English as a global language

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David Crystal, world authority on the English language, has written a timely and informative account of the phenomenon of English as a global language. It includes a historical summary of the global development of English; an analysis, well supported by facts and figures, of the current spread and status of English as a first and second language internationally; and an informed assessment – by one of the leading scholars of language – of the future of English. The book asks three basic questions: what makes a world language? why is English the leading candidate? and will it continue to hold that position? It steers even-handedly through the minefield of political debate about the current hegemony of English, and will appeal to anyone with an interest in language issues, whatever the political views on the subject.

Preface

It has all happened so quickly. In 1950, any notion of English as a true world language was but a dim, shadowy, theoretical possibility, surrounded by the political uncertainties of the Cold War, and lacking any clear definition or sense of direction. Fifty years on, and World English exists as a political and cultural reality. How could such a dramatic linguistic shift have taken place, in less than a lifetime? And why has English, and not some other language, achieved such a status? These are the questions which this book seeks to answer.

The time is right to address these issues. Thanks to progress in sociolinguistics, we now know a great deal about the social and cultural circumstances which govern language status and change, and several encyclopedic surveys have made available detailed information about world language use. There is also an increasingly urgent need for sensitive discussion. In several countries, the role of English has become politically contentious, and arguments have raged about its current and future status. Have matters developed to the point where the rise of English as a world language is unstoppable? To debate this question, we need to be aware of the factors which will influence the outcome.

It is difficult to write a book on this topic without it being interpreted as a political statement. Because there is no more intimate or more sensitive an index of identity than language, the

subject is easily politicized, as it has been in such diverse locations as India, Malaysia, and the USA. A detached account is all the more desirable, and this is what I have tried to write in these pages, partly based on the historical research I carried out for my *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, but extending this to provide a fuller and more focused analysis of the cultural factors involved. I have thus tried to tell the story of World English objectively, without taking sides on political issues, and without adopting the kind of triumphalist tone which is unfortunately all too common when people write on English in English.

But authors should always tell their readership where they stand, when dealing with contentious topics, hence the following summary. I firmly believe in two linguistic principles, which some people see as contradictory, but which for me are two sides of the one coin.

- I believe in the fundamental value of multilingualism, as an amazing world resource which presents us with different perspectives and insights, and thus enables us to reach a more profound understanding of the nature of the human mind and spirit. In my ideal world, everyone would be at least bi-lingual. I myself live in a community where two languages – Welsh and English – exist side by side, and I have cause to reflect every day on the benefits which come from being part of two cultures. A large part of my academic life, as a researcher in general linguistics, has been devoted to persuading people to take language and languages seriously, so that as much as possible of our linguistic heritage can be preserved.
- I believe in the fundamental value of a common language, as an amazing world resource which presents us with unprecedented possibilities for mutual understanding, and thus enables us to find fresh opportunities for international cooperation. In my ideal world, everyone would have fluent command of a single world language. I am already in the fortunate position of being a fluent user of the language which is most in contention for this role, and have cause to reflect every day on the benefits of having it at my disposal. A large part of my academic life, as a specialist in applied English linguistics, has been devoted to making these benefits

available to others, so that the legacy of an unfavoured linguistic heritage should not lead inevitably to disadvantage.

We need to take both principles on board if we are to make any progress towards the kind of peaceful and tolerant society which most people dream about. The first principle fosters historical identity and promotes a climate of mutual respect. The second principle fosters cultural opportunity and promotes a climate of international intelligibility. I hate it when people turn these principles against each other, seeing them as contradictory rather than complementary; but I can perfectly well understand why it happens. I am no innocent in the real bilingual world. Living in a bilingual community as I do, and (when I'm not being a linguist) being the director of a bicultural arts centre, I am very well aware of the problems posed by limited financial resources, conflicts of interest, and downright intolerance. I have had my share of heated arguments with government authorities, local politicians, and national grant-awarding bodies over the question of how to arrive at a sensible and sensitive balance between the two principles, in their local application to the situation in Wales. So I am under no illusions about how difficult it is to achieve a consensus on such deep-rooted matters. But a search for balance and consensus there must always be, in a civilized society, and this need becomes even more critical at a world level, where the resources for mutual harm, as a consequence of failure, are so much greater.

I have written *English as a Global Language* as a contribution towards this long-term goal, but I cannot take the credit for first seeing the need for such a book. The suggestion in fact came from Mauro E. Mujica, chairman of US English, the largest organization which has been campaigning for English to be made the official language of the USA. He wanted to have a book which would explain to the members of his organization, in a succinct and factual way, and without political bias, why English has achieved such a worldwide status. I could not find such a book, nor did my own previous accounts of the history of the language give a comprehensive account of the social-historical factors involved. I therefore decided to research a short account for private circulation among his membership, and the present book

is a heavily reworked, retitled, and much expanded version of that – now including, for example, a separate section on the 'official English' debate in the USA and further material on the use of English on the Internet. Many other revisions derive from suggestions made by a group of British and American academic reviewers of the typescript, commissioned by my publisher, Cambridge University Press, about ways in which the range and balance of the book might be improved; and *English as a Global Language* has benefited greatly from their input. I am also grateful to Randolph Quirk, especially for his suggestions about ways of improving the statistical picture presented in chapter 2, and to Geoffrey Nunberg for comments which have helped my understanding of the US situation, and for sending me some unpublished observations relating to the Internet, for use in chapter 4.

For some, of course, the mere mention of any political organization, in the natural history of a project, is enough to bias its content. I should therefore make it very clear that this book has not been written according to any political agenda. I would have written exactly the same work if the initial idea had come from an organization on the other side of the US political linguistic divide. *English as a Global Language* simply asks three questions: what makes a world language? why is English the leading candidate? and will it continue to hold this position? An account of the relevant facts and factors can be of benefit to anyone with an interest in language matters, whatever their political views, and it is this which I hope the book has been able to achieve.

David Crystal
Holyhead

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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. It is the kind of statement which seems so obvious that most people would give it 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. Indeed, if there is anything to wonder about at all, they might add, it is why such a headline 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. 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 (or, it is more often said, abuse) 'our' language.

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.

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 as a mother tongue – in the case of English, this would mean the

USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and several Caribbean countries. 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'. 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. Each year brings new political decisions on the matter: 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 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 to 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.

Because of this three-pronged development – of first-language, official-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 nearly a quarter of the world's population is already fluent or competent

in English, and this figure is steadily growing – in the late-1990s, that means between 1.2 and 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.

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 cultural power, and this relationship will become increasingly clear as the history of English is told (see chapters 2–4). Without a strong power-base, whether political, military or economic, 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:

> 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.

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 more a Romance than a Germanic language. And there have been comments made about other structural aspects, too, such as the absence in English 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 many 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 becomes an international language for one chief reason: the political power of its people – especially their 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.

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 early in the twentieth century, 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, 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 in the right place at the right time. 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'. During the twentieth century, this world presence was maintained and promoted, almost single-handedly, through the economic supremacy of the new American superpower. And the language behind the US dollar was English.

Why do we need a global language?

Translation has played a central (though often unrecognized) role in human interaction for thousands of years. When monarchs or ambassadors met on the international stage, there would invariably be interpreters present. But there are limits to what can