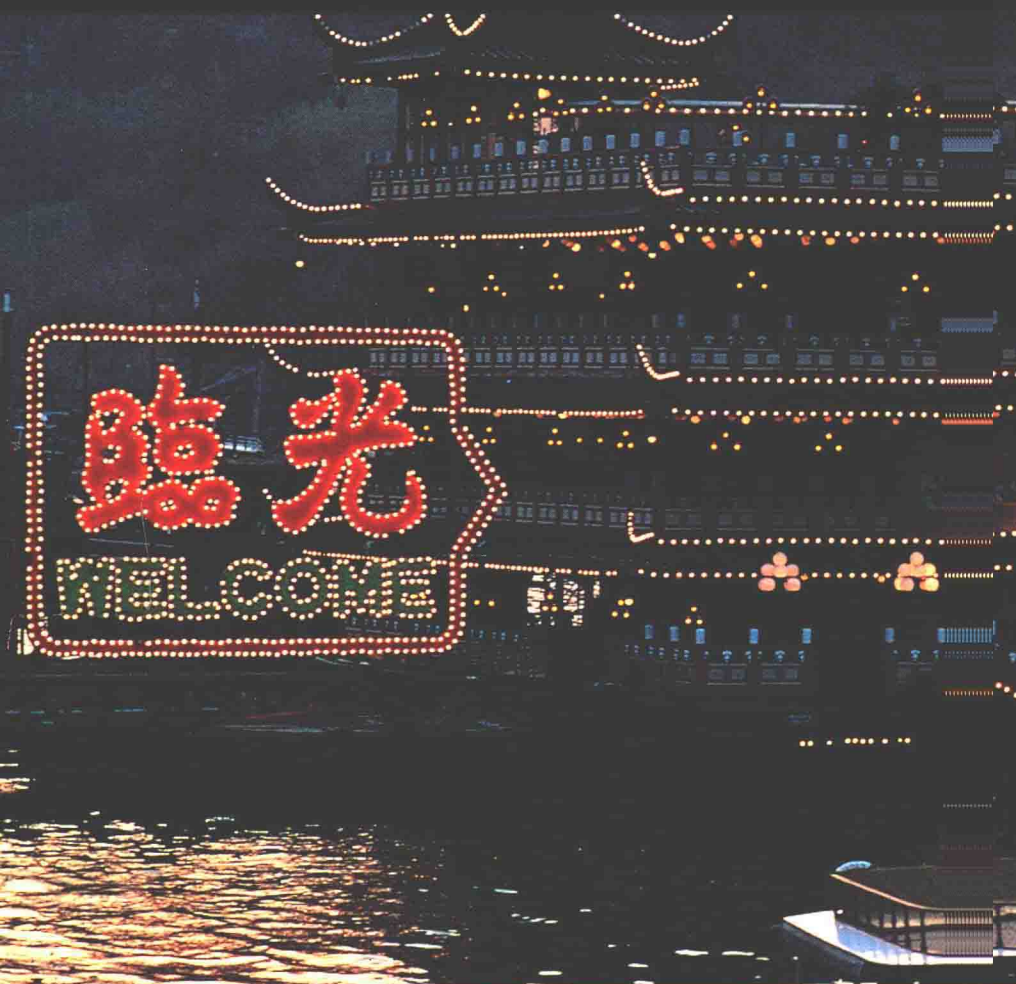


DAVID CRYSTAL

English as a
Global Language

SECOND EDITION



English as a global language

Second edition

DAVID CRYSTAL



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Preface to the second edition



Although *English as a global language* did not appear until 1997, it was actually written in 1995, which in 2002 seems a very long time ago, as far as global linguistic developments are concerned. The 1990s were a revolutionary decade, in that respect, with a proliferation of new linguistic varieties arising out of the worldwide implementation of the Internet, an emerging awareness of the crisis affecting the world's endangered languages, and an increasingly public recognition of the global position of English. Academic publications relating to this last topic seriously increased in number and weight. The largely article-driven literature of previous decades had typically been exploratory and programmatic, restricted to individual situations, anecdotal in illustration, lacking a sociolinguistic frame of reference, and focusing on the written (and usually literary) language. By contrast, the 1990s saw the emergence of a more comprehensive perspective in which spoken varieties became prominent, there was a real increase in the amount of descriptive data, and attempts were made to arrive at explanations and to make predictions of an appropriately general and sociolinguistically informed character.

In particular, several book-length treatments of English appeared, each providing a personal synthesis of previous observations and speculations, and focusing on the phenomenon of global English as an end in itself. By the end of the decade, the different attitudes had highlighted a number of important theoretical issues,

and made it possible to see the various kinds of focus adopted by individual authors. I came to see the first edition of the present book, as a consequence, more clearly as predominantly a retrospective account, examining the range of historical factors which have led to the current position of English in the world. Although avoiding firm predictions about the future, I thought it likely that English 'has already grown to be independent of any form of social control' (1st edition, p. 139). In my view the momentum of growth has become so great that there is nothing likely to stop its continued spread as a global lingua franca, at least in the foreseeable future. Other books took different perspectives. For example, David Graddol's *The future of English*, published in 1998, looked towards the future, beginning with the present-day situation, and examining the contemporary trends likely to affect the language's eventual role. For him, English is certainly stoppable. Emphasizing the unpredictability inherent in language use, he suggested that 'the current global wave of English may lose momentum' (p. 60) and saw the real possibility of new language hierarchies emerging in the next century, with English holding a less global position. Then Tom McArthur, in *The English languages*, also published in 1998, adopted a more synchronic perspective, moving away from a monolithic concept of English. His primary focus was on the kinds of variation encountered in the language as a consequence of its global spread. He suggested that English was undergoing a process of radical change which would eventually lead to fragmentation into a 'family of languages'.

The role of these books has been to underline some of the parameters of inquiry which must influence the next wave of empirical studies. From a stage when there were few general hypotheses to motivate research, we now have a multiplicity of them. Some are issues relating to language use: several political, economic, demographic and social factors have been identified as potential influences on world language presence, all of which have been recognized as operating at local regional levels, such as in relation to minority languages or endangered languages; however, the role of such factors at a global level remains virtually unexplored. Others are issues affecting language structure: the way in which regional and social factors influence the growth of language varieties and

foster linguistic change has formed much of the subject-matter of sociolinguistics and dialectology; but here, too, there is as yet little understanding of what happens when these processes begin to operate at a macro level. To take just one example: the radical diversification envisioned by McArthur could have several outcomes, certainly including the development of an English family of languages, but also resulting in various forms of multiglossia (going well beyond current conceptions of diglossia), the emergence of more complex notions of ‘standard’, and different kinds of multi-dialectism. We have as yet no adequate typology of the remarkable range of language contact situations which have emerged as a consequence of globalization, either physically (e.g. through population movement and economic development) or virtually (e.g. through Internet communication and satellite broadcasting).

I originally wrote *English as a global language* as (what I hoped would be) a straightforward read, and chose not to impede the flow for a general reader by providing an array of academic footnotes and a full bibliographical apparatus. When I wanted to make a specific reference, I incorporated it into the text. I think now, several years on, things have changed, with very much more literature available to refer to, and more points of view to take into account, so for this new edition I have adopted a more conventional academic style of presentation. As far as content is concerned, the main change has been an expanded chapter 5, which now includes a long section illustrating and discussing the structural features of ‘New Englishes’. This too has been the consequence of the much greater availability of descriptive studies of individual varieties than was the case a decade ago. Finally, all population figures and estimates of usage have been updated to the year 2001.

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Preface to the first edition



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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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.’² 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.³ 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

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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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

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.