

# GLOBALIZATION OF ENGLISH

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*Motto:*

*“Familiarity with German, English, Spanish, French and Italian is no longer sufficient for anyone wanting to keep abreast of modern civilisation... The tendency is for the world to have a single civilisation; but there is a multitude of languages of civilisation” (Antoine Meillet, 1918).*

*This paper will examine a relatively neglected aspect of the current scholarly and political debate on globalization: language. It is universally acknowledged that globalization requires/produces new channels, networks and practices of communication which are not dependent on geographical proximity, but less has been said about one obvious corollary: that globalization requires/produces new ways of using and thinking about language.*

## 1. What Is Global Language?

It is everywhere. Some 380million people speak it as their first language and perhaps two-thirds as many again as their second. A billion are learning it, about a third of the world's population are in some sense exposed to it and by 2050, it is predicted, half the world will be more or less proficient in it. It is the language of globalisation - of international business, politics and diplomacy. It is the language of computers and the Internet. “You’ll see it on posters in Côte d’Ivoire, you will hear it in pop songs in Tokyo, you will read it in official documents in Phnom Penh. Deutsche Welle broadcasts in it. Bjork, an Icelander, sings in it. French business schools teach in it. It is the medium of expression in cabinet meetings in Bolivia. Truly, the tongue spoken back in the 1300s only by the ‘low people’ of England, as Robert of Gloucester put it at the time, has come a long way. It is now the global language.”<sup>189</sup>

What is the language of globalization? French was once the language of worldwide diplomacy, but it has been on the decline for decades. English seems to work almost everywhere. English has inarguably achieved some sort of global status. Whenever we turn on the news to find out what is happening in East Asia, or the Balkans, or Africa, or South America, or practically anyplace, local people are being interviewed and telling us about it in English. This past April the journalist Ted Anthony, in [an article about](#) global English that he wrote for the Associated Press, observed, “When Pope John Paul II arrived in the Middle East last month to retrace Christ’s footsteps and addressed Christians, Muslims and Jews, the pontiff spoke not Latin, not Arabic, not Hebrew, not his native Polish. He spoke in English.”<sup>190</sup> Indeed, by now lists of facts about the amazing reach of English may have

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<sup>189</sup> *The Economist*, December 20th 2001

<sup>190</sup> <http://wire.ap.org/APpackages/english/english1.html>

begun to sound awfully familiar. Have we heard these particular facts before, or only others like them? English is the working language of the Asian trade group ASEAN. It is the de facto working language of 98 percent of German research physicists and 83 percent of German research chemists. It is the official language of the European Central Bank, even though the bank is in Frankfurt and neither Britain nor any other predominantly English-speaking country is a member of the European Monetary Union. It is the language in which black parents in South Africa overwhelmingly wish their children to be educated.<sup>191</sup>

In an era of increased communication through the telephone, fax machine, television, and modem, the world is becoming more and more globally oriented. Businesses, families, friends, and many other groups with common interests are able to form small “tele-“ or “cyber-“ communities that transcend geographic boundaries. Yet, despite our ability to transmit information across oceans, communication still relies on language to mediate interchange between individuals within these communities. Information is useless if it cannot be processed and understood. Therefore, in order to achieve true and complete globalization, we would have to eliminate language barriers and develop a universal standard according to which everyone could interact at the same level of understanding.

In many ways, this is already happening in that English is becoming the universal language of this global era. Tourists traveling to different countries, business men and women conferencing across the Atlantic, and advertisers trying to reach the maximum consumer base all use the English language to communicate with others on common terms. The effect of having a universal language is twofold: the loss of meaning and deeper understanding in literature versus the accessibility of communicating it to a wider audience. With English as the “universal” language, we have been growing a “tourist culture” that allows us to visit foreign lands without knowing the language and appreciating the native culture. However, this is outweighed by the ability to communicate with a more diverse community, fellow tourists from another culture, business partners over the Internet etc.

With English, in particular, as the semi-universal language, there have been several social repercussions that are often overlooked by its speakers. First, for Americans, having English as a semi-universal language allows us to perpetuate our ignorance of other languages and cultures rather than being forced to learn them by the power of the global market. This has longer term effects because we likewise do not emphasize knowledge of foreign language and cultures in American public elementary schools. Therefore, we place the burden on older students at an age when it is more difficult for them to learn foreign languages, thus making it difficult for students to learn more than one language.

Although it may seem unnecessary to learn several foreign languages as English becomes more and more communal, we must be wary of the effects that this will have; language, literature, and ethnic personality are in danger of being lost as we strive to “Americanize” the code through which we communicate and record information. Subtleties of meaning and unique characteristics of certain words are lost in translation; e.g., something is inescapably lost in reading a Nobel Prize-winning novel in English rather than its original language. Yet, it is also not practical to propose that every individual be able to communicate in all languages and dialects so as to preserve the diversity of all language. It seems that a

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<sup>191</sup> Cf. David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.158

universal language is not only necessary but also inevitable in a nearly completely globalized world. Nevertheless, our aim should be to find a language that is truly universal, enabling all members of the exchange to equally participate and learn it, while also preserving the multitude of diverse languages and dialects in the world by increasing our encouragement of foreign language study. The English language is a powerful leveler because of its ability to “Americanize” words and phrases from other languages and soon adopt them as its own. Yet, we must prevent it from swallowing them up in the process, and thus losing other languages as a source of variety leading to increased and more precise expressions. Communication today demands precision and accuracy; we must make sure that we are striving to enhance communication and language in the world rather than reducing it to a simpler and less expressive form.

## 2. First, Second, or Foreign Language?

People who expect English to triumph over all other languages are sometimes surprised to learn that the world today holds three times as many native speakers of Chinese as native speakers of English. “Chinese,” as language scholars use the word, refers to a family of languages and dialects the most widely spoken of which is Mandarin, and which share a written language although they are not all mutually intelligible when spoken. “English” refers to a family of languages and dialects the most widely spoken of which is standard American English, and which have a common origin in England - though not all varieties of English, either, are mutually intelligible. The versions of English used by educated speakers practically anywhere can be understood by most Americans, but pidgins, creoles, and diverse dialects belong to the same family, and these are not always so generally intelligible.

“Native speaker” is no easier to define with any precision than “Chinese” or “English,” although it means roughly what you would think: a person who grew up using the language as his or her first. In terms of how demographic patterns of language use are changing, native speakers are not where the action is. And the difference between native speakers and second- or foreign-language speakers is an important one subjectively as well as demographically. The subjective distinction will be painfully familiar to anyone who spent years in school studying a foreign language and is now barely able to summon enough of it to order dinner in a restaurant.

In any case, the numerical gap is impressive: about 1,113 million people speak Chinese as their mother tongue, whereas about 372 million speak English. And yet English is still the world’s second most common native language, though it is likely to cede second place within fifty years to the South Asian linguistic group whose leading members are Hindi and Urdu. In 2050, according to a model of language use that The English Company<sup>192</sup> developed and named “engco” after itself, the world will hold 1,384 million native speakers of Chinese, 556 million of Hindi and Urdu, and 508 million of English. As native languages Spanish and Arabic will be almost as common as English, with 486 million and 482 million speakers respectively. And among young people aged fifteen to twenty-four English is expected to be in fourth place, behind not only Chinese and the Hindi-Urdu languages but also Arabic, and just ahead of Spanish. But assuming that the tallies of native languages in use today are roughly accurate, the basis for projections of who will speak what as a first language fifty years from now is relatively strong. That is because many of the people who

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<sup>192</sup> <http://www.english.co.uk/>

will be alive in fifty years are alive now; a majority of the *parents* of people who will be here then are already here; and most people's first language is, of course, the first language of their parents.

Prod at this last idea, to see how it takes into account such things as immigration and bilingual or multilingual places, and you will find that it is not rock-solid. By David Crystal's estimate, for example, two thirds of the world's children grow up in bilingual environments and develop competence in two languages<sup>193</sup> - so it is an open question what the native language of many of those children is. Then, too, a range of population projections exists, and demographers keep tinkering with them all.

"Second-language" speakers live in places where English has some sort of official or special status. In India, for instance, the national government sanctions the use of English for its business, along with fifteen indigenous languages. What proportion of India's population of a billion speaks English is hotly debated, but most sources agree it is well under five percent. All the same, India is thought to have the fourth largest population of English-speakers in the world, after the United States, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria - or the third largest if you discount speakers of Nigerian Pidgin English. English is a second language for virtually everyone in India who speaks it. And obviously the United States, too, contains speakers of English as a second language - some 30 million of them in 1995, according to an estimate by David Crystal.<sup>194</sup>

"Foreign-language" speakers of English live in places where English is not singled out in any formal way, and tend to learn it to communicate with people from elsewhere. Examples might be Japanese who travel abroad on business and Italians who work in tourism in their own country. The distinction between the two categories of non-native speakers is sometimes blurry. In Denmark and Sweden the overwhelming majority of children are taught English in school - does that constitute a special status? The distinction between categories of speakers matters, in part because where English is a first or second language it develops local standards and norms. India, for instance, publishes dictionaries of Indian English, whereas Denmark and Sweden tend to defer to Britain or the United States in setting standards of English pronunciation and usage. The distinction also matters in relation to how entrenched English is in a given place, and how easy that place would find it to abandon the language.

One more surprise is how speculative any estimate of the use of English as a second or a foreign language must necessarily be. How large an English vocabulary and how great a command of English grammar does a person need in order to be considered an English-speaker? Generally, even the most rigorous attempts to determine how many people speak what, including the U.S. Census, depend on self-reporting. Language researchers readily admit that their statistics on second- and foreign-language use are, as Graddol put it in "The Decline of the Native Speaker", "educated guesswork."<sup>195</sup> David Crystal, in his [\*Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language\*](#), observed that only 98 million second-language

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<sup>193</sup> Cf. David Crystal, *Op.cit.* 167

<sup>194</sup> Cf. David Crystal, *Op.cit.*, p. 125

<sup>195</sup> David Graddol, "The decline of the native speaker", in David Graddol, Ulrike Meinhof (eds) *English in a Changing World* (AILA 1999), p.25

speakers of English in the world could be totted up with certainty.<sup>196</sup> In *English as a Global Language*, though, he argued that the true number was more nearly 350 million.<sup>197</sup> Graddol put forward a variety of estimates in "The Decline of the Native Speaker," including Crystal's, and explained why each had its proponents. According to the most expansive of them, the number of second-language speakers was 518 million in 1995. From 98 million to 518 million is quite a range.

Estimates of the number of foreign-language speakers of English range more widely still. Crystal reports that these "have been as low as 100 million and as high as 1,000 million."<sup>198</sup> The estimates *would* vary, because by definition foreign-language speakers live in places where English has no official or special status. They may or may not have been asked in a national census or other poll about their competence in English or other languages; they may or may not have had any formal schooling in English; their assessment of their ability to speak English may or may not be accurate.

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4. Meillet, Antoine, *Les langues dans l'Europe nouvelle*, Paris: Payot, 1918.
5. *The Economist*, December 20th 2001

### **Internet Resources:**

1. <http://www.english.co.uk/>
2. <http://wire.ap.org/APpackages/english/english1.html>

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<sup>196</sup> Cf. Crystal, David, [Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language](#), Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 187

<sup>197</sup> Cf. Crystal, David, *English as a Global Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 135

<sup>198</sup> Crystal, David, *Op.cit.*, p. 148