

A thousand years of English

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Around the end of the first millennium, Y1K, something happened of great linguistic interest in Britain: a conversation came to be written down in Anglo-Saxon. It happened like this. There is a document called the *Colloquy* of Aelfric, the abbot of Eynsham in Oxfordshire, dating from around 1000 AD. Colloquies – dialogues between a schoolmaster and his pupils – were a normal part of monastic schools in Western Europe, especially for teaching boys Latin. What makes this one so important is that someone – perhaps Aelfric himself, more likely a later teacher – has glossed the Latin words of the dialogue by writing their Anglo-Saxon equivalents in tiny letters between the lines of the manuscript. It is, as a result, our earliest recorded English conversation.

The opening is very instructive. ‘We children ask you, master, to teach us to speak correctly, because we are unlearned and we speak badly.’ ‘What do you want to say?’ asks the teacher. ‘What do we care what we talk about,’ reply the students, ‘as long as we say it right!’ They knew the penalties. The Benedictine Rule was observed in Anglo-Saxon monasteries, and it was very strict about speaking Latin correctly on such occasions as reading at meals or joining in the services. Errors were severely punished – just as they would be 700 years later, when English grammar began to be taught in schools.

The rise of English

Comments about the English language are conspicuous by their absence in 1000 AD. Latin ruled the educated world, and English had no special status. It was a parochial language then – and 500 years later it still was, though other languages (in particular French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch) had developed a wide European profile. In 1582, Richard Mulcaster, the headmaster of Merchant Taylors’ School, wrote this about English: ‘Our English tongue is of small reach – it stretcheth no further than this island of ours – nay, not there over all.’ (He was of course thinking of the Celtic languages, still strongly present in Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and the Isle of Man.) And he reflects: ‘Our state is no Empire to hope to enlarge it by commanding over countries’. There was no real literature to be proud of, either – not since the time of Chaucer, 200 years before.

1582. What a time to be saying such things. In the course of the next generation, everything changed, both in politics and literature. Within two years, Walter Raleigh’s first expedition to America was to set sail, and although this was a failure, the first permanent English settlement was in place, in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Loan words from Indian languages into the English spoken there – which as a result started to turn into American English – become a significant feature of contemporary writing. Captain John Smith, writing in 1608, describes a *racoon*; *totem* is found in 1609; *caribou* and *opossum* are mentioned in 1610.

As for literature, 1582 was also a significant year, as it was the year in which a young man in Stratford, Warwickshire, fell in love – not with Gwynneth Paltrow (that came later) – but with Anne Hathaway. Soon after – we do not know how or when – he moved to London, and by 1592 was already being talked about as a writer. Within 20 years, English literature would never be the same again.

The origins of world English

Mulcaster wasn’t entirely accurate. English had already begun to move away from England – and to change, as a result. During the 11th century, a new variety of the language took root in Scotland, much influenced by the refugees who had fled north in the years following the

Norman Conquest. This Middle Scots was the basis of the very distinctive Scots English we know today. And the first overseas development took place in 1171, when English rule was imposed on Ireland by Henry II; the influence of Irish Gaelic on English must have been heard not long after.

Some 4-5 million people spoke English late in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. This had grown to a quarter of the world's population, some 1.5 billion, late in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. How could this happen? There is of course nothing intrinsically wonderful about English that it should have spread so widely. Its pronunciation is not simpler than that of many other languages, its grammar is no simpler – what it lacks in morphology (in cases and genders) it certainly makes up for in syntax (in word-order patterns) – and its spelling certainly is not simpler. A language becomes a world language for one reason only – the power of the people who speak it.

There was political power, firstly, in the form of the colonialism that 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 an official or working role in the proceedings of about 85% of the world's international organizations.

Secondly, 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 made 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'.

Thirdly, 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.

Fourthly, there was cultural power, in the 20th century manifesting itself everywhere, chiefly through American influence. We saw English come to dominate in the press, along the news agency telegraph wires, 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 chiefly on English.

The New Englishes

A language which has come to be spoken by as many people as English has ceased to be the property of any of its constituent communities. Nobody owns English now – not the British, with whom the language began, nor the Americans, who now comprise its largest mother-tongue community. The total number of mother-tongue speakers in the world, some 400 million, is actually falling, as a proportion of world English users. And they all have a share in the future of English - first-language, second-language, and foreign-language speakers alike. Language is an immensely democratising institution. To have learned a language is immediately to have rights in it. And it is 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.

Vocabulary is the area which will be most affected, as English spreads around the world. Words will be taken over ('borrowed') from the indigenous language or languages spoken in

a country. In many countries, where several cultures co-exist, such as West Africa or Malaysia, these words can come from several languages. Australian English vocabulary has borrowed only a few words from its indigenous languages – such as *dingo*, *koala*, *wallaby*, and *boomerang* – but it will eventually borrow many more, from its immigrant groups.

How many words will enter the language, in these ways? People have begun to tabulate them, in the form of word-lists and dictionaries, and the results are surprising. It does not take long before such compilations reach several thousand words. There were over 3,000 items recorded in the first edition of the *Dictionary of South African English* (1978). The *Concise Australian National Dictionary*, published in 1989, has 10,000 items in it. There are over 15,000 entries in a *Dictionary of Jamaican English*. Many English-speaking countries now have dictionary projects. It is of course an ongoing enterprise, as new words are being invented all the time.

The effect of even fairly small numbers of localized words can be great, for several reasons. The new words are likely to be frequently used within the local community, precisely because they relate to distinctive notions there. And they tend not to occur in isolation: if a conversation is about, say, local politics, then the names of several political parties, slogans, and other allusions are likely to come into the same discourse, making it increasingly impenetrable. ‘Blairite MP in New Labour Sleaze Trap, say Tories’ might be a British newspaper example. Six words with British political meanings or overtones there, in quick succession. Exactly the same kind of piling up of unfamiliar expressions can be heard, and often read, in areas where new Englishes are emerging.

Here’s another written example, from the South African *Sunday Times*, where all the local words are Afrikaans in origin: ‘It is interesting to recall that some *verkrampte* Nationalists, who pose now as super Afrikaners, were once *bittereinder* *bloedsappe*.’ [*verkramp*: bigoted; *bittereinder* a die-hard of the Anglo-Boer war; *bloedsappe* a staunch member of the United Party]. And here’s a spoken one, between two Malaysian women: ‘I was stuck in the computer room. Big queue there. Hanya [only] three computer, thirteen orang [people] line-up! If I *keluat* [move out], I go back to the end of the line. Jadi, *sampai sekarang pun* [therefore till now also], I’ll still be there!’

There’s nothing new about all this. English early on borrowed tens of thousands of words from French and Latin, to produce such alternatives as *ask*, *question* and *interrogate*, or *fire*, *flame* and *conflagration*. Words from over 350 languages are represented in English now. The Middle Ages saw an enormous influx from the main European languages, notably French and Italian; the Renaissance, and later the Industrial Revolution, saw an even greater influx of words from Latin and Greek. Indeed, as there is far more Romance than Anglo-Saxon vocabulary in English, our language has been Franglais-like for centuries. It is a point the French fail to appreciate, when they complain about the way English is currently influencing their language.

Mixed languages are on the increase, as we enter the new millennium; and it is important to realise that this is happening. It is quite wrong to think of the ‘future of world English’ as if it was simply going to be a more widely used version of British English, or of American English. These varieties will stay, but they will be supplemented by other varieties which will display increasing differences from them.

An English family of languages?

So, at the beginning of the new millennium, can we avoid the conclusion that, left to itself, English is going to fragment into mutually unintelligible varieties, just as Latin did a millennium ago? In several countries, English has come to be used to express sociopolitical identity, and received a new character as a consequence, conventionally labelled Nigerian English, Singaporean English, Indian English, Jamaican English, and so on. And if

significant change can be noticed within a relatively short period of time – a few decades – might not these varieties become even more differentiated over the next century or so, so that we end up with an English ‘family of languages’?

It is certainly possible. But there are certain pressures which are working in the opposite direction. Alongside the need to reflect local situations and identities, which fosters diversity, there is the need for mutual intelligibility, which fosters standardization. People need to be able to understand each other, both within a country and internationally. There has always been a need for lingua francas. And as supra-national organizations grow – political, economic, and social – the need becomes more pressing. The 185 members of the UN are there not simply to express their identities, but also because they want to talk to each other. And whatever languages are chosen by an organization as lingua francas, it is essential – if the concept is to work – for everyone to learn the same thing, a standard form of the language (‘Standard English’). And when we reflect on the opportunities there are for contact these days, whether as a result of the media, travel, or electronic communication, the chances are that the standard element in the international use of English will be strengthened rather than weakened.

These centripetal forces were lacking a thousand years ago, when Aelfric wrote his Colloquy. Once the Roman Empire had begun to fragment, there was nothing to stop the centrifugal forces tearing spoken Latin apart. The numbers of Standard Latin speakers around Europe were small, and communication between groups was difficult. The whole globe now is communicatively smaller than Europe was then. It is the relative isolation of people from each other that causes a formerly common language to move in different directions. In the Middle Ages, it was very easy for communities to be isolated. Today it is virtually impossible.

It therefore looks as if we are all facing a multidialectal future for English in the new millennium. To survive, we shall need a standard language to achieve national and international intelligibility, and a regional English (or other language) to express our local or ethnic identity. The more mobile of us will doubtless master several regional Englishes, as we travel about the world. Some of these Englishes, especially in their more colloquial varieties, have already become so distinctive that they are largely unintelligible to outsiders. And as we listen to such people fluently switching between the standard language and the local variety, as circumstances require, we would have to say that they are multilingual – but in English.

It is a scenario that the monks of Aelfric’s monastery would never have imagined, in their wildest dreams. And it has all happened within a millennium.