

ENGLISH: A WORLD LANGUAGE?

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Abstract

In questi giorni tutti parlano dell'importanza dell'inglese come lingua mondiale e della sua conoscenza come misura della cultura personale, come veniva considerato il latino nei tempi passati.

In che modo l'inglese ha raggiunto lo *status* che ha oggi? In che campi è considerato essere realmente una lingua mondiale?

Sono coinvolti vari fattori geopolitici, così come elementi pratici, ma non tutti sono d'accordo sul ruolo che ha assunto oggi la lingua inglese.

Qui si esaminano tali questioni e ci si interroga se l'inglese sia veramente una lingua globale, e se sia, o possa essere, la lingua franca di tutti, oppure se essa sia in qualche modo uno strumento usato da una parte di società relativamente ristretta.

Introduction

In Italy today, it has become a commonplace that anyone who does not have a certain proficiency in English and computer skills is out of the race. There seems to be a general consensus regarding this right across the board, from teenagers to parents to employees, and, to the relief and satisfaction of many, the Ministry of Education. I aim to look at why and how such an affirmation, or at least the first part of it, can have become accepted as true by so many, not only in Italy, and examine some of the consequences arising from this phenomenon.

It is an undisputed fact that English has gained status as a world language. It is not the language with the greatest number of native speakers, the prize for which goes to Chinese, a form of which is spo-

ken by about 15% of the world population, but roughly one fifth of the world's population is said to speak English either as its mother tongue or second language, and seventy-five percent of the world's mail is written in English. Not only this, but according to Conrad and Fishman, "as of January 1, 1975, English was the sole 'designated' official language of some 21 countries, and the designated co-official language of some 16 more. In addition, English has some official status in eight other countries but is not designated as official"¹. For instance, English is widely used in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, India, United Arab Emirates, Canada, the United States, Panama, Surinam, South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya in addition to several other countries, namely the Commonwealth states. Whether we like it or not, English is the language which some 84% of European Union school children and university students are studying. Neither French in the Middle Ages nor Latin in the days of the Roman Empire were so widely taught.

Obviously, before we can be clear about the figures involved, we have to decide on the degree of competence required to qualify a speaker as "Speaker of English as a Second Language". On this subject Braj Kachru (1985)² pointed out that if the spread of English continued as it was doing in 1983, by 2000 its non-native speakers would outnumber its native speakers. Others were more cautious in their predictions, but English is by far the most commonly used lingua franca for those wishing to communicate with others of different nationalities.

How has English become a World Language?

The reasons for this phenomenon are basically five: Firstly, *Britain's colonial / military history*, then in the nineteenth century, Britain's role in *industry and economics*, superseded in the twentieth century by the United States of America. *Travel, technology (and now the internet in particular), and academic exchange* have all favoured and fostered the use of the English language. Lastly, *popular culture* through pop/rock

¹ Conrad - Fishman, *English as a world language: the evidence*, Devon, Newbury House Publisher, 1977, pp. 7-12.

² Cfr. B. Kachru, *Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle*, in *Quirk and Widdowson, 1985.

music and cinema (where, as is usually the case in other countries, films are not dubbed).

English as a language of conquest

There is a cliché used by sociolinguists which has it that language is “a dialect with an army and a navy”. Beginning in the 18th century, it was the military who carried English beyond England’s shores for good.

As European colonizers swept across the globe, the British Empire spread: North America; Australia; India; Southeast Asia; Africa, the Caribbean. English ships carried English passengers to English outposts, where the tongue of the realm was English. British subjects - more than a quarter of the world’s population by 1900 - had little choice but to learn English to communicate in the countries that formed around them. In India, in particular, the use of the English language as an instrument of colonial power was particularly felt. The plethora of languages spoken on the Indian subcontinent made it impossible to consider using any one of them as the language of administration of that huge colony, so English was introduced not only as the language of administration but as the lingua franca for all Indians. In 1950, after British withdrawal, the Constitution of India was officially presented to the Indian people. In Part XVII, Article 343, Hindi is declared to be the official language of India. However, it continues, “for a period of fifteen years from the commencement of this Constitution, the English language shall continue to be used for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before such commencement”³. This choice was not unanimously accepted, and a group of Hindi nationalists called the Hindi-wallahs pushed for Hindi as the sole language of India, expunging all traces of English from Indian language and life, replacing all English words untranslatable into Hindi with Sanskrit-based neologisms. The moderate opposition recognised that “progress towards the social revolution

³ N. Shulkav, *The Constitution of India*, Lucknow, Eastern Book Company, 1964⁴.

would be greatly retarded, perhaps stopped”⁴. After the fifteen-year period was over, provision was made for English to be used in future, for another, political, not “linguistic”, reason. Hindi is a northern Indian language not used in vast areas of India at all, and would in effect be a foreign language whose use, while upholding the dignity of Hindi-speaking states, would seem to downgrade the others. English was thus considered an ideal lingua franca for India. The same reasoning prevailed in other countries in the post-colonial phase. One thinks of Nigeria with its 400 languages. While in Nigeria, this solution has been accepted, in Kenya there is much more controversy, as nationalists point out that it requires no more effort to learn a local language as a lingua franca than it does to learn English, but, as in India, others state that English is neutral, with no ethnic or emotional attachments.

Thus, years after the colonial reality that introduced this state of linguistic affairs had become a memory, the language has remained as a main or institutional means of communication. Then came the 20th century technology explosion. Suddenly people were talking across the oceans, flying across continents, hearing broadcasts that reverberated around the planet. Language spread faster than ever, while world wars carried American and British soldiers across the globe, sowing English as they went.

English as a language of commerce

Leaving aside colonialism, let’s turn now to the world economy as a promoter of English. When World War II ended, the historic pro-British Empire balance shifted. The Empire was falling apart, its subjects gaining independence. India, Nigeria, Kenya, Malaysia, and Singapore fell away within twenty years of the end of the war, whereas the United States of America, driven by an unheard-of post-war prosperity, were becoming a global force, making it English’s primary spear-carrier in the second half of the 20th century.

The United Kingdom and the United States are both key nations in the world of trade, business and technology. When engaged in trade

⁴ A. Granville, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966, p. 269.

and business with these nations, knowing English is an advantage. As non-English-speaking countries began to realise that, industry and business hired people who knew English, or required their workers to attend language courses.

English as the language of technology

It is fairly easy to get a very basic vocabulary in English. In most contexts, to cite a simple example, one can get by, say, with the word “boat”, but when you’re more conversant with the language, you can be more specific and say “cabin cruiser with twin-screw engine”. There are half a million words to learn in English, but you only need a small percentage of these to make yourself understood.

As it spreads, the English language absorbs words from other languages. “Algebra” is originally from Arabic, “*chauffeur*” from French, “*ombudsman*” from Swedish, and “*ski*” from Norwegian, to mention a few examples. Although English absorbs new words, it also sprinkles its own words into other languages, particularly in the area of technology, as other languages adopt English terms. Clearly when it comes to multinational engineering or scientific projects, a lingua franca is necessary, and that is often English, but more *éclatant* is the effect of the internet on the world in linguistic terms.

Until recently, around 80% of what was to be found on the internet was in English, though that figure is now regarded as a high-water mark. It’s not that English-speakers are logging off — *au contraire* — but that other people are increasingly logging on, to search out or create content in their own languages. As the newsletter prepared for the British Council in September of 1998 asserted, “Non-English speakers are the fastest growing group of new Internet users”. In the same Newsletter, the British Council claim that nearly 44% of the world’s online population now speak a language other than English at home. Although many of these Internet users are bilingual and speak English in the workplace, Euro Marketing suggest that advertisers of non-business products will more easily reach this group by using their home language. Of the 56 million people who speak languages on the Internet other than English, Spanish speakers represent nearly a quarter.

The study also estimated that 13.1 percent of all Internet users speak an Asian language at home — Japanese, for the most part. A

surge in Internet use like the one that began in the United States half a dozen or so years ago is now under way in a number of other populous and relatively well-off places.

Clearly, in order for the internet to become popular and useful, it's content cannot remain largely English-centred. People want to use it in their own language, and are doing so. This means that the impact of English will not be largely increased by technology, but what about the influence of technology on the language itself? English is a system of communication, and highly germane to it is what or who speakers of English care to communicate with, and about what. The more we need to use English to communicate with machines — or with people whose fluency is limited or whose understanding of English does not coincide with ours — the more simplified the language will need to be.

And yet technology is expanding English, by requiring us to devise new words to describe all the possibilities it offers. Throughout the past century, according to *Twentieth Century Words* (1999), by John Ayto, technological domains — at first in the field of cars and aviation and radio, and eventually nuclear power, space, computers, and the Internet — were among the leading “lexical growth-areas”. Now, this doesn't only apply to words: we have whole new ways of combining the elements of written language. One ready example is emoticons (such as :> and ;-o), which seem to have firmly established themselves in the realm of e-mail. Is *www* a word? Does one write the expression *dot com* or *.com*? And then there's professional jargon. In the course of exchanging ideas, global communities of astrophysicists, cardiologists, chip designers, food scientists, and systems analysts are filling the English language full of jargon. As science and technology grow increasingly multifarious and specialized, the jargon necessarily grows increasingly recondite: in the journal *Neurology*, for example, article titles like “Homogeneous phenotype of the gypsy limb-girdle MD with the sarcoglycan C283Y mutation” are run-of-the-mill. The range of English continues to expand further and further beyond any single person's ability to understand it all.

This takes us, to the last cause I give for the spread of English, the “language of academe”. In chemistry laboratories in Jordan, university libraries in Cambodia, and college classrooms in Sweden, and right across the globe, English is increasingly becoming the language of higher education. The development is being stoked by the growing integration of the world economy, with the United States, the one

remaining superpower and the world's economic locomotive, at its head.

The trend is also being fuelled by the spread of information technology, because of the large amount of computer software written in English, and by the use of the internet as a scientific resource largely composed in English. And as colleges in more and more countries compete for the tuition money that foreign students can bring, the colleges are teaching their courses in English, so the students won't have to learn Thai or Greek to go to class and consequently opt to go somewhere else.

Ninety-five percent of the 925,000 scientific articles published in thousands of major periodicals in 1997 were written in English, according to Eugene Garfield, founder of the Science Citation Index, which tracks science publications. But only half of the English articles originated in English-speaking countries. The trend toward publishing in English began after World War II and has accelerated over the past 20 years.

The spread of English represents a serious cultural and psychological imposition, say many in countries where it is not a native language. To get the same sense, Americans or Britons need only imagine having to learn their calculus in German, or their psychology in Chinese. "Every country loves its own culture and language", says Ruben Umaly, secretary general of the Association of Universities of Asia Pacific, which is based in Thailand and uses English as its official language. However, English is increasingly the language of international business and communications, he says, and "we cannot avoid globalisation".

An interesting case is the academic world of Malaysia, a once British colony. After independence from Britain, in 1957, Malaysia's university system used English. But by the 1980's, the country wanted to demonstrate its linguistic independence and began the arduous task of developing education programmes in the main national language, Malay. The effort did not last long. By the early 1990's, the authorities found that a Malay curriculum was not realistic if they wanted to be competitive internationally.

Proficiency in English was made compulsory for university admission; reading assignments in English increased, and English-speaking lecturers were invited to teach. Foreign universities, including two from Australia and one from Britain, were allowed to open branches in the country.

In Moscow, Beijing, and Seoul, thousands of private language schools have opened to dispense English lessons to students, business people, and bureaucrats who want to get ahead. "Without the language, their opportunities are limited", says Elena Ostrovidova, a spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Education. In China, where using English could once have resulted in a prison sentence, the language is now on the highly competitive national university-entrance examination. A recent government survey found that 70 percent of urban Chinese have studied English. University professors hold "English corners" in community centres, department stores, and parks around Beijing, where students can come to practice.

Such ideas are even beginning to gain ground in traditionally insular Japan. Nevertheless, many Japanese fear that welcoming English could threaten their cultural identity. This year, a commission appointed by the prime minister released a report, "Japan's Goals in the 21st Century", which stated that English should be used in teaching and research and that called for the number of foreign, English-speaking faculty members to be "dramatically increased". That was hard enough for many Japanese to take, but the report created real controversy with its recommendation for a "long-term, national debate on whether to make English an official second language". Ryutaro Ohtsuka, a University of Tokyo spokesman who published his doctoral thesis on human ecology in English 20 years ago, scoffs at the idea.

"Japanese culture can be expressed only in Japanese", he says

Nearer home, the trend toward English is well advanced in the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries — and with it, muted but persistent concerns. Much of the assigned reading at the region's institutions is in English, and if just one foreign student is present in a class, the professor usually switches to English. Graduate courses there are increasingly being taught exclusively in English, as are a small but growing number of undergraduate courses.

The University of Copenhagen, the main institution in Denmark, warned about the dangers of the trend in a 1995 strategic plan: "The fact that English is going to be the international scholarly language in the same way as Latin was in the university's infancy and youth", the

document said, “must not mean that Danish becomes the language of the peasants, as it was then”. In neighbouring Sweden, Bengt Streijffert, a top official at the University of Lund, one of Sweden’s large state institutions, says that English is used for most intellectual discourse there and that Swedish may soon just be used “at home and with the dog”. “It is the universities”, he concludes sanguinely, “which may be leading the way into the abyss”.

The growing internationalisation of higher education is adding to the pressure. Under the European Union’s Erasmus program, intended to help young people study outside their native countries, 100,000 students crossed borders for one or two terms in the last academic year. They often attended classes taught in English, because countries using less common languages typically have to make such offerings to attract foreign students.

A word should be said about the other scientific lingua franca (literally speaking): French. In 1990, according to the publishers of the Science Citation Index, 30.6 percent of scientific papers from France were published in French — the rest in English. By 1999, the portion in French had halved, to 16.2 percent.

French scientific conferences are now frequently conducted in English, a development that, in the early 1990’s, prompted the authorities to threaten to withdraw government money from meetings held in France and not conducted mainly in French. The threat had virtually no effect.

France spends some \$300-million a year to promote the language of Molière and Voltaire around the world, according to the French Ministry of Culture and Communication. Yet the sum has done little to stem the onslaught of English. Vietnam, a former French colony, used to conduct higher education and all official business in French, and more recently favoured Russian. Today, Vietnam uses primarily Vietnamese, with English by far the foreign language of choice. “The French government tries to keep French alive”, says Nguyen Van Dao, president of Vietnam National University, in Hanoi. “But French is not so popular among young people. Foreign companies use English. Students know English is necessary for getting a good job”.

This is fine, and to be expected, but having said all this, there is one terrible truth to be taken into consideration: According to recent “Eurobarometer” surveys described by Graddol, “77% of Danish adults and 75% of Swedish adults for example, say they can take part

In a conversation in English.” And “nearly one third of the citizens of the 13 ‘non English-speaking’ countries in the EU ‘can speak English well enough to take part in a conversation’”. However, Richard Parker, in his book *Mixed Signals: The Prospects for Global Television News* (1995), reported this about a study commissioned by Lintas, a major media buyer, in the early 1990’s:

When ad researchers recently tested 4,500 Europeans for “perceived” versus “actual” English-language skills, the results were discouraging. First, the interviewees were asked to evaluate their English-language abilities, and then to translate a series of sample English phrases or sentences. The study produced, in its own words, “sobering” results: “the number of people really fit for English-language television turned out to be less than half the expected audience”. In countries such as France, Spain, and Italy, the study found, fewer than 3 percent had excellent command of English; only in small markets, such as Scandinavia and the Low Countries did the numbers even exceed 10 percent.

So the number of people in the world who speak English is unknown, and how well many of them speak and understand it is questionable. No one is arguing that English is not widely spoken and taught. But the vast numbers that are often repeated — a billion English-speakers, a billion and a half — have only tenuous grounding in reality.

Does this mean that all those Italians (and others, of course) who are not computer literate and unable to sustain a conversation in English are “out of the race”? Or is the race only really for the elite whose daily lives will put them in contact with an international commercial or academic environment?