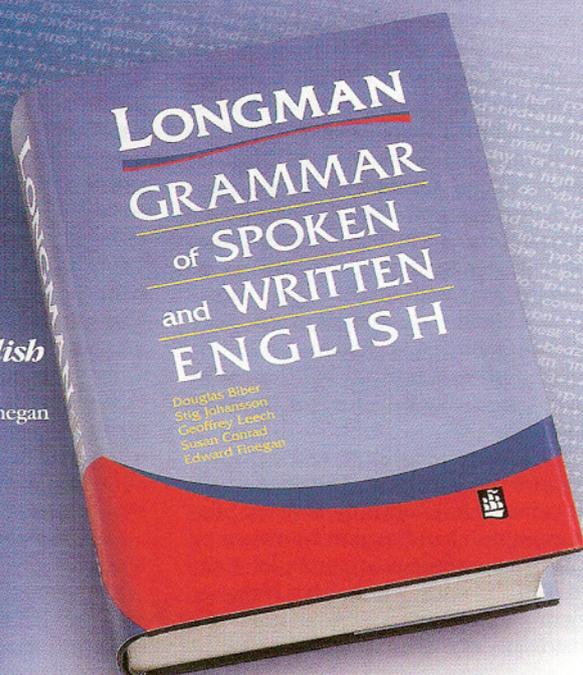
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### *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*

Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad and Edward Finegan

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settlement was in place, in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Loan words from Indian languages into the English spoken there – which as a result started to turn into American English – become a significant feature of contemporary writing virtually immediately. Captain John Smith, writing in 1608, describes a *raccoon*; *totem* is found in 1609; *caribou* and *opossum* are mentioned in 1610; *moccasin* in 1612; *moose* in 1613. Reference is soon being made to the distinctive sound of the American accent.

As for literature, 1582 was also a significant year, as it was the year in which a young man in Stratford, Warwickshire, fell in love – not with Gwyneth Paltrow (that came later) – but with Anne Hathaway. Soon after – we do not know how or when – he moved to London, and by 1592 was already being talked about as a writer. Within 20 years, English literature would never be the same again.

Six hundred years into the history of Latin, and we see the beginnings of its decline. Six hundred years into the history of English, and we see the beginnings of its expansion. Some 4-5 million people spoke English late in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. This had grown to a quarter of the world's population, some 1.5 billion, late in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. The contrast between Latin and English seems total. Or is it?

### Centrifugal forces

When a language spreads, it changes. The simple fact that parts of the world differ from each other in fauna and flora means that words will come into use in one area that are unknown in another, as we have seen in the case of American English. But the impact of a new culture upon English affects far more than fauna and flora alone. Think, for a moment, of all the cultural domains which are likely to generate new vocabulary when English comes to be used in such places as West Africa, Singapore, India, or South Africa, and speakers find themselves adapting the language to meet their communicative needs – not just native speakers, of course, but those who learn it as a second or foreign language as well.

It is a point often forgotten, especially by native speakers, that a language which has come to be spoken by as many people as English has ceased to be owned by any of its constituent communities – not the British, with whom the language began 1500 years ago, nor the Americans, who now comprise its largest mother-tongue community. The total number of mother-tongue speakers in the world, some 400 million, is actually falling, as a proportion of world English users, which probably now total some 1.5 billion – a quarter of the world's population. And they all have a share in the future of English, first-language, sec-

ond-language, and foreign-language speakers alike. Language is an immensely democratising institution. To have learned a language is immediately to have rights in it. You may add to it, modify it, play with it, create in it, ignore bits of it, as you will. And it is just as likely that the future course of English is going to be influenced by those who speak it as a second or foreign language as by those who speak it as a mother-tongue. Fashions count, in language, as anywhere else. And fashions are a function of numbers. It is perfectly possible for a linguistic fashion to be started by a group of second- or foreign-language learners, or by those who speak a creole or pidgin variety, which then catches on among mother-tongue speakers. Rapping is a case in point. And as numbers grow, and second/foreign-language speakers gain in national and international prestige, usages which were previously criticised as “foreign” can become part of the standard educated speech of a locality, and eventually appear in writing.

The bulk of the new distinctiveness of English is going to lie in the area of vocabulary – by which I mean not just new words, but new meanings of words, and new idiomatic phrases. This isn't surprising, when you think of the range of domains likely to generate such vocabulary in parts of the world where English is being freshly used. There is a country's biogeographical uniqueness, which will generate potentially large numbers of words for animals, fish, birds, plants, rocks, and so on – and all the issues to do with land management and interpretation. There will be words for foodstuffs, drinks, medicines, drugs, and the practices associated with eating, health-care, disease, and death. The country's mythology and religion, and practices in astronomy and astrology, will bring forth new names for personalities, beliefs, and rituals. Oral and perhaps also written literature will give rise to distinctive names in sagas, poems, oratory, and folktales. There will be a body of local laws and customs, with their own terminology. The culture will have its own technology which will have its technical terms – such as for vehicles, house-building, weapons, clothing, ornaments, and musical instruments. The world of leisure and the arts will have a linguistic dimension – names of dances, musical styles, games, sports – as will distinctiveness in body appearance (such as hair styles, tattoos, decoration). Virtually any aspect of social structure can generate complex naming systems – local government, family relationships, clubs and societies, and so on.

So, when a community adopts a new language, and starts to use it in relation to all areas of life, there is inevitably going to be a great deal of lexical adaptation. This will happen in two main ways.

First, some words will change their meaning. Words from the variety of

English introduced will be applied to new settings and take on different senses. This has often happened in the language's history; for example, in the Anglo-Saxon period Christian missionaries took over pagan words (such as *heaven*, *hell*, *God*, and *Easter*) and gave them new meanings. Today we see it in the way, for example, a biological species in the new country similar in appearance to one found in the old will often keep the old name, even though it is not the same entity – pheasant in South Africa is usually found for certain species of francolin.

Secondly, words will be taken over (“borrowed”) from the local setting – usually, words from the indigenous language or languages spoken in the country. An example from the South African *Sunday Times*: “Diplomatic indabas only rarely produce neatly wrapped solutions to problems.” *Indaba*, from the Nguni group of languages, was originally a tribal conference, but has now been extended to mean any conference between political groups.

How many words will grow, in these ways? It does not take long before such word-lists and dictionaries reach several thousand words. There were over 3,000 items recorded in the Branfords' first edition of the *Dictionary of South African English* (1978). There are over 6,000 entries in David Grote's *British English for American Readers* (1992). *The Concise Australian National Dictionary* (1989) has 10,000 items in it. There are over 15,000 entries in Cassidy & Le Page's *Dictionary of Jamaican English*.

The totals are small compared with the size of English vocabulary as a whole; but the effect of even fairly small numbers of localized words can be great. The new words are likely to be frequently used within the local community, precisely because they relate to distinctive notions there. Also, these words tend not to occur in isolation: if a conversation is about, say, local politics, then several political terms are likely to come together, making it impenetrable. “Blairite MP in New Labour Sleaze Trap, say Tories” might be a British newspaper example. Six words with British political meanings or overtones there, in quick succession. Exactly the same kind of piling up of foreign expressions can be found in areas where new Englishes are emerging. In this example from the South African *Sunday Times*, all the local words are Afrikaans in origin: “It is interesting to recall that some verkrampte Nationalists, who pose now as super Afrikaners, were once bittereinder bloedsappe.” [verkrampt, bigoted; bittereinder, die-hard; bloedsappe, staunch member of the United Party, formerly the South African Party, or SAP]

You can see how things might develop further. It isn't just an Afrikaans noun which is distinctive; in that example it

was a noun phrase. So, if a phrase, why not a whole clause – as in English [sic] “Je ne sais quoi” or “c’est la vie”. Quite lengthy sections of an originally English sentence might come to contain chunks of borrowed language, or vice versa. And this is what we find.

When people rely simultaneously on two or more languages to communicate with each other, the phenomenon is called code-switching. We can hear it happening now all over the world, between all sorts of languages. But because English is so widespread, it is especially noticeable there, in writing as well as in speech. In *The English Languages*, Tom McArthur gives an example of a bilingual leaflet issued by the HongkongBank in 1994 for Filipino workers. The Tagalog section contains a great deal of English mixed in. For example:

Mag-deposito ng pera mula sa ibang HongkongBank account, at any HongkongBank ATM, using your Cash Card. Mag-transfer ng regular amount bawâ't buwan (by Standing Instruction) galang sa inyong Current o Savings Account, whether the account is with HongkongBank or not.

This kind of language is often described using a compound name – Taglish (for Tagalog-English). We also have Franglais, Tex-Mex, Japlish, Spanglish, Wenglish, and many more. Traditionally, these names were used as scornful appellations. People would sneer at Tex-Mex, and say it was neither one language nor the other. It was gutter-speak, by people who had not learned to talk properly. Now we know better. We can hardly call a language like Taglish gutter-speak when it is being used in writing by a major banking corporation. Linguists have spent a lot of time analysing these “mixed” languages, and found that they are full of complexity and subtlety of expression – as we would expect, if people have the resources of two languages to draw upon.

Mixed languages are certainly on the increase, as we travel the English-speaking world; and it is important to realise that this is happening. It is quite wrong to think of the “future of world English” as if it was simply going to be a more widely used version of British English, or of American English. These varieties will stay, of course, but they will be supplemented by other varieties which, although perhaps originating in Britain or the USA, will display increasing differences from them. The signs of this period of diversification have been around a long time, but the extent of its presence has only recently come to be appreciated. It is not something we usually see in print – except insofar as a novelist captures it in a conversation, or it turns up in informal writing in a newspaper. But we readily encounter it when we

travel to the countries concerned.

### Centripetal forces

Six hundred years into the spread of both Latin and English, there was a turning-point. In the case of Latin, it was the onset of fragmentation. In the case of English, it was the onset of expansion. But now it looks as if the period of expansion contained the seeds of fragmentation. At the beginning of the new millennium, can we avoid the conclusion that, left to itself, English is going to fragment into mutually unintelligible varieties, just as Latin did? The forces of the past 50 years, which have led to so many newly independent nation-states, and a tripling of the membership of the UN, certainly suggest this conclusion. English has come to be used, in several of these countries, as the expression of a sociopolitical identity, and received a new character as a consequence, conventionally labelled Nigerian English, Singaporean English, and so on. And if significant change can be noticed within a relatively short period of time – a few decades – must not these varieties become even more differentiated over the next century or so, so that we end up with an English “family of languages”?

It is possible. But there are certain pressures working in the opposite direction. Not everything is centrifugal. Alongside the need to reflect local situations and identities, which fosters diversity, there is the need for mutual intelligibility, which fosters standardisation. People need to be able to understand each other, both within a country and internationally. There has always been a need for lingua francas. And as supranational organisations grow, the need becomes more pressing. The 185 members of the UN are there not simply to express their identities, but also because they want to talk to each other. And whatever languages are chosen by an organization as lingua francas, it is essential – if the concept is to work – for everyone to learn the same thing, a standard form of the language. In the case of English, when people get together on international occasions, or read the international press, or write books for international publication, what they use is Standard English.

In fact, it isn't totally identical everywhere – the differences between British and American spelling are one obvious point – but in writing it is over 99% the same. It is somewhat less established in speech, where differences will frequently be heard identifying people as British, American, and so on. However, these are still very few, and are likely to diminish as international contacts increase. It is a cliché, but the world has become a smaller place, and this has an obvious linguistic consequence – that we talk to each other more, and come to understand each other more. British people can now

watch American football on TV each week, and their awareness of that game's technical vocabulary increases as a result. When we reflect on the opportunities for contact these days, the chances are that the standard element in international English will be strengthened. Satellite television, beaming down American and British English into homes all round the world, is a particularly significant development. An increasingly standardized spoken English is a likely outcome, I believe.

These centripetal forces were lacking a thousand years ago. Once the Roman Empire had begun to fragment, there was nothing to stop the centrifugal forces tearing spoken Latin apart. The numbers of Standard Latin speakers around Europe were small, and communication between groups was difficult. The whole globe now is communicatively smaller than Europe was then. It is the relative isolation of people from each other that causes a formerly common language to move in different directions. In the Middle Ages, it was very easy for communities to be isolated from the rest of the world. Today it is virtually impossible.

### A synthesis

Centrifugal and centripetal forces co-exist, and we want both. We want to express our identity through language and we want to communicate intelligibly through language. We want to be different and we want to be the same. And the splendid thing about humans using language, of course, is that this is the kind of situation the brain handles very well, because it is so multifunctional. One of the main insights of linguistics during the twentieth century was to demonstrate the extraordinary capacity of the brain for language. Bilingualism, multilingualism, is the normal human condition. Well over half of the people in the world, perhaps two-thirds, are bilingual. Children learn their languages – often several languages – at extraordinary speed. Evidently, there is something in our make-up which promotes the acquisition of talk. I therefore see no intrinsic problems in the gradual emergence of a tri-English world – a world, that is, in which a home dialect – often very mixed in character – a national standard dialect, and an international standard dialect comfortably coexist. It is a prospect which our Latin forebears would have envied.

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