English in the future

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This book has tried to establish a new agenda for debate, not simply on the future of the English language in the 21st century, but also on the role of its native speakers, their institutions and their global enterprises.

This final section brings together some of the arguments put forward in the book and shows how they might help address key questions about the future of English. The 'rush' to English around the world may, for example, prove to be a temporary phenomenon which cannot be sustained indefinitely. Languages other than English are likely to achieve regional importance whilst changed economic relations between native-speaking English countries and other parts of the world will alter the rationale for learning and speaking English.

The ELT industry may also find itself vulnerable to shifts in public opinion, like other global business enterprises now experiencing 'nasty surprises' in their world markets. An increasing concern for social equity rather than excessive benefit for the few is one expected social value shift which likely to inform both public policy decisions and personal life-choices and this will have unpredictable consequences for the popularity of learning English as a foreign language.

The English language nevertheless seems set to play an ever more important role in world communications, international business, and social and cultural affairs. But it may not be the native-speaking countries who most benefit.

World English

One question which arises in any discussion of global English is whether a single world standard English will develop, forming a supranational variety which must be learned by global citizens of the 21st century. Like most questions raised in this book, this demands a more complicated answer than those who ask probably desire.

There are, for example, at least two dimensions to the question: the first is whether English will fragment into many mutually unintelligible local forms; the second is whether the current 'national' standards of English (particularly US and British) will continue to compete as models of correctness for world usage, or whether some new world standard will arise which supersedes national models for the purposes of international communication and teaching.

The widespread use of English as a language of wider communication will continue to exert pressure towards global uniformity as well as give rise to anxieties about 'declining' standards, language change and the loss of geolinguistic diversity. But as English shifts from foreign-language to second-language status for an increasing number of people, we can also expect to see English develop a larger number of local varieties.

These contradictory tensions arise because English has two main functions in the world: it provides a vehicular language for international communication and it forms the basis for constructing cultural identities. The former function requires mutual intelligibility and common standards. The latter encourages the development of local forms and hybrid varieties. As English plays an evermore important role in the first of these functions, it simultaneously finds itself acting as a language of identity for larger numbers of people around the world. There is no need to fear, however, that trends towards fragmentation will necessarily threaten the role of English as a lingua franca. There have, since the first records of the language, been major differences between varieties of English.

The mechanisms which have helped maintain standard usage in the past may not, however, continue to serve this function in the future. Two major technologies have helped develop national, standard-language forms. The first was printing, the invention of which provided a 'fixity' in communication by means of printed books. According to scholars such as Anderson (1983), such fixity was a necessary requirement for the 'imagined communities' of modern nation states. But with increasing use of electronic communication much of the social and cultural effect of the stability of print has already been lost, along with central 'gatekeeping' agents such as editors and publishers who maintain consistent, standardised forms of language.

The second technology has been provided by broadcasting, which in many ways became more important than print in the socially mobile communities of the 20th century. But trends in global media suggest that broadcasting will not necessarily play an important role in establishing and maintaining a global standard. Indeed, the patterns of fragmentation and localisation, which are significant trends in satellite broadcasting, mean that television is no longer able to serve such a function. How can there be such a thing as 'network English' in a world in which centralised networks have all but disappeared?

Meanwhile, new forms of computer-mediated communication are closing the gap between spoken and written English which has been constructed laboriously over centuries. And cultural trends encourage the use of informal and more conversational language, a greater tolerance of diversity and individual style, and a lessening deference to authority. These trends, taken together, suggest that a weakening of the institutions and practices which maintained national standard languages is taking place: that the native-speaking countries are experiencing a 'destandardisation' of English.

The ELT industry, however, may play an important role in maintaining an international standard, as Strevens (1992) suggested:

> There exists an unspoken mechanism, operated through the global industry of ELT teaching, which has the effect of preserving the unity of English in spite of its great diversity. For throughout the world, regardless of whether the norm is native-speaker or non-native speaker variety, irrespective of whether English is a foreign or second language, two components of English are taught and learned without variation: these are its grammar and its core vocabulary. [...] the grammar and vocabulary of English are taught and learned virtually without variation throughout the world. (Strevens, 1992, p. 39)

However, second-language countries are likely to develop their own curricula, materials and teaching resources which they will seek to export to neighbouring countries. In some parts of the world, this may help bring new, non-native models of English – supported by dictionaries and pedagogic materials – into competition with the older standard varieties. There is no reason why, say, an Asian standard English may not gain currency.

Smith (1992) carried out an experiment using speakers of 9 'national varieties' of English – China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Taiwan, the United Kingdom and the United States – in order to discover whether 'the spread of English is creating greater problems of understanding across cultures' (Smith, 1992, p. 88). He concluded that there was no evidence of a breakdown in the functioning of English as an international lingua franca but that, interestingly, 'native speakers (from Britain and the US) were not found to be the most easily understood, nor were they, as subjects, found to be the best able to understand different varieties of English' (Smith, 1992, p. 88).

Since the ELT publishers from native-speaking countries are likely to follow markets – most of the large publishers already provide materials in several standards – it will be non-native speakers who decide whether a US model, a British one, or one based on a second-language variety will be taught, learned and used. At the very least, English textbooks in countries where English is spoken as a second language are likely to pay much more attention to local varieties of English and to localise their product by incorporating materials in local varieties of English.

The most likely scenario thus seems to be a continued 'polycentrism' for English – that is, a number of standards which compete. It will be worth monitoring the global ELT market for signs of shifting popularity between textbooks published in different standards.

Will English give Britain a special economic advantage? **?**

It has been suggested that the English language will provide the key to Britain's economic prosperity in the future. After all, if much of the world's business is conducted in English, this surely will be of advantage to native speakers. This book presents arguments which challenge this idea and suggests that in future Britain's monolingualism may become a liability which offsets any economic advantage gained from possessing extensive native-speaker resources in the global language.

There are several reasons why monolingualism may not be the most advantageous strategy in a world that increasingly is bilingual and multilingual, and trade is significant among them. A greater volume of trade will occur within Europe in a context where trilingual competence (in English, French and German), or at least bilingual competence, is widely regarded as necessary, especially for trade with peripheral countries. As the 'core' of Europe moves eastwards, there is a danger that Britain's peripheral position will be felt more acutely and its monolingual status may become an economic liability. In other regions of the world, regional languages may become important in business – such as Chinese in East and South-east Asia, and Spanish in the Americas. The inability to field staff competent in these languages in addition to English may prove a hindrance as markets become more competitive. The likelihood is that English may be so prevalent in the world that Britain obtains no special benefit in having so many native speakers: the advantage may shift more clearly towards bilingualism.

At present, the English language helps make Britain attractive to Asian companies wishing to invest in factories with direct access to European markets, since many Asian countries use English as their international lingua franca. But if a country such as the Netherlands can provide English, German and Dutch-speaking employees, why establish an enterprise within a mono-lingual English-speaking area which is peripheral geographically, politically and economically? Britain's linguistic advantage in attracting investment from Asia may decrease as English becomes more widely used in other European countries.

English will no doubt remain an important asset to Britain in terms of the production and marketing of intellectual property; English language materials will continue to be important economic resources for native speakers. But intellectual property in English will become more widely produced and marketed in other parts of the world.

The global ELT market, similarly, is likely to become more complex. As in other global industries, the strategic importance of alliances and cooperative ventures will grow. International networks of language schools may take an increasing market share. Competitors to Britain will arise in Europe, some of whom will employ British native speakers on a contract basis, while others will establish offices in Britain. These trends may make it less easy to identify distinctively British goods and services.

There is also a likelihood that new ELT providers based in European and Asian second-language areas may prove more attractive to some clients than native-speaker institutions. There is a rising demand for courses, materials and teachers which cater for the needs and experiences of second-language users. Non-native-speaking teachers are not necessarily regarded as 'second best' any more. More people are asking, 'How can monolingual British teachers best understand the needs of second-language users of English?'

Such developments make it difficult to argue that Britain will have an intrinsic economic advantage based on language. If Britain retains an edge with regard to the English language, it will be largely because of wider cultural associations and its international 'brand image'.

Will the British 'brand' of English play an important role in the world in the 21st century? **?**

The conventional wisdom is that US English is the most influential variety worldwide. Recent American studies of the cultural consequences of globalisation suggest:

> The global culture speaks English – or, better, American. In McWorld's terms, the queen's English is little more today than a high-falutin dialect used by advertisers who want to reach affected upscale American consumers. American English has become the world's primary transnational language in culture and the arts as well as science, technology, commerce, transportation, and banking. ... The war against the hard hegemony of American colonialism, political sovereignty, and economic empire is fought in a way which advances the soft hegemony of American pop culture and the English language. (Barber, 1996, p. 84)

> By 2000, English was the unchallenged world lingua franca. ... This language monopoly bestowed upon the United States an incalculable but subtle power: the power to transform ideas, and therefore lives, and therefore societies, and therefore the world. (Celente, 1997, p. 298)

It will be clear from the discussion elsewhere in this book that these commentaries already have a slightly old-fashioned feel to them. The hegemony of English may not be so entrenched as writers such as Barber and Celente fear. But Barber may also be dismissing the position of British English too readily. Much of the negative reaction to English in the world is directed towards the US; most territories in which English is spoken as a second language still have an (ambiguous) orientation to British English (Figure 5, p. 11); British publishers have a major share of the global ELT market and there are signs that even US companies are using the British variety to gain greater acceptance in some world markets. Microsoft, for example, produces two English versions of intellectual property on CD-ROM, such as the *Encarta Encyclopedia*: a domestic (US English) edition and a 'World English edition' based on British English.

The future of British English in the world will depend in part on continued, careful management of its 'brand image'. Some useful groundwork has already been undertaken. The support of 'British Studies' courses in overseas universities, for example, has helped shift the focus from cultural heritage to a more balanced understanding of Britain's place in the modern world. There is also a growing appreciation of the importance of British audio-visual products in projecting an image of Britain as a leader of style and popular culture.

Rival languages

Which languages may rival English as a world lingua franca in the 21st century?

There is no reason to believe that any other language will appear within the next 50 years to replace English as the global lingua franca. The position of English has arisen from a particular history which no other language can, in the changed world of the 21st century, repeat.

We have argued, however, that no single language will occupy the monopolistic position in the 21st century which English has – almost – achieved by the end of the 20th century. It is more likely that a small number of world languages will form an 'oligopoly', each with particular spheres of influence and regional bases.

As trade, people movement and communication between neighbouring countries in Asia and South America become more important than flows between such regions and Europe and North America, so we can expect languages which serve regional communication to rise in popularity. But it is actually very difficult to foresee more precisely what will occur.

For example, we have noted that economic activity, telecommunications traffic and air travel between Asian countries will greatly increase. But there are at least three possible linguistic scenarios which may develop from this. One is that English will remain the preferred language of international communication within Asia, since the investment in English may be regarded as too great to throw away, or the social elites who have benefited from English in the past may be reluctant to let their privileged position become threatened. Or it may simply be the most common shared language. A second scenario is that Mandarin becomes regionally more important, beginning as a lingua franca within Greater China (for communication between the regions of Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai and Taiwan) and building on increased business communication between the overseas Chinese in South-east Asia.

The third scenario is that no single language will emerge as a dominant lingua franca in Asia and a greater number of regional languages will be learned as foreign languages. If intraregional trade is greatest between adjacent countries, then there is likely to be an increased demand for neighbouring languages. In this case the pattern of demand for foreign languages will look different in each country.

The position of Russian in Central and North Asia is subject to similar problems of prediction. But it does seem clear that the global fortunes of Spanish are rising quite rapidly. Indeed, the trading areas of the south (Mercosur, Safta) are expected to merge with Nafta in the first decade of the new millennium. This, taken together with the expected increase in the Hispanic population in the US, may ensure that the Americas emerge as a bilingual English-Spanish zone.

Which languages will benefit from language shift? Which languages will lose speakers?

This book has identified language shift – where individuals and whole families change their linguistic allegiances – as a significant factor in determining the relative positions of world languages in the 21st century. Although such shifts are relatively slow – often taking several generations to fully materialise – they are surprisingly difficult to predict. Most research in this area has focused on migrant and minority communities who gradually lose their ethnic language and adopt that of the majority community. Little research has been conducted on linguistic migration between 'big' languages, such as from Hindi or Mandarin to English. But in the next 50 years or so we can expect substantial language shift to occur as the effects of economic development and globalisation are felt in more countries. This takes us into new territory: there has been no comparable period in which can provide an indication of what is to come.

First, the loss of at least 50% and perhaps as much as 90% of the world's languages means that the remaining languages will acquire native speakers at a faster rate than population increase in their communities. English is not the direct cause of such language loss, nor is it the direct benefactor. As regional language hierarchies become more established, there will be a shift towards languages higher in the hierarchy. One of the concomitant trends will be increased diversity in the beneficiary languages: regional languages will become more diverse and 'richer' as they acquire more diverse speakers and extend the range of their functions.

Second, processes of internal migration and urbanisation may restructure residential and employment patterns in multilingual communities on lines of social class rather than ethnolinguistic community. Parasher (1980) showed, for example, how the rehousing of ethnic groups brought about by redevelopment created neighbourhoods in which English became the language of inter-ethnic friendship and communication.

Third, economic development is greatly enlarging the numbers of middle class, professional families in the world – those who are most likely to acquire and use English in both work and social forums.

Fourth, the growth of English-medium tertiary education worldwide has created a significant transition point in late adolescence for many second-language speakers at which English may take over from their first language as a primary means of social communication. The nature of English bilingualism in many L2 countries thus suggests that for some speakers English may become a first language during the course of their lives, which would upset the assumption that such language shift can only occur between generations. Migration towards L1 use of English by middle-class professionals may thus take place more rapidly than has hitherto been thought possible. India and Nigeria may experience substantial increase in numbers of first language speakers of English in this way and it is worth remembering that even a small percentage change in these countries would greatly increase the global number of native English speakers.

The languages which might benefit most, in terms of larger numbers of native speakers, are Hausa and Swahili in Africa, Malay, regional languages in India and Tok Pisin. Russian, Mandarin and Arabic may also profit. English, at the apex of the hierarchy, is certainly implicated in this 'upgrading' process and will probably continue to act as a global engine of change, encouraging users to shift upwards from small community languages to languages of wider communication.

What gives a language global influence and makes it a 'world language'?

No one has satisfactorily answered the question of what makes a language a 'world' language. It is clear from earlier discussions in this book that sheer numbers of native speakers do not in themselves explain the privileged position of some languages.

David Crystal suggests that 'a language becomes an international language for one chief reason: the political power of its people – especially their military power' (Crystal, 1997, p. 7). Historically that may have been true: in the future, it will be less clearly military power which provides the international backing for languages, because of changes in the nature of national power, in the way that cultural values are projected and in the way markets are opened for the circulation of goods and services.

What we need is some sense of what makes a language attractive to learners, so that we can identify languages which newly meet such criteria in the future. This would also allow us to chart and ideally anticipate, the decline of erstwhile popular languages.

In this book we have focused on economic and demographic factors. Some combination of these might usefully form a starting point for an understanding of what makes a language acquire importance. The engco model provides an illustration of the kind of approach that can be taken. The model calculates an index of 'global influence' taking into account various economic factors which have been discussed earlier, including Gross Language Product and openness to world trade (Traded Gross Language Product). The model also includes demographic factors, such as the numbers of young speakers and rates of urbanisation. Finally, it takes into account the human development index (HDI) for different countries. This is a composite figure produced by the UN, which combines measures of quality of life with those for literacy and educational provision. In this way, HDI provides an indicator of the proportion of native speakers who are literate and capable of generating intellectual resources in the language.

The engco model of global influence thus generates a new kind of league table among languages, which weights languages not only by the number and wealth of their speakers, but also by the likelihood that these speakers will enter social networks which extend beyond their locality: they are the people with the wherewithal and ambition to 'go about' in the world, influence it and to have others seek to influence them. The calculations for the mid 1990s for the 'basket' of languages we have surveyed in this book are as shown in Table 19.

No strong claims are made for the validity of this index, but it does seem to capture something of the relative relations between world languages which other indices, based crudely on economic factors or numbers of native speakers, do not convey. It shows that English is, on some criteria at least, a long way ahead of all other languages, including Chinese.

The advantage of the engco index is the way it can be used to generate projections. As the model is refined and the full demographic and economic projections for the countries concerned are taken into account, league tables will be published for the decades up to 2050. Preliminary results indicate that on this basis Spanish is one of the languages which will rise most quickly. The nearest rivals to English – German, French and Japanese, will grow much more slowly. The relative positions of the 'top six' are likely to change during the coming decades, but it is unlikely that any other language will overtake English.

1	English	100
2	German	42
3	French	33
4	Japanese	32
5	Spanish	31
6	Chinese	22
7	Arabic	8
8	Portuguese	5
9	Malay	4
10	Russian	3
11	Hindi/Urdu	0.4
12	Bengali	0.09

Table 19 'Global influence' of major languages according to the engco model. An index score of 100 represents the position of English in 1995

The changing status of languages will create a new language hierarchy for the world. Figure 38 shows how this might look in the middle of the 21st century, taking into account economic and demographic developments as well as potential language shift. In comparison with the present-day hierarchy there are more languages in the top layer. Chinese, Hindi/Urdu, Spanish and Arabic may join English. French and other OECD languages (German, Japanese) are likely to decline in status. But the biggest difference between the present-day language hierarchies and those of the future will result from the loss of several thousand of the world's languages. Hence there may be a group of languages at the apex, but there will be less linguistic variety at the base. The shift from linguistic monopoly to oligopoly brings pluralism in one sense, but huge loss of diversity in another. This will be offset only in part by an increasing number of new hybrid language varieties, many arising from contact with English.
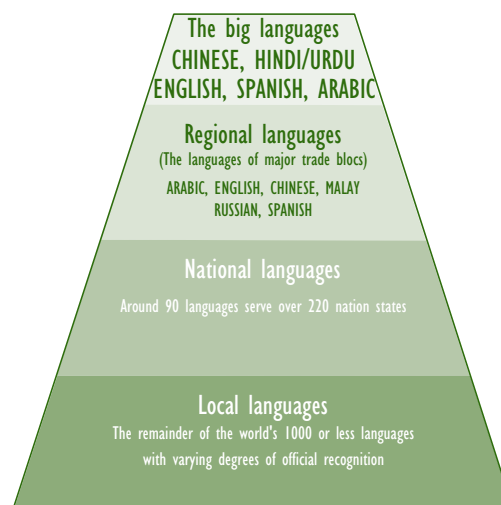
The big languages
CHINESE, HINDI/URDU
ENGLISH, SPANISH, ARABIC

Regional languages
(The languages of major trade blocs)
ARABIC, ENGLISH, CHINESE, MALAY
RUSSIAN, SPANISH

National languages
Around 90 languages serve over 220 nation states

Local languages
The remainder of the world's 1000 or less languages
with varying degrees of official recognition

Figure 38 The world language hierarchy in 2050?

English as a transitional phenomenon

Will the demand for English in the world continue to rise at its present rate?

Although the position of English seems entrenched, it is possible that the extraordinary interest in the language in recent years will prove to be a temporary phenomenon associated with the 'first-wave' effects in a period of global change: the transitional nature of a global economy, the current state of telecommunications networks, the immaturity of satellite television markets, and educational curricula which lag behind the needs of workers and employers. These pages examine why the current global wave of English may lose momentum.

Figure 39 shows the projections made by the engco model for speakers of English to 2050. The dotted lines

Figure 39 Estimates of first-language speakers of English from 1950 to 2050 as calculated by the engco model, together with speculations regarding L2 and EFL communities

represent speculative curves for second-language and foreign-language speakers. There is, as yet, no basis for estimating these groups safely – although it is these communities who will in practice determine the future of global English. Nevertheless, the curves are located approximately correctly for the present time (the vertical dashed line) and the speculative curves demonstrate some ideas developed in this book.

First, L1 speakers of English will soon form a minority group. Second, at some point the increase in people learning English as a foreign language will level out. This is a demographic necessity, but may be hastened by a 'leakage' of EFL speakers to L2 status. The key question is, at what point will the numbers of learners decline?

The dotted line, 'market share', indicates a speculative projection of the global ELT market open to the ELT industries of native-speaking countries, who currently dominate global ELT provision. The curve begins with a notional 50% share, which takes account of the present closed nature of many national textbook markets. The actual share of the market taken by publishers and educational providers from Britain, Ireland, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand is at present impossible to estimate – but it is the shape of the curve which is important. Here it shows a declining market share, as providers from L2 territories become more active. That British and other native-speaking ELT providers will find the global market much more competitive, will lose market share and may even experience a decline, is entirely compatible with the idea that more people in the world are learning and using English.
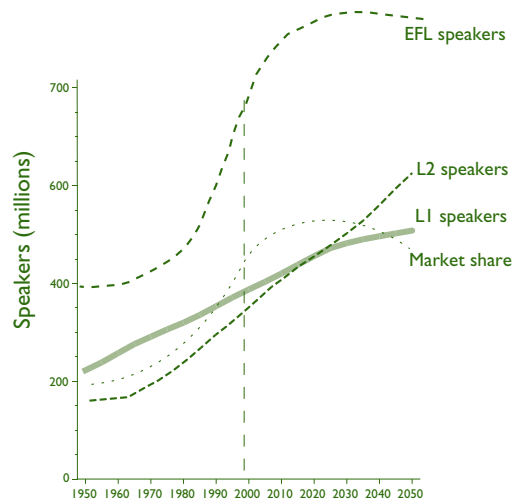
Will satellite TV channels bring English into every home, creating a global audio-visual culture?

Satellite TV has been regarded as a major driver of global English. Star TV in Asia, for example, used English and Mandarin in their start-up phases, because these are the 'big' languages which reach the largest audiences. MTV is frequently credited with bringing US English to the world through music and popular culture. Thus English language programmes reach the middle classes in South and South-east Asia in whom the companies who pay for advertising are most interested. But the extensive use of English language material also reflects the easy availability of English language product on the world market. However, as satellite operators develop, they need to expand their audiences by increasing their reach in individual countries – this means going beyond English-speaking audiences. As their income streams develop and as technological innovation (such as digital transmission) make additional channels available, operators will be able to finance and operate channels more suited to local and niche audiences. Such economic and technological logic explains why English programming has been so prominent in the 1990s. Evident now is the same logic driving an increase in the number of languages and community interests serviced by satellite and cable TV. English language programmes will remain, particularly in certain content areas (such as sport and news), but they will become one of many offerings, rather than the dominant programming.

National networks in English-speaking countries will continue to establish operations in other parts of the world, but their programming policies will emphasise local languages. CBS, for example, intends to establish a news and entertainment channel in Brazil, broadcasting in Portuguese, not English; CNN International is launching Spanish and Hindi services; Star TV and MTV are rapidly localising – introducing programming in an increasing number of languages (p. 46).

National networks based in other languages will also establish a greater presence in the global audio-visual market. Ray and Jacka (1996), for example, note that Doordarshan, the Indian state-television company, will lease transponders on a new satellite with a footprint stretching from South-east Asia to Europe. They comment, 'this signals two major changes: the loosening grip of Murdoch on global satellite broadcasting and the entry of Doordarshan into global broadcasting to Indian diasporic audiences. [...] there can be no doubt that India will become an even stronger force in world television in the very near future' (Ray and Jacka, 1996, p. 99). Spanish television networks in Mexico are similarly establishing a global presence, producing programming for Europe as well as for Spanish speakers elsewhere in the Americas.

It is thus clear that two trends will dominate the second wave of satellite broadcasting: other major world languages will increase their global reach and the larger providers will localise their services. Both trends indicate a more crowded and linguistically plural audio-visual landscape in the 21st century.

Will English continue to be associated with leading-edge technology?

Leading-edge technology, particularly computers and information technology, has been largely English based in several respects. First, its research and development is focused in the US, though often in close collaboration with Japanese transnational companies (TNCs). Second, the literature and conferences in which research findings are reported and through which researchers keep up to date with developments elsewhere, are English based. Third, communications technology and document-handling software have developed around the English language. Indeed, the notorious history of the ascii coding set which has plagued the use of computer systems for non-English languages for many years, is one example. Fourth, the installed user base of new technology is primarily located in the US, resulting in support manuals, help lines, on-screen menu systems and so on, appearing first in English.

The close association between English and information technology may prove a temporary phenomenon. As software and technology become more sophisticated, they support other languages much better. Desktop publishing and laser printing are now capable of handling hundreds of lesser used languages and a wide range of scripts and writing systems. Computer operating systems and software are now routinely versioned for many languages. In many cases the user can further customise the product, allowing even very small languages, unknown to the manufacturers, to be accommodated. So whereas English speakers used to enjoy the best and latest technology, this is no longer so true.

Will economic modernisation continue to require English for technology and skills transfer?

Currently, English is to be found at the leading edge of economic modernisation and industrial development (p. 32). The typical pattern of economic modernisation involves technology and skills transfer from the Big Three regions (North America, Europe and Japan) as a result of investment by TNCs, often via joint-venture companies: a process associated closely with English.

But as countries benefit from such transfer and 'come up to speed', there develop local networks of small companies supplying the large TNC enterprises. Since many such suppliers use local employment, this secondary economic activity does not stimulate English to the same degree as primary activity around TNCs.

There is yet a third wave to be expected in economic development. Just as the Big Three TNCs transfer technology, not simply to produce goods more cheaply but also to create new markets, so countries like Thailand and Malaysia are looking towards their neighbours, including Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, as future trading partners. The development of such regional trade, in which no Big Three country is directly involved, may diminish the primacy of English as the language of technology transfer: the necessary level of expertise can be obtained closer to home and more cheaply. Sources of management and technology transfer in Asia now include Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia and Thailand. This third-wave technology transfer – often associated with less than leading-edge technology – may be less reliant on English. But it is equally possible that English provides the means for such countries to extend into regional markets.

There is no doubt that it would be extremely helpful to have a better understanding of how the next phases of globalisation will affect the use of English.

What impact will the Internet have on the global use of English?

The Internet epitomises the information society, allowing the transfer of services, expertise and intellectual capital across the world cheaply, rapidly and apparently without pollution or environmental damage. At present 90% of Internet hosts are based in English-speaking countries. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of traffic and the majority of Web sites are based in English and that those users based in other countries and who normally work in other languages, find they have to communicate with others in the cyberspace community through the medium of English.

Many studies, however, have shown how well the Internet supports minority and diasporic affinity groups. Although early studies of 'nationally oriented' Internet newsgroups (containing discussions of national or regional culture and language) seemed to indicate a preference for using English (for example, soc.culture.punjabi) others which have become more recently active (such as soc.culture.vietnamese) extensively use the national language. It is not yet clear why some groups use English less than others, but an overall trend away from the hegemony of English in such groups is visible and often surfaces as an explicit topic of discussion.

One reason may be that the Internet user base is developing rapidly in Asia and non-English-speaking countries. And software technology, such as browser and HTML standards (which govern the HyperText Mark-up Language in which Web pages are written), now also supports multilingual browsing (p. 51).

The quantity of Internet materials in languages other than English is set to expand dramatically in the next decade. English will remain pre-eminent for some time, but it will eventually become one language amongst many. It is therefore misleading to suggest English is somehow the native language of the Internet. It will be used in cyberspace in the same way as it is deployed elsewhere: in international forums, for the dissemination of scientific and technical knowledge, in advertising, for the promotion of consumer goods and for after-sales services.

In the meantime, local communication on the Internet is expected to grow significantly. This, and the increasing use of email for social and family communication, will encourage the use of a wider variety of languages. English is said to have accounted for 80% of computer-based communication in the 1990s. That proportion is expected to fall to around 40% in the next decade.

Managing the future

Can anything be done to influence the future of English?

Can anything be done by institutions and decision-makers to influence the future of English?

This is a difficult question to answer. There is an argument that global processes are too complex, too overwhelming in their momentum and too obscure in their outcomes to permit the activities of a few people and institutions, even with coherent policies, to make any difference. David Crystal suggests that the English language may have passed beyond the scope of any form of social control:

> It may well be the case ... that the English language has already grown to be independent of any form of social control. There may be a critical number or critical distribution of speakers (analogous to the notion of critical mass in nuclear physics) beyond which it proves impossible for any single group or alliance to stop its growth, or even influence its future. If there were to be a major social change in Britain which affected the use of English there, would this have any real effect on the world trend? It is unlikely. (Crystal, 1997, p. 139)

Even if the English language cannot, in any comprehensive sense, be managed, there is an argument that complex systems have an unpredictability in their behaviour which needs to be taken into account by strategic management. The institutions and organisations which will best survive the potentially traumatic period of global reconstruction which has only just begun, and even thrive during it, will be those which have the best understanding of the changing position of English in local markets, which can adapt the products and services they offer most quickly and effectively and which know how to establish appropriate alliances and partnerships.

But the function of strategic management can extend beyond ensuring either survival or the exploitation of changing conditions in the marketplace. In complex systems, small forces, strategically placed, can lead to large global effects. There is no way, at present, of knowing what nudges placed where will have what consequences. But careful strategic planning, far-sighted management, thoughtful preparation and focused action now could indeed help secure a position for British English language services in the 21st century.

A 'Brent Spar' scenario for English

Shell Oil is renowned for its use of scenario planning in the 1960s, which allowed it to weather the disruptions following the oil crisis more easily than rival companies (pp. 22–3). But its corporate scenario planning has had some signal failures in recent years – it failed, for example, to ensure policies were sufficiently robust against the real-life scenario provided by the Brent Spar oil platform. Shell wished to dispose of the redundant structure by sinking it in the North Sea. It was aware of the environmental issues – there is evidence that, in hindsight, the environmental case was on Shell's side. But this did not prevent a major public-relations disaster which, through boycotts of Shell products in the Netherlands and Germany, hit the corporation's profits and brought its reputation under public scrutiny.

Shell's experience is just one of many recent examples of how the international business environment can spring 'nasty surprises', often resulting from shifts in public opinion. There are two reasons why public attitudes now have a powerful impact on whole industries whose profitability and even viability can be destroyed remarkably quickly.

First is the increasing complexity of global business: if one sector or product line is hit, then it may have a much wider and unpredictable impact worldwide. Transnational corporations have discovered that there is 'no hiding place'. An incident in a small, jointly managed subsidiary in a remote part of the world can have major consequences for the parent company and other related businesses. Second, globalisation affects not just large business enterprises but also the way public opinions are formed and disseminated: public attitudes and changing social values now have a much greater effect on the business environment. In this respect, global media and Internet technologies are helping bring about a new form of 'people's democracy', of which policy makers of all kinds need to take more serious account.

There are several lessons here for English and those who supply English language goods and services. Public attitudes towards massive language loss in the next few decades, for example, is unpredictable. It would be easy for concerns about this issue to become incorporated into the wider environmental consciousness which seems to be spreading around the world. The spread of English might come to be regarded in a similar way as exploitative logging in rainforests: it may be seen as providing a short-term economic gain for a few, but involving the destruction of the ecologies which lesser-used languages inhabit, together with consequent loss of global linguistic diversity. The Shell experience suggests that a direct link between the spread of English and language loss would not have to be proven. Indeed, counter-evidence could be brought forward by linguists and yet have little impact on global public opinion.

There are other ideological movements which are travelling in a similar direction. There is, for example, a growing demand for linguistic rights, within a human-rights agenda, arguing that educational provision in a child's mother tongue should be regarded as a basic human right. Such arguments may be carried to the heart of the political process in countries experiencing demand for regional autonomy or repositioning themselves as regional hubs for trade and services.

These trends suggest a 'nightmare scenario' in which the world turns against the English language, associating it with industrialisation, the destruction of cultures, infringement of basic human rights, global cultural imperialism and widening social inequality.

Clinging to the idea that the presently dominant 'economic rationality' will continue to direct the future of English without hindrance during the next century might be similar to Shell's failure to anticipate public reaction to Brent Spar. But even if economic rationalism lingers, there may come a time when more realistic assessments are made by governments of the long-term effectiveness of mass English teaching.

The need for an ethical framework for ELT

There is a growing appreciation that the business environment of the next century will require global enterprises to meet three 'bottom lines': economic prosperity, environmental protection and social equity. Public trust in the institutions and organisations which provide goods and services may in the future represent a more important component of brand image than the quality of the product itself. Hence ethical, as well as environmental, values are likely to come under increasing public scrutiny and significantly influence customer loyalty.

However, one of the problems facing the proponents of an ethical approach to English teaching is that no one is sure where the moral high ground lies when it comes to the export of ELT goods and services. English has for long been seen as a 'clean' and safe export, one without some of the complex moral implications associated with the sale of products such as weapons or military vehicles. The ELT industry has been portrayed as one which benefits both producer and consumer and both exporting and importing countries. It has been a major component in overseas aid as well as a commercial enterprise.

How then, can the teaching of English be brought within a more ethical framework? What social responsibilities are associated with the promotion and teaching of English? There is a growing concern about endangered languages but very little debate about the management of large languages, of which English is the largest.

A more sensitive approach will be needed in the future, which recognises that English is not a universal panacea for social, economic and political ills and that teaching methods and materials, and educational policies, need to be adapted for local contexts. The world is becoming aware of the fate of endangered languages and more anxious over the long-term impact of English on world cultures, national institutions and local ways of life. Perhaps a combination of circumstances – such as shifting public values, changed economic priorities and regional political expediency – could bring about a serious reversal for British ELT providers at some point in the future. The development of a 'Brent Spar' scenario for English might help explore possible chains of events.

Whether such a discussion is held in terms of global 'brand management', the need to adapt to a changing business environment, or a moral requirement to work within an ethical framework, the ELT industry will have to respond to changing international social values. This would bring a major exporting activity into the same framework which is now expected to regulate trading relations with other countries and would help to ensure that the reputation of Britain, of the British people and their language, is enhanced rather than diminished in the coming century.

Ways forward

This book has aimed to establish a new agenda for debate, not simply on the future of the English language in the 21st century, but also on the role of its native speakers, their institutions and their global enterprises. For this reason the book identifies some of the key questions and has drawn attention to a number of areas which will repay further investigation and development.

- *Supporting a debate on the future of English.* Many of the topics raised briefly in this book would repay further discussion and consultation with experts in the various areas of concern (such as economists, technologists, cultural theorists, business managers). This can be taken forward in a variety of ways: seminars, further publications or Internet discussion groups.

- *Building better forecasting models.* The forecasting models upon which this book draws (such as the engco model) show the value of modelling for certain purposes. There is more that can be done in this direction to understand better the patterns of language shift and to model the future populations of second-language speakers.

- *Scenario building.* It is suggested that building scenarios for English in different parts of the world would help to explore further the impact on the English language of the complex interaction of global economic and technological trends. This is not a project to be undertaken lightly, but it is likely to repay the investment by providing a structure within which local knowledge and experience can be centrally coordinated. The 'Brent Spar' scenario is only one possibility. Others relate to the future language use and loyalties of the global teenager and the impact of the growing middle and professional classes in Asia.

- *Brand management.* One way of managing the complex attitudes and responses to English by the world public to the benefit of Britain is through more careful 'brand management'. A debate would be timely on how Britain's ELT providers can cooperatively prepare for the need to build and maintain the British brand and how the promotion of English language goods and services relates to the wider image of Britain as a leading-edge provider of cultural and knowledge-based products. The way English is promoted and marketed may play a key role in positioning Britain as one of the 21st century's forward-thinking nations.

The indications are that English will enjoy a special position in the multilingual society of the 21st century: it will be the only language to appear in the language mix in every part of the world. This, however, does not call for an unproblematic celebration by native speakers of English. Yesterday it was the world's poor who were multilingual; tomorrow it will also be the global elite. So we must not be hypnotised by the fact that this elite will speak English: the more significant fact may be that, unlike the majority of present-day native English speakers, they will also speak at least one other language – probably more fluently and with greater cultural loyalty.

Tables

Figures

Case studies

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The engco model

The engco forecasting model has been designed by The English Company (UK) Ltd as a means of examining the relative status of world languages and making forecasts of the numbers of speakers of different languages based on demographic, human development and economic data. The figures reported in this document are based on demographic projections from *World Population Prospects 1950–2050 (1996 Revision)* and *Sex and Age Quinquennial 1950–2050 (1996 Revision)* in machine-readable data sets made available by the United Nations in 1997, on economic data for 1994 from the World Bank, and from estimates of proportions of national populations speaking different languages taken from national census data and a variety of reference sources.

The main purpose of the model is to explore the potential impact of urbanisation and economic development on the global linguistic landscape of the 21st century. Further explanations of the assumptions made by the engco model, together with any other reports and revised projections, can be found from time to time on The English Company (UK) Ltd's Internet site (http://www.english.co.uk).