

1

Why a global language?



‘English is the global language.’

A headline of this kind must have appeared in a thousand newspapers and magazines in recent years. ‘English Rules’ is an actual example, presenting to the world an uncomplicated scenario suggesting the universality of the language’s spread and the likelihood of its continuation.¹ A statement prominently displayed in the body of the associated article, memorable chiefly for its alliterative ingenuity, reinforces the initial impression: ‘The British Empire may be in full retreat with the handover of Hong Kong. But from Bengal to Belize and Las Vegas to Lahore, the language of the sceptred isle is rapidly becoming the first global lingua franca.’ Millennial retrospectives and prognostications continued in the same vein, with several major newspapers and magazines finding in the subject of the English language an apt symbol for the themes of globalization, diversification, progress and identity addressed in their special editions.² Television programmes and series, too, addressed the issue, and achieved world-wide audiences.³ Certainly, by the turn of the century, the topic must have made contact

¹ *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, 12 July 1997. ² Ryan (1999).

³ For example, *Back to Babel*, a four-part (four-hour) series made in 2001 by Infonation, the film-making centre within the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, had sold to sixty-four countries by 2002. The series was notable for its range of interviews eliciting the attitudes towards English of users in several countries. It was also the first series to devote a significant

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David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

with millions of popular intuitions at a level which had simply not existed a decade before.

These are the kinds of statement which seem so obvious that most people would give them hardly a second thought. Of course English is a global language, they would say. You hear it on television spoken by politicians from all over the world. Wherever you travel, you see English signs and advertisements. Whenever you enter a hotel or restaurant in a foreign city, they will understand English, and there will be an English menu. Indeed, if there is anything to wonder about at all, they might add, it is why such headlines should still be newsworthy.

But English **is** news. The language continues to make news daily in many countries. And the headline **isn't** stating the obvious. For what does it mean, exactly? Is it saying that everyone in the world speaks English? This is certainly not true, as we shall see. Is it saying, then, that every country in the world recognizes English as an official language? This is not true either. So what does it mean to say that a language is a global language? Why is English the language which is usually cited in this connection? How did the situation arise? And could it change? Or is it the case that, once a language becomes a global language, it is there for ever?

These are fascinating questions to explore, whether your first language is English or not. If English is your mother tongue, you may have mixed feelings about the way English is spreading around the world. You may feel pride, that your language is the one which has been so successful; but your pride may be tinged with concern, when you realize that people in other countries may not want to use the language in the same way that you do, and are changing it to suit themselves. We are all sensitive to the way other people use (it is often said, abuse) 'our' language. Deeply held feelings of ownership begin to be questioned. Indeed, if there is one predictable consequence of a language becoming a global language, it is that nobody owns it any more. Or rather, everyone who has learned it now owns it – 'has a share in it' might be more

part of a programme to the consequences for endangered languages (see below, p. 20). The series became available, with extra footage, on DVD in 2002: www.infonation.org.uk.

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0521823471 - English as a Global Language, Second Edition

David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Why a global language?*

accurate – and has the right to use it in the way they want. This fact alone makes many people feel uncomfortable, even vaguely resentful. ‘Look what the Americans have done to English’ is a not uncommon comment found in the letter-columns of the British press. But similar comments can be heard in the USA when people encounter the sometimes striking variations in English which are emerging all over the world.

And if English is not your mother tongue, you may still have mixed feelings about it. You may be strongly motivated to learn it, because you know it will put you in touch with more people than any other language; but at the same time you know it will take a great deal of effort to master it, and you may begrudge that effort. Having made progress, you will feel pride in your achievement, and savour the communicative power you have at your disposal, but may none the less feel that mother-tongue speakers of English have an unfair advantage over you. And if you live in a country where the survival of your own language is threatened by the success of English, you may feel envious, resentful, or angry. You may strongly object to the naivety of the populist account, with its simplistic and often suggestively triumphalist tone.

These feelings are natural, and would arise whichever language emerged as a global language. They are feelings which give rise to fears, whether real or imaginary, and fears lead to conflict. Language marches, language hunger-strikes, language rioting and language deaths are a fact, in several countries. Political differences over language economics, education, laws and rights are a daily encounter for millions. Language is always in the news, and the nearer a language moves to becoming a global language, the more newsworthy it is. So how does a language come to achieve global status?

What is a global language?

A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. This might seem like stating the obvious, but it is not, for the notion of ‘special role’ has many facets. Such a role will be most evident in countries where large numbers of the people speak the language

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David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

as a mother tongue – in the case of English, this would mean the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, several Caribbean countries and a sprinkling of other territories. However, no language has ever been spoken by a mother-tongue majority in more than a few countries (Spanish leads, in this respect, in some twenty countries, chiefly in Latin America), so mother-tongue use by itself cannot give a language global status. To achieve such a status, a language has to be taken up by other countries around the world. 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. Firstly, a language can be made the 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 these societies, it is essential to master the official language as early in life as possible. Such a language is often described as a ‘second language’, because it is seen as a complement to a person’s mother tongue, or ‘first language’.⁴ The role of an official language is today best illustrated by English, which now has some kind of special status in over seventy countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore and Vanuatu. (A complete list is given at the end of chapter 2.) This is far more than the status achieved by any other language – though French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic are among those which have also developed a considerable official use. New political decisions on the matter continue to be made: for example, Rwanda gave English official status in 1996.

Secondly, a language can be made a priority in a country’s foreign-language teaching, even though this language has no official status. It becomes the language which children are most likely to be taught when they arrive in school, and the one most available

⁴ The term ‘second language’ needs to be used with caution – as indeed do all terms relating to language status. The most important point to note is that in many parts of the world the term is not related to official status, but simply reflects a notion of competence or usefulness. There is a long-established tradition for the term within the British sphere of influence, but there is no comparable history in the USA.

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0521823471 - English as a Global Language, Second Edition

David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Why a global language?*

to adults who – for whatever reason – never learned it, or learned it badly, in their early educational years. Russian, for example, held privileged status for many years among the countries of the former Soviet Union. Mandarin Chinese continues to play an important role in South-east Asia. English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language – in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil – and in most of these countries it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, often displacing another language in the process. In 1996, for example, English replaced French as the chief foreign language in schools in Algeria (a former French colony).

In reflecting on these observations, it is important to note that there are several ways in which a language can be official. It may be the sole official language of a country, or it may share this status with other languages. And it may have a ‘semi-official’ status, being used only in certain domains, or taking second place to other languages while still performing certain official roles. Many countries formally acknowledge a language’s status in their constitution (e.g. India); some make no special mention of it (e.g. Britain). In certain countries, the question of whether the special status should be legally recognized is a source of considerable controversy – notably, in the USA (see chapter 5).

Similarly, there is great variation in the reasons for choosing a particular language as a favoured foreign language: they include historical tradition, political expediency, and the desire for commercial, cultural or technological contact. Also, even when chosen, the ‘presence’ of the language can vary greatly, depending on the extent to which a government or foreign-aid agency is prepared to give adequate financial support to a language-teaching policy. In a well-supported environment, resources will be devoted to helping people have access to the language and learn it, through the media, libraries, schools, and institutes of higher education. There will be an increase in the number and quality of teachers able to teach the language. Books, tapes, computers, telecommunication systems and all kinds of teaching materials will be increasingly available. In many countries, however, lack of government support, or a shortage of foreign aid, has hindered the achievement of language-teaching goals.

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David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

Distinctions such as those between ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language status are useful, but we must be careful not to give them a simplistic interpretation. In particular, it is important to avoid interpreting the distinction between ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language use as a difference in fluency or ability. Although we might expect people from a country where English has some sort of official status to be more competent in the language than those where it has none, simply on grounds of greater exposure, it turns out that this is not always so. We should note, for example, the very high levels of fluency demonstrated by a wide range of speakers from the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. But we must also beware introducing too sharp a distinction between first-language speakers and the others, especially in a world where children are being born to parents who communicate with each other through a lingua franca learned as a foreign language. In the Emirates a few years ago, for example, I met a couple – a German oil industrialist and a Malaysian – who had courted through their only common language, English, and decided to bring up their child with English as the primary language of the home. So here is a baby learning English as a foreign language as its mother tongue. There are now many such cases around the world, and they raise a question over the contribution that these babies will one day make to the language, once they grow up to be important people, for their intuitions about English will inevitably be different from those of traditional native speakers.

These points add to the complexity of the present-day world English situation, but they do not alter the fundamental point. Because of the three-pronged development – of first-language, second-language, and foreign-language speakers – it is inevitable that a global language will eventually come to be used by more people than any other language. English has already reached this stage. The statistics collected in chapter 2 suggest that about a quarter of the world’s population is already fluent or competent in English, and this figure is steadily growing – in the early 2000s that means around 1.5 billion people. No other language can match this growth. Even Chinese, found in eight different spoken languages, but unified by a common writing system, is known to ‘only’ some 1.1 billion.

Cambridge University Press

0521823471 - English as a Global Language, Second Edition

David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Why a global language?*

What makes a global language?

Why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are. Latin became an international language throughout the Roman Empire, but this was not because the Romans were more numerous than the peoples they subjugated. They were simply more powerful. And later, when Roman military power declined, Latin remained for a millennium as the international language of education, thanks to a different sort of power – the ecclesiastical power of Roman Catholicism.

There is the closest of links between language dominance and economic, technological, and cultural power, too, and this relationship will become increasingly clear as the history of English is told (see chapters 2–4). Without a strong power-base, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication. Language has no independent existence, living in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it. Language exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails.

This point may seem obvious, but it needs to be made at the outset, because over the years many popular and misleading beliefs have grown up about why a language should become internationally successful. It is quite common to hear people claim that a language is a paragon, on account of its perceived aesthetic qualities, clarity of expression, literary power, or religious standing. Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic and French are among those which at various times have been lauded in such terms, and English is no exception. It is often suggested, for example, that there must be something inherently beautiful or logical about the structure of English, in order to explain why it is now so widely used. ‘It has less grammar than other languages’, some have suggested. ‘English doesn’t have a lot of endings on its words, nor do we have to remember the difference between masculine, feminine, and neuter gender, so it must be easier to learn’. In 1848, a reviewer in the British periodical *The Athenaeum* wrote:

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David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

In its easiness of grammatical construction, in its paucity of inflection, in its almost total disregard of the distinctions of gender excepting those of nature, in the simplicity and precision of its terminations and auxiliary verbs, not less than in the majesty, vigour and copiousness of its expression, our mother-tongue seems well adapted by *organization* to become the language of the world.

Such arguments are misconceived. Latin was once a major international language, despite its many inflectional endings and gender differences. French, too, has been such a language, despite its nouns being masculine or feminine; and so – at different times and places – have the heavily inflected Greek, Arabic, Spanish and Russian. Ease of learning has nothing to do with it. Children of all cultures learn to talk over more or less the same period of time, regardless of the differences in the grammar of their languages. And as for the notion that English has ‘no grammar’ – a claim that is risible to anyone who has ever had to learn it as a foreign language – the point can be dismissed by a glance at any of the large twentieth-century reference grammars. The *Comprehensive grammar of the English language*, for example, contains 1,800 pages and some 3,500 points requiring grammatical exposition.⁵

This is not to deny that a language may have certain properties which make it internationally appealing. For example, learners sometimes comment on the ‘familiarity’ of English vocabulary, deriving from the way English has over the centuries borrowed thousands of new words from the languages with which it has been in contact. The ‘welcome’ given to foreign vocabulary places English in contrast to some languages (notably, French) which have tried to keep it out, and gives it a cosmopolitan character which many see as an advantage for a global language. From a lexical point of view, English is in fact far more a Romance than a Germanic language. And there have been comments made about other structural aspects, too, such as the absence in English

⁵ Largely points to do with syntax, of course, rather than the morphological emphasis which is what many people, brought up in the Latinate tradition, think grammar to be about. The figure of 3,500 is derived from the index which I compiled for Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985), excluding entries which related solely to lexical items.

Cambridge University Press

0521823471 - English as a Global Language, Second Edition

David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Why a global language?*

grammar of a system of coding social class differences, which can make the language appear more ‘democratic’ to those who speak a language (e.g. Javanese) that does express an intricate system of class relationships. But these supposed traits of appeal are incidental, and need to be weighed against linguistic features which would seem to be internationally much less desirable – notably, in the case of English, the accumulated irregularities of its spelling system.

A language does not become a global language because of its intrinsic structural properties, or because of the size of its vocabulary, or because it has been a vehicle of a great literature in the past, or because it was once associated with a great culture or religion. These are all factors which can motivate someone to learn a language, of course, but none of them alone, or in combination, can ensure a language’s world spread. Indeed, such factors cannot even guarantee survival as a living language – as is clear from the case of Latin, learned today as a classical language by only a scholarly and religious few. Correspondingly, inconvenient structural properties (such as awkward spelling) do not stop a language achieving international status either.

A language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power. The explanation is the same throughout history. Why did Greek become a language of international communication in the Middle East over 2,000 years ago? Not because of the intellects of Plato and Aristotle: the answer lies in the swords and spears wielded by the armies of Alexander the Great. Why did Latin become known throughout Europe? Ask the legions of the Roman Empire. Why did Arabic come to be spoken so widely across northern Africa and the Middle East? Follow the spread of Islam, carried along by the force of the Moorish armies from the eighth century. Why did Spanish, Portuguese, and French find their way into the Americas, Africa and the Far East? Study the colonial policies of the Renaissance kings and queens, and the way these policies were ruthlessly implemented by armies and navies all over the known world. The history of a global language can be traced through the successful expeditions of its soldier/sailor speakers. And English, as we shall see in chapter 2, has been no exception.

Cambridge University Press

0521823471 - English as a Global Language, Second Edition

David Crystal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

But international language dominance is not solely the result of military might. It may take a militarily powerful nation to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it. This has always been the case, but it became a particularly critical factor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with economic developments beginning to operate on a global scale, supported by the new communication technologies – telegraph, telephone, radio – and fostering the emergence of massive multinational organizations. The growth of competitive industry and business brought an explosion of international marketing and advertising. The power of the press reached unprecedented levels, soon to be surpassed by the broadcasting media, with their ability to cross national boundaries with electromagnetic ease. Technology, chiefly in the form of movies and records, fuelled new mass entertainment industries which had a worldwide impact. The drive to make progress in science and technology fostered an international intellectual and research environment which gave scholarship and further education a high profile.

Any language at the centre of such an explosion of international activity would suddenly have found itself with a global status. And English, as we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, was apparently ‘in the right place at the right time’ (p. 78). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain had become the world’s leading industrial and trading country. By the end of the century, the population of the USA (then approaching 100 million) was larger than that of any of the countries of western Europe, and its economy was the most productive and the fastest growing in the world. British political imperialism had sent English around the globe, during the nineteenth century, so that it was a language ‘on which the sun never sets’.⁶ During the twentieth century, this world presence was maintained and promoted almost single-handedly through the economic supremacy of the new American superpower. Economics replaced politics as the chief driving force. And the language behind the US dollar was English.

⁶ An expression adapted from the nineteenth-century aphorism about the extent of the British Empire. It continued to be used in the twentieth century, for example by Randolph Quirk (1985: 1).