

## English in the New World

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The emergence of English as the world's first genuinely global language has been predicted for a long time. Now that it is here, its presence raises some unexpected and unprecedented questions.

But is it here? To be worthy of the designation 'global', a language needs to be present, in some sense, in every country in the world. English has probably now achieved this position. It is used as a first language by some 400 million people, mainly in the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. It has achieved special status as a 'second' language in over 70 countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore, and Vanuatu, spoken by at least another 400 million. And in most – perhaps now all? - of the remaining countries, it has become the foreign language which children are most likely to learn in school. The number of foreign learners may now exceed a billion.

Although estimates vary greatly, 1,500 million or more people are today thought to be competent communicators in English. That is a quarter of the world's population. So, is English a global language, when three out of four people do not yet use it? Given the areas of world influence where it has come to have a pivotal role, the answer has to be yes. The evidence suggests that English is now the dominant voice in international politics, banking, the press, the news agencies, advertising, broadcasting, the recording industry, motion pictures, travel, science and technology, knowledge management, and communications. No other language has achieved such a widespread profile - or is likely to, in the foreseeable future.

Several other languages have an important international presence, of course. Two, indeed, have far more mother-tongue speakers than English. A 1999 survey puts Mandarin Chinese and Spanish ahead of English, and although there is some uncertainty about the latter's statistics, there is no doubt that Spanish is currently growing faster than any other language, especially in the

Americas. But the reason for the global status of English is nothing to do with the number of first-language speakers it has. There are some three times as many people who speak it as a second or foreign language, and this ratio is increasing, given the differentials between such low population-growth countries as the UK and USA, on the one hand, and such high ones as India and Nigeria, on the other. The future of the language is evidently out there in the ELT (English-language teaching) world.

As a consequence, nobody owns English now. The language may have begun in Britain, and achieved its current world presence chiefly because of the USA, but the combined total of 300 million or so first-language speakers of those two countries is still only a fifth of the world total. Once a language comes to be so widespread, it ceases to have a single centre of influence. The changes taking place in the way English is used in such areas as South Africa, India, Ghana, and Singapore are outside of anyone's control. Not even a World English Academy could affect them.

So what will happen to the language, as a result? The most immediate result will be the development of new varieties of English, spoken by grass-roots populations all over the world. Some of these 'New Englishes' already exist, going under such names as 'Singlish' (short for Singaporean English) and 'Spanglish' (for the Hispanic/English mixed language heard in the USA). They exist simply because people want them to – that is, they want a distinctive form of language to express their local or ethnic identity. They therefore develop very different vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from that found in Standard English; and these differences will only increase over the next generation.

Does this mean that English is going to fragment into a 'family of English languages', in much the way that Vulgar Latin broke up into the Romance languages a millennium ago? At the most colloquial level, there will certainly be considerable mutual unintelligibility, especially if a great deal of local language mixing takes place. The sentence 'You wanted to beli some barang-barang' is a recent example from a conversation between two

Malaysians: they are speaking English, but they have put some Malay words into it (the meaning is 'buy some things'). This kind of mixing is a perfectly normal linguistic development, and it will be increasingly heard in multicultural settings everywhere, whether in Malaysia, Ghana, Zimbabwe - or Wales.

On the other hand, there are several centralising forces at work in the world, fostering mutual intelligibility. Standard English is the chief force, existing as an international reality in print, and available as a tool for national and international communication by people from all these countries. Anyone with a reasonable level of education will be able to read it. Many will be able to speak it. Certainly, everyone will be under some pressure to learn it. In August 1999, Prime Minister Goh of Singapore spent several minutes of his National Day address arguing that, if Singaporeans wanted to be understood by the outside world, they must replace Singlish by Standard English.

A replacement philosophy, however, will not work. The need to express one's local linguistic identity in a distinctive way is too deep-rooted. Nor is there any need to think in replacive terms. Because of the idiosyncrasies of my personal background, I am able to speak Welsh English, Liverpool English, and Standard English. When I learned the latter, in school, I did not drop the former two. And I am not alone. Many people have two dialects at their disposal – one for home, one for away. In Britain we have learned how pointless and counter-productive it is to expect children to acquire Standard English at the expense of their home dialect. Today, our curriculum teaches them to be proud of both. And the same kind of 'bidialectism' will, I believe, eventually become routine abroad.

There are too many centralising factors keeping Standard English in the forefront of world attention for the old Latin scenario to obtain. And its position is being reinforced by new technologies. Satellite television is beaming Standard English down into previously unreachable parts of the world, thereby fostering greater levels of mutual intelligibility. And the Internet currently has a predominantly (70%) English voice - though this figure is rapidly falling, as

other languages come on-line. The vast majority of the World Wide Web is in Standard English, albeit in many specialised varieties.

However, nothing is entirely predictable, in the world of language. Who would have believed, a millennium ago, that hardly anybody would know Latin a thousand years later? It takes only a shift in the balance of economic or political power for another language, lurking in the wings, to move centre-stage. But I am a great believer in the snowball effect. I think English has become so large, now, given the momentum of its history, that it is unstoppable. Too many people around the world have found it a useful tool for there to be any serious likelihood of a reversal - at least, not in the near future.

Where we need to take special care is to avoid the monolingual trap. People who speak English as a mother-tongue still need to learn foreign languages, both for the insight these give into different ways of seeing the world, and for the economic and social competitive advantages they permit. And places where English is growing need to make special efforts to look after their indigenous languages and dialects, otherwise these will become seriously endangered, and eventually die. The flowering of an individual language is a wonderful thing; but all languages have a right to flower, and it is up to us to give them the opportunity to do so.