

A new linguistic world

David Crystal speaks on language and how we communicate with each other across the globe.

The new millennium will see the English language experiencing a period of growth more explosive than at any time in the last 400 years. Not since the Renaissance has it been subjected to so many new pressures and extended to meet the needs of so many fresh populations of users.

As a consequence, future English will be as different from what we speak and write today as modern English is from the language of Shakespeare. The chief reason is the emergence of English as the world's first genuinely global language.

A global language

People were predicting "world English" over 200 years ago. In 1780, the future US president, John Adams said: "English is

destined to be, in the next and succeeding centuries, more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age." A prescient observation.

By the end of the 20th-century, English had developed a special role in virtually every country. It had come to be spoken by some 400 million as a first language, mainly in the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

It had achieved special status as a "second" language in over 70 countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore, and Vanuatu, spoken by another 400 million. In most of the remaining countries, it had become the foreign language that children were most likely to learn in school. The number of foreign

learners may now exceed a billion. Because of this three-pronged development – of first-, second- and foreign-language speakers – it is inevitable that a world language will eventually come to be used by more people than any other. English has already reached this stage.

Although estimates vary greatly, 1.5 billion or more people are now thought to be competent communicators in it. That is a quarter of the world's population. Of course, we must not overstate: if one in four of the world's population speaks English, three out of four do not. One in four is nonetheless an impressive total.

Why English?

There is, of course, nothing intrinsically wonderful about English that it should have

spread so widely. Pronunciation is no simpler than that of many other languages, its grammar is no easier – what it lacks in morphology (cases and genders) it certainly makes up for in syntax (word-order patterns) – and its spelling certainly is no less complicated. A language becomes a world language for one reason only – the power of the people who speak it.

Political power in the form of the colonialism first brought English around the world, so that in the 19th-century, the language was one "on which the sun never sets." Most commentators would have had no difficulty giving a single answer to the question: 'Why world English?' They would simply have pointed to the growth of the British Empire. This legacy carried over into the 20th-century. English now plays

the facts

The new culture-influenced English language, as encountered on the World Wide Web: an extract from a page devoted to sumo wrestling:

A kinboshi is awarded to any maegashira ranked rikishi who defeats a yokozuna during one of the six official tournaments held each year... By the time a rikishi reaches the rank of Sekiwake, he has been able to consistently string together kachi-koshi records, and it is common to see sekitori stalled at the Sekiwake rank with eight or nine wins out of each 15 day basho.



an official or working role in the proceedings of about 85 per cent of the world's international organisations.

Then, there was technological power, in the sense that the Industrial Revolution was very much an English-language event. Over half of the scientists and technologists who were part of that revolution worked in English, and people who travelled to Britain (and later America) to learn about the new technologies had to do so through the medium of English. By 1800, the chief growth areas in textiles and mining were producing a range of manufactured goods for export which led to Britain being called the “workshop of the world.”

Third, there was economic power. The early 19th-century saw the rapid growth of the international banking system, especially in Germany, Britain and the USA, with London and New York becoming the investment capitals of the world. The resulting “economic imperialism” brought a fresh dimension to the balance of linguistic power. “Money talked” then as now – and the language in which it was talking was chiefly English.

Finally, there was cultural power which, in the 20th-century, manifests itself everywhere – chiefly, through American influence. We saw English come to dominate in the press, along the news agency telegraph wires,



E-mail users have developed a lexicon of “smilies” – a language of typed icons. Among the first were the symbols :) or :-), which, seen sideways, represent a smiling face. It did not take long before an enormous lexicon of joke “smilies” emerged. Here are a few samples:

%-) **User has been staring at the screen for too long**

[:-) **User is wearing a walkman**

8-) **User is wearing sunglasses**

B:-) **User is wearing sunglasses on head**

:-{) **User has a mustache**

:*) **User is drunk**

:-[**User is a vampire**

:-E **User is a bucktoothed vampire**

:-F **User is a bucktoothed vampire with one tooth missing**

:-~) **User has a cold**

:-@ **User is screaming**

:-:) **User is a punk**

:-:(**Real punks don't smile**

+:-) **User holds a Christian religious office**

0 :-) **User is an angel at heart**

and in advertising. We saw it rule broadcasting, the recording industry, and motion pictures. We saw it emerge as the medium of much of the world's knowledge, especially in science and technology. And we saw it in the development of international travel, where the need for safe transportation led to a reliance on English.

New vocabulary

When a language becomes a world language, it changes dramatically as it responds to the needs of its new users – whether in Singapore or Sheffield, West Africa or West Ealing. In particular, its vocabulary grows. *The Oxford English Dictionary* already has over half a million entries, but this will double in the next century as new words rush into English from all around the world. English has always been a vacuum-cleaner of a language, sucking in words from every language it encounters.

As it comes to be used in very different cultures from

those it has expressed in the past, its lexical range is going to grow dramatically.

Each newly encountered culture generates thousands of words. There will be its terms for fauna and flora, and for the practices associated with eating, health-care, disease and death. Mythology and religion will introduce names for personalities, beliefs and rituals. Distinctive names will arise in sagas, poems, oratory and folktales. There will be a body of local laws and customs, with their own terminology, as well as terms for domestic effects, such as clothing and ornaments. The world of leisure and the arts will have its linguistic dimension – names of dances, musical styles and games – as will the social structures of local government and family relationships.

All of this, of course, will not just be found abroad. As Britain becomes increasingly multicultural, so its English will take on an ethnically varied flavour – not only in vocabulary

but also in pronunciation and, to some extent, in grammar and styles of discourse. New accents and dialects will emerge, replacing the rural voices of the past and diversifying the urban voices of the big cities. There are now many more kinds of regional speech in Birmingham and Manchester, as a result of immigrant settlement, than ever before. As class barriers weaken, these new varieties will become more prestigious, beginning to influence the standard language. They will be increasingly heard on radio and television, with programmes – from soaps to news broadcasts – adopting accents felt to be more “audience-friendly”.

Who owns English?

People or groups who have thought they “owned” the language in the past may well find these change uncomfortable. There will always be people who will write to the press and the BBC, as they have for decades, regretting the changes and predicting imminent linguistic doom. The forces governing language change are immense, however, operating regardless the preferences of individuals, pressure groups or even national institutions. For over 250 years, people have noticed small changes in contemporary usage and used them as evidence of the impending death of English. The real evidence is to the contrary: despite these changes, English has continued to grow and has never been healthier.

In the new millennium, we will have to recognise that a language which has come to be spoken by a quarter of the world's population has ceased to be owned by any of its constituent communities. Everyone who speaks English has a share in its future: first-

second- and foreign-language speakers alike. Language is an immensely democratising institution. To have learned a language is immediately to have rights in it. You may add to it, play with it, create in it or ignore bits of it, as you wish. It is, also, just as likely that the course of the English language is going to be influenced by those who speak it as a second or foreign language as by those who speak it as a mother-tongue. Indeed, as there are now three times as many people who have learned English as a foreign language than have learned it at their mother's knee, this outcome is inevitable.

The effect of technology

Technological developments and the Internet in particular will also have an important influence on the way English grows in the 21st-century – though it will not be as dramatic as people often think. Its eventual impact will probably be no greater than that introduced by previous technologies, such as printing and broadcasting. To a large extent, the Internet is simply holding a mirror up to our linguistic nature. Whether we use e-mail, chat groups or the Web, we see there what we see and hear in the real world. The language of the British Library catalogue is available equally in Euston Road or Holyhead. The Web will not be a source major linguistic innovation.

E-mail has shown us a greater degree of novelty, introducing a potential flexibility into the written language which has not been seen in English since the 18th-century. Standard capitalisation, spelling and punctuation are often ignored. On the other hand, by no means everyone has allowed their



writing to change in this way: most e-messages are in perfectly standard orthography.

A distinctive e-style has certainly begun to evolve and this will one day take its place alongside the hundreds of other styles already in the language, but it will not be as esoteric a style as first appeared in the experimental outpourings of its more daring practitioners, when the medium became available in the mid-1990s. It will settle down, as do all styles, when the need to foster intelligibility

moderates the impulse to express identity.

Celebrating linguistic diversity

There is a down side to the global rise of English. Of the 6,000 or so languages in the world, at least half are likely to become extinct in the next century. One of the consequences of colonialism has been the way in which many minority cultures have assimilated to the dominant ones, with a shift in use away from their indigenous languages. In Australia and North America, for example, the shift has been to English. The issue of language death goes well beyond English, for the same effects have been noted in parts of the world where English is not historically a major influence.

The indigenous languages of South America are also rapidly disappearing – but there, the shift has been to Spanish and Portuguese. Every country needs to increase its efforts to preserve the world's linguistic diversity. The ecological movement has had its major successes in biological conservation and

there is no reason why there should not be similar successes in relation to language. Governments can do a great deal by introducing protection measures for minority languages – as has already happened in relation to the Welsh language. We should celebrate the linguistic diversity around us, for each language gives us a unique view of what it means to be human. “I am always sorry when any language is lost,” said Dr Johnson, “because languages are the pedigree of nations.”

The many influences which have shaped the British pedigree are reflected in its language; and as fresh influences emerge, so British English will continue to keep pace with them. But the perspective is going to be different. Several hundred languages are now heard in London, which has become one of the multilingual capitals of the world. We are entering a new linguistic age. Britain, therefore, has every opportunity to do its bit, not only by fostering its indigenous languages and dialects, but also by welcoming new ones and by providing more opportunities for people to learn foreign languages.

The widespread comment that “the British are not very good at other languages” should become what it always was – a 20th-century myth.

We need a linguistic focus for the new millennium. Dialects and languages flourish best when we remember to value them. A national centre devoted to the celebration of language and languages – it would be the first in the world – could be the worthiest of new millennial goals for a multilingual Britain.

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Men at work

Top: Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, c. 1600, mirroring and influencing the language of the 16th-century – and still influential to this day.

Bottom: Eliza Doolittle and Prof Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, hard at work improving 'er spoken language.