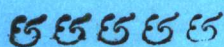


DAVID CRYSTAL

The English Language



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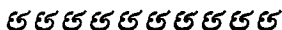


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Introduction

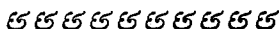
This book is a mixture of what, in the world of travel, tourists would expect to find in a 'guide' or a 'companion'. In the main, it provides a systematic account of the most important characteristics of the English language, such as you would hope to receive from a professional guide. At the same time, it includes a number of special features and illustrations which are off the beaten track, and which would be more likely to come from a knowledgeable companion. In exploring a new country, both kinds of approach have their value; and so I believe it is in exploring a language. In the space available, I have been able to cover most of the topics that would be considered central, or orthodox, in any account of English; but I have devoted a great deal of space, especially in the panels and end-of-chapter features, to topics which have no other justification than that I find them fascinating. My hope is that my tastes and yours will coincide, at least some of the time.

I have organized the book so that it can be dipped into. The chapters are numbered in sequence, but each is self-contained, and they do not have to be read in order. There is an element of the country ramble in this account of the language. Some parts can be read quickly; others invite you to pause and consider – and at times to act.

There are three main parts. Part I (Chapters 2–5) is anatomical, dealing with the structure of the language – its grammar, vocabulary, sounds and spellings. Part II (Chapters 6–8) is physiological: it shows the language in use in a wide variety of settings. And Part III (Chapters 9–14) is historical. Here we do not have an appropriate

biological term, for a language does not grow like a plant or person. Part III traces the development of English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present day, and its movement out of England to all parts of the globe.

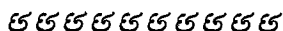
There are three appendices. Appendix A provides a chronology of the language – a résumé of the significant dates in English language history. Appendix B lists recent books about English, with some comments about their coverage or emphasis. And Appendix C gives in full any references made in the body of the text. The whole is preceded by a general chapter reviewing the current state of English world-wide.



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The English Language Today

In the glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth (the first, that is, from 1558 to 1603), the number of English speakers in the world is thought to have been between five and seven million. At the beginning of the reign of the second Queen Elizabeth, in 1952, the figure had increased almost fiftyfold: 250 million, it was said, spoke English as a mother tongue, and a further 100 million or so had learned it as a foreign language.

Thirty-five years on, the figures continue to creep up. The most recent estimates tell us that mother-tongue speakers are now over 300



'Would you like an English "You're too late for breakfast" or a Continental "You're too late for breakfast"?'

million. But this total is far exceeded by the numbers of people who use English as a foreign language – at least a further 400 million, according to the most conservative of estimates, and perhaps a further billion, according to radical ones. ‘Creep’, perhaps, is not quite the right word, when such statistics are introduced.

What accounts for the scale of these increases? The size of the mother-tongue total is easy to explain. It’s the Americans. The estimated population of the USA was just under 239 million in 1985, of whom about 215 million spoke English as a mother tongue. The British, Irish, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, and South Africans make up most of the others – but even combined they don’t reach 100 million. There’s no doubt where the majority influence is. However, these figures are growing relatively slowly at present – at an average rate of about half a per cent per annum. This is not where the drama lies.

A much more intriguing question is to ask what is happening to English in countries where people *don’t* use it as a mother tongue. A highly complicated question, as it turns out. Finding out about the number of foreigners using English isn’t easy, and that is why there is so much variation among the estimates. There are hardly any official figures. No one knows how many foreign people have learned English to a reasonable standard of fluency – or to any standard at all, for that matter. There are a few statistics available – from the examination boards, for example – but these are only the tip of a very large iceberg.

ENGLISH AS A ‘SECOND’ LANGUAGE

The iceberg is really in two parts, reflecting two kinds of language learning situation. The first part relates to those countries where English has some kind of special status – in particular, where it has been chosen as an ‘official’ language. This is the case in Ghana and Nigeria, for example, where the governments have settled on English as the main language to carry on the affairs of government, education, commerce, the media, and the legal system. In such cases, people have to learn English if they want to get on in life. They have their mother tongue to begin with – one or other of the local languages – and they start learning English, in school or in the street, at an early

age. For them, in due course, English will become a language to fall back on, when their mother tongue proves to be inadequate for communication – talking to people from a different tribal background, for example, or to people from outside the country. For them, English becomes their ‘second’ language.

Why do these countries not select a local language for official use? The problem is how to choose between the many indigenous languages, each of which represents an ethnic background to which the adherents are fiercely loyal. In Nigeria, for example, they would have to choose between Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo, Fulani, and other languages belonging to different ethnic groups. The number of speakers won’t decide the matter – there are about as many speakers of Hausa as there are of Yoruba, for instance. And even if one language did have a clear majority, its selection would be opposed by the combined weight of the other speakers, who would otherwise find themselves seriously disadvantaged, socially and educationally. Inter-tribal tension, leading to unrest and violence, would be a likely consequence. By giving official status to an outside language, such as English, all internal languages are placed on the same footing. Everyone is now equally disadvantaged. It is a complex decision to implement, but at least it is fair.

To talk of ‘disadvantaged’, though, is a little misleading. From another point of view, the population is now considerably ‘advantaged’, in that they thereby come to have access to a world of science, technology, and commerce which would otherwise not easily be available to them.

But why English? In Ghana, Nigeria, and many other countries, the choice is motivated by the weight of historical tradition from the British or American colonial era. A similar pattern of development can be observed in countries which were influenced by other cultures, such as the French, Spanish, Portuguese, or Dutch. French, for example, is the official language in Chad; Portuguese in Angola. But English is an official or semi-official language in over sixty countries of the world (see p. 5) – a total which far exceeds the range of these other languages.

Does this mean that we can obtain an estimate of the world’s second-language English speakers simply by adding up the populations of all the countries involved? Unfortunately, it isn’t so easy.

Most of these countries are in underdeveloped parts of the world, where educational opportunities are limited. The country may espouse English officially, but only a fraction of the population may be given an opportunity to learn it. The most dramatic example of this gap between theory and practice is India.

In 1985, the population of India was estimated to be 768 million. English is an official language here, alongside Hindi. Several other languages have special status in their own regions, but English is the language of the legal system; it is a major language in Parliament; and it is a preferred language in the universities and in the all-India competitive exams for senior posts in such fields as the civil service and engineering. Some 3,000 English newspapers are published throughout the country. There is thus great reason to learn to use the language well. But it is thought that those with an educated awareness of English may be as little as 3 per cent of the population. Perhaps 10 per cent or more, if we recognize lower levels of achievement, and include several varieties of pidgin English (see pp. 12-16). In real terms, the English speakers of India may only number 70 millions – a small amount compared with the total population. On the other hand, this figure is well in excess of the population of Britain.

When all the estimates for second-language use around the world are added up, we reach a figure of around 300 million speakers – about as many as the total of mother-tongue users. But we have to remember that most of these countries are in parts of the world (Africa, South Asia) where the population increase is four times as great as that found in mother-tongue countries. If present trends continue, within a generation mother-tongue English use will have been left far behind.

ENGLISH AS A 'FOREIGN' LANGUAGE

The second part of the language-learning iceberg relates to people who live in countries where English has no official status, but where it is learned as a foreign language in schools, institutes of higher education, and through the use of a wide range of 'self-help' materials. There are only hints as to what the numbers involved might be. Even in the statistically aware countries of Western Europe, there are no reliable figures available for the number of people who are learning

English in the world

English is an official language, or has a special status, in over 60 of the world's territories, listed below (with population estimates, in most cases for 1985). Countries with a major mother-tongue English population are marked *. Note that there are several other countries where English has no official status, but where there are none the less substantial numbers of second-language speakers, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Malaysia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

1. Australia *	15,749,000	27. Nauru (with	
2. Bahamas *	230,000	Nauruan)	8,000
3. Barbados *	252,700	28. New Zealand *	3,291,300
4. Belize *	166,400	29. Nigeria	96,015,000
5. Bermuda *	56,700	30. Pakistan (with Urdu)	100,356,000
6. Botswana	1,082,000	31. Papua New Guinea	3,345,000
7. Cameroon (with		32. Philippines (with	
French)	9,635,000	Filipino)	54,669,000
8. Canada (with		33. Puerto Rico (with	
French) *	25,427,000	Spanish)	3,311,100
9. Dominica *	77,400	34. Saint Christopher	
10. Fiji	692,000	and Nevis *	47,000
11. Gambia	749,200	35. Saint Lucia *	137,600
12. Ghana	12,815,300	36. Saint Vincent and the	
13. Grenada *	96,000	Grenadines *	105,000
14. Guyana *	953,000	37. Senegal (with	
15. Hong Kong (with		French)	6,520,000
Chinese)	5,415,000	38. Seychelles (with	
16. India (with Hindi,		French)	65,000
and several local		39. Sierra Leone	3,930,000
languages)	768,000,000	40. Singapore (with	
17. Ireland (with Irish) *	3,614,000	Chinese, Malay,	
18. Jamaica *	2,343,700	Tamil)	2,558,200
19. Kenya (with Swahili)	20,312,000	41. Solomon Is.	267,270
20. Kiribati	65,000	42. South Africa (with	
21. Lesotho (with Sotho)	1,499,600	Afrikaans) *	27,424,000
22. Liberia	2,232,000	43. Suriname (with	
23. Malawi (with Chewa)	7,058,800	Dutch)	395,000
24. Malta (with Maltese)	333,000	44. Swaziland (with	
25. Mauritius	1,024,900	Swazi)	647,400
26. Namibia (with		45. Tanzania (with	
Afrikaans)	1,097,000	Swahili)	21,730,000

46. Tonga (with Tongan)	97,050	53. Western Samoa (with Samoan)	160,000
47. Trinidad and Tobago*	1,189,000	54. Zambia	6,666,000
48. Tuvalu	8,580	55. Zimbabwe	8,100,000
49. Uganda	14,716,100	And many other	
50. United Kingdom*	56,518,000	British and US dependencies (e.g. Gibraltar, Falkland Is., US Pacific Territories)	300,000
51. United States of America*	238,740,000		
52. Vanuatu (with French)	140,000		

English as a foreign language -- or any other language, for that matter. In a continent such as South America, the total is pure guesswork.

The total most often cited in the mid-1980s was 100 million, based largely on the figures available from English-language examining boards, estimates of listeners to English-language radio programmes, sales of English-language newspapers, and the like. But this figure did not take into account what is currently happening in the country where data about anything has traditionally been notoriously difficult to come by: China.

In China, there has been an explosion of interest in the English language in recent years. One visitor returned to China in 1979, after an absence of twenty years, and wrote: 'in 1959, everyone was carrying a book of the thoughts of Chairman Mao; today, everyone is carrying a book of elementary English'. In 1983, it is thought, around 100 million people watched the BBC television series designed to teach the language, *Follow Me*. Considerable publicity was given in the Western media to the sight of groups of Chinese practising English-language exercises after work, or queuing to try out their English on a passing tourist. The presenter of *Follow Me*, Kathy Flower, became a national celebrity, recognized everywhere. And the interest continues, with new series of programmes being designed to meet the needs of scientific and business users. What level of fluency is being achieved by this massive influx of learners is unknown. But if only a fraction of China's population is successful, this alone will be enough to make the 100 million total for world foreign-language use a gross underestimate.

And why shouldn't they be successful, in China, Japan, Brazil, Poland, Egypt, and elsewhere? There is enormous motivation, given the way that English has become the dominant language of world

communication. Textbooks on English these days regularly rehearse the litany of its achievements. It is the main language of the world's books, newspapers, and advertising. It is the official international language of airports and air traffic control. It is the chief maritime language. It is the language of international business and academic conferences, of diplomacy, of sport. Over two thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three quarters of the world's mail is written in English. Eighty per cent of all the information stored in the electronic retrieval systems of the world is stored in English. And, at a local level, examples of the same theme can be found everywhere. A well-known Japanese company, wishing to negotiate with its Arabic customers, arranges all its meetings in English. A Colombian doctor reports that he spends almost as much time improving his English as practising medicine. A Copenhagen university student comments: 'Nearly everyone in Denmark speaks English; if we didn't, there wouldn't be anyone to talk to.'

Statistics of this kind are truly impressive, and could continue for several paragraphs. They make the point that it is not the number of mother-tongue speakers which makes a language important in the eyes of the world (that crown is carried by Chinese), but the extent to which a language is found useful outside its original setting. In the course of history, other languages have achieved widespread use throughout educated society. During the Middle Ages, Latin remained undisputed as the European language of learning. In the eighteenth century, much of this prestige passed to French. Today, it is the turn of English. It is a development which could be reversed only by a massive change in the economic fortunes of America, and in the overall balance of world power.

CONSEQUENCES

When a language, like a nation, exercises a new-found influence in world affairs, several things happen. People begin to study it in unprecedented detail. Research projects flourish. Scholars write grammars, dictionaries, and manuals of its style. They plan surveys of educated usage, and surveys of dialects. Courses in the teaching of the language proliferate, in a rapidly increasing number of (not always respectable) institutions. There is a general raising of



English in the world