

## Whose language?

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By Michael Skapinker

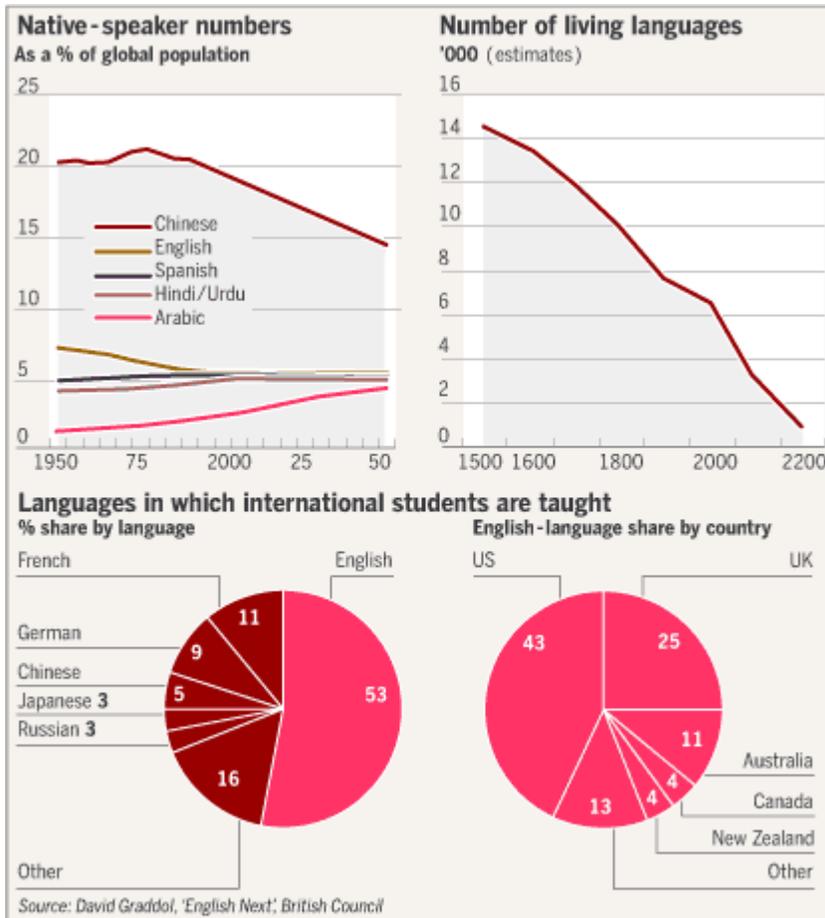
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Chung Dong-young, a former television anchorman and candidate to be president of South Korea, may be behind in the opinion polls but one of his campaign commitments is eye-catching. If elected, he promises a vast increase in English teaching so that young Koreans do not have to go abroad to learn the language. The country needed to “solve the problem of families separated for English learning”, the Korea Times reported him saying.

In China, Yu Minhong has turned New Oriental, the company he founded, into the country’s biggest provider of private education, with more than 1m students over the past financial year, the overwhelming majority learning English. In Chile, the government has said it wants its population to be bilingual in English and Spanish within a generation.

No one is certain how many people are learning English. Ten years ago, the British Council thought it was around 1bn. A report, *English Next*, published by the council last year, forecast that the number of English learners would probably peak at around 2bn in 10-15 years.

How many people already speak English? David Crystal, one of the world’s leading experts on the language and author of more than 100 books on the subject, estimates that 1.5bn people – around one-quarter of the world’s population – can communicate reasonably well in English.



Latin was once the shared language over a vast area, but that was only in Europe and North Africa. Never in recorded history has a language been as widely spoken as English is today. The reason millions are learning it is simple: it is the language of international business and therefore the key to prosperity. It is not just that Microsoft, Google and Vodafone conduct their business in English; it is the language in which Chinese speak to Brazilians and Germans to Indonesians.

David Graddol, the author of *English Next*, says it is tempting to view the story of English as a triumph for its native speakers in North America, the British Isles and Australasia – but that would be a mistake. Global English has entered a more complex phase, changing in ways that the older English-speaking countries cannot control and might not like.

Commentators on global English ask three principal questions. First, is English likely to be challenged by other fast-growing languages such as Mandarin, Spanish or Arabic? Second, as English spreads and is influenced by local languages, could it fragment, as Latin did into Italian and French – or might it survive but spawn new languages, as German did with Dutch and Swedish? Third, if English does retain a standard character that allows it to continue being understood everywhere, will the standard be that of the old English-speaking world or something new and different?

Mr Graddol says the idea of English being supplanted as the world language is not fanciful. About 50 years ago, English had more native speakers than any language except Mandarin. Today both Spanish and Hindi-Urdu have as many native speakers as English does. By the middle of this century, English could fall into fifth place behind Arabic in the numbers who speak it as a first language.

Some believe English will survive because it has a natural advantage: it is easy to learn. Apart from a pesky “s” at the end of the present tense third person singular (“she runs”), verbs remain

unchanged no matter who you are talking about. (I run, you run, they run; we ran, he ran, they ran.) Definite and indefinite articles are unaffected by gender (the actor, the actress; a bull, a cow.) There is no need to remember whether a table is masculine or feminine.

There is, however, plenty that is difficult about English. Try explaining its phrasal verbs – the difference, for example, between “I stood up to him” and “I stood him up”. Mr Crystal dismisses the idea that English has become the world’s language because it is easy. In an essay published last year, he said Latin’s grammatical complexity did not hamper its spread. “A language becomes a world language for extrinsic reasons only, and these all relate to the power of the people who speak it,” he wrote. The British empire carried English to all those countries on which the sun never set; American economic and cultural clout ensured English’s dominance after the British empire had faded.

So could China’s rise see Mandarin becoming the world’s language? It may happen. “Thinking back a thousand years, who would have predicted the demise of Latin?” Mr Crystal asks. But at the moment there is little sign of it, he says. The Chinese are rushing to learn English.

Mr Graddol agrees that we are unlikely to see English challenged in our lifetime. Once a lingua franca is established, it takes a long time to shift. Latin may be disappearing but it remained the language of science for generations and was used by the Roman Catholic church well into the 20th century.

As for English fragmenting, Mr Graddol argues it has already happened. “There are many Englishes that you and I wouldn’t understand,” he says. *World Englishes*, a recent book by Andy Kirkpatrick, professor at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, gives some examples. An Indian teenager’s journal contains this entry: “Two rival groups are out to have fun . . . you know generally indulge in *dhamal* [a type of dance] and pass time. So, what do they do? Pick on a *bechaara bakra* [poor goat] who has entered college.” Prof Kirkpatrick also provides this sample of Nigerian pidgin English: “Monkey de work, baboon dey chop” (Monkeys work, baboons eat).

It is unlikely, however, that this fragmentation will lead to the disappearance of English as a language understood around the world. It is common for speakers of English to switch from one or other variant to a use of language more appropriate for work, school or international communication. Mr Crystal says modern communication through television, film and the internet means the world is likely to hold on to an English that is widely understood.

The issue is: whose English will it be? Non-native speakers now outnumber native English-speakers by three to one. As hundreds of millions more learn the language, that imbalance will grow. Mr Graddol says the majority of encounters in English today take place between non-native speakers. Indeed, he adds, many business meetings held in English appear to run more smoothly when there are no native English-speakers present.

Native speakers are often poor at ensuring that they are understood in international discussions. They tend to think they need to avoid longer words, when comprehension problems are more often caused by their use of colloquial and metaphorical English.

Barbara Seidlhofer, professor of English and applied linguistics at the University of Vienna, says relief at the absence of native speakers is common. “When we talk to people (often professionals) about international communication, this observation is made very often indeed. We haven’t conducted a systematic study of this yet, so what I say is anecdotal for the moment, but there seems to be very widespread agreement about it,” she says. She quotes an Austrian banker as saying: “I always find it easier to do business [in English] with partners from Greece or Russia or Denmark. But when the Irish call, it gets complicated and taxing.”

On another occasion, at an international student conference in Amsterdam, conducted in English, the lone British representative was asked to be “less English” so that the others could understand her.

Prof Seidlhofer is also founding director of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (Voice), which is recording and transcribing spoken English interactions between speakers of the language around the world. She says her team has noticed that non-native speakers are varying standard English grammar in several ways. Even the most competent sometimes leave the “s” off the third person singular. It is also common for non-native speakers to use “which” for humans and

“who” for non- humans (“things who” and “people which”).

Prof Seidlhofer adds that many non-native speakers leave out definite and indefinite articles where they are required in standard English or put them in where standard English does not use them. Examples are “they have a respect for all” or “he is very good person”. Nouns that are not plural in native-speaker English are used as plurals by non-native speakers (“informations”, “knowledges”, “advices”). Other variations include “make a discussion”, “discuss about something” or “phone to somebody”.

Many native English speakers will have a ready riposte: these are not variations, they are mistakes. “Knowledges” and “phone to somebody” are plain wrong. Many non-native speakers who teach English around the world would agree. But language changes, and so do notions of grammatical correctness. Mr Crystal points out that plurals such as “informations” were once regarded as correct and were used by Samuel Johnson.

Those who insist on standard English grammar remain in a powerful position. Scientists and academics who want their work published in international journals have to adhere to the grammatical rules followed by the native English-speaking elites.

But spoken English is another matter. Why should non-native speakers bother with what native speakers regard as correct? Their main aim, after all, is to be understood by one another. As Mr Graddol says, in most cases there is no native speaker present.

Prof Seidlhofer says that the English spoken by non-native speakers “is a natural language, and natural languages are difficult to control by ‘legislation’.

“I think rather than a new international standard, what we are looking at is the emergence of a new ‘international attitude’, the recognition and awareness that in many international contexts interlocutors do not need to speak like native speakers, to compare themselves to them and thus always end up ‘less good’ – a new international assertiveness, so to speak.”

When native speakers work in an international organisation, some report their language changing. Mr Crystal has written: “On several occasions, I have encountered English-as-a-first-language politicians, diplomats and civil servants working in Brussels commenting on how they have felt their own English being pulled in the direction of these foreign-language patterns . . . These people are not ‘talking down’ to their colleagues or consciously adopting simpler expressions, for the English of their interlocutors may be as fluent as their own. It is a natural process of accommodation, which in due course could lead to new standardised forms.”

Perhaps written English will eventually make these accommodations too. Today, having an article published in the Harvard Business Review or the British Medical Journal represents a substantial professional accomplishment for a business academic from China or a medical researcher from Thailand. But it is possible to imagine a time when a pan-Asian journal, for example, becomes equally, or more, prestigious and imposes its own “Globish” grammatical standards on writers – its editors changing “the patient feels” to “the patient feel”.

Native English speakers may wince but are an ever-shrinking minority.

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