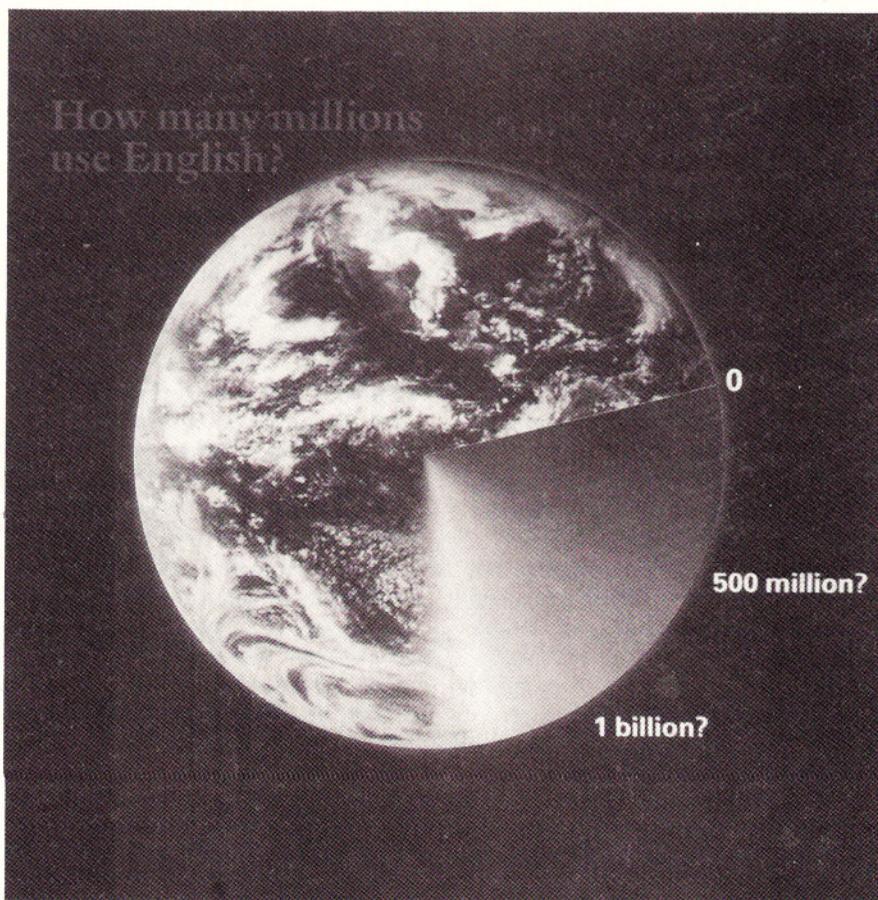

HOW MANY MILLIONS?

The Statistics of English Today

DAVID CRYSTAL

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth – the first, that is, from 1558 to 1603 – the number of English speakers in the world is thought to have been between 5 and 7 million. At the beginning of the reign of the second Queen Elizabeth in 1952, the figure had increased almost fiftyfold. In 1962, Randolph Quirk estimated in *The Use of English* that 250 millions had English as a mother tongue, with a further 100 million using it as a second or foreign language.

Fifteen years later, and we find Joshua Fishman and his colleagues, in *The Spread of English*, citing 300 million for the mother tongue category. A further 300 million is said to use it as an additional language. These figures are the ones which are repeatedly quoted throughout the statistically-conscious 1970s. They are adopted by Bailey and Görlach as recently as 1982, in their *English as a World Language*. But they are now very much out of date. In 1984, several sources collected by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching in London indicated that the figure would have to be raised by 100 million. One analysis, quite often



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referred to, gives mother-tongue use as 300 million, second language use also as 300 million, and foreign language use as 100 million. This was the total used by Quirk in his address to the British Council's anniversary conference on 'Progress in English Studies' in September 1984. So there we are. 700 millions.

But actually, there we aren't. For in Erik Gunnemark and Donald Kenrick's geolinguistic handbook, *What Language Do They Speak?*, published privately in 1983, we are given a detailed list of English speaker totals. The home language total is unremarkable – they cite 'over 300 million'. It is the figure for English as an 'official language' which grabs the eye: over 1,400 million! Allowing a further 100 million or so for speakers as a foreign language, we

COUNTRY	FIRST LANGUAGE SPEAKERS	SECOND LANGUAGE SPEAKERS
Anguilla	10,000-	10,000
Antigua-Barbuda	100,000	100,000
Australia	14,000,000	15,000,000-
Bahamas	250,000	250,000
Barbados	250,000+	250,000+
Belize	100,000+	150,000+
Bermuda	50,000+	50,000+
Botswana		1,000,000-
Brunei		200,000+
Cameroon		8,000,000+
Canada	17,000,000+	24,000,000+
Cook Islands		20,000-
Dominica	50,000+	100,000-
Ethiopia		32,200,000
Fiji		600,000+
Ghana		12,000,000
Gibraltar		30,000+
Great Britain	56,000,000+	57,000,000
Grenada	100,000+	100,000+
Guyana	900,000+	900,000
Hong Kong	?	6,000,000-
India	?	700,000,000+
Irish Republic	3,300,000	3,300,000
Jamaica	2,300,000	2,300,000
Kenya		17,000,000
Kiribati		60,000+
Lesotho		1,400,000
Liberia		2,000,000
Malaysia (East)		14,300,000
Malawi		6,400,000
Malta		350,000
Mauritius		1,000,000
Montserrat	15,000	15,000
Namibia		1,000,000
Nauru		80,000+
New Zealand	3,000,000	3,200,000
Pakistan	? ? 90m+	85,000,000+
Papua New Guinea		3,500,000
Philippines		50,000,000
Senegambia		600,000
Seychelles		60,000
Sierra Leone		3,600,000
Singapore	?	2,500,000
Solomon Islands		200,000+
South Africa	2,000,000+	30,000,000
St Kitts & Nevis	60,000	60,000
St Lucia		100,000+
St Vincent	100,000+	100,000+
Swaziland		600,000
Tanzania		18,500,000
Tonga		100,000+
Trinidad & Tobago	1,200,000	1,200,000
Tuvalu		80,000+
Uganda		13,000,000
United States	215,000,000	230,000,000+
USA territories, Pacific		300,000-
Vanuatu		100,000
Western Samoa		150,000+
Zambia		6,000,000
Zimbabwe	200,000+	7,600,000
various British territories	30,000+	30,000
TOTALS	316,015,000+	1,336,845,000+

Estimates of the number of English users in the world. *The first list* gives figures for those who speak English as a mother tongue, or first language. *The second list* gives recent overall population figures (usually 1981 or thereabouts) for those countries where English has official status as a medium of communication, and where people have learned it—usually in school—as a second language. These totals will generally be overestimates. There are no figures available for people who have learned English as a *foreign* language, in countries where the language has no official status. I have used a plus sign to mean 'more than', a minus sign to mean 'less than', and a question mark in places where no one knows how many first language speakers there are.

here reach a total not far off a third of the current world population. Has this enormous jump in the estimates, from 700 to 1400 million, any justification?

Gunnemark and Kenrick do provide one clue that their total may be less dramatic than it seems. Their figure, they say, 'includes some 800 million inhabitants in countries where English is an associated official language (above all India)'. Ah, India. A country whose population increased by a quarter between 1971 and 1981. The 1983 population estimate for India was 698 million—a convenient figure for me to use in the present discussion, as it relates very nicely to the 700 million difference cited above. Indeed, it is already an underestimate, when we recall the world growth rate of 1.8 per cent. Or, to put this another way, *if this article takes you a quarter of an hour to read, you must revise your estimate of India's population upwards by 4,000.*

The significance of India is obvious, when you look at the table of countries where English has some kind of official standing. No other population estimate in the list gets anywhere near that country's total. Apart from one uncertain exception, which I'll refer to shortly, whatever is happening to English in India will be the factor which decides whether our total is nearer 700 or 1400 million. Or perhaps this statement should be broadened to include the whole of the Indian subcontinent— that is, to include Bangladesh (92.6m.), Pakistan (87.1m.), Sri Lanka (15.2m.), Nepal (15.8m.), and Bhutan (1.2m.)

– all 1983 population estimates. Braj Kachru adopts this broader perspective, in his article on South Asian English in the Bailey and Görlach collection. He points out that figures for all the functions of English in all the regions are not available, but he cites a widely-used total of 3 per cent of the population as ‘English-knowing bilinguals’ – that is, those ‘who can use English (more or less) effectively in a situation’ (p. 378). Three per cent of around 900 million is an easy sum: 27 million people.

Of course, it all depends what ‘more or less’ means. Kachru’s examples show that he is taking a fairly conservative line here, considering only those who have an educated awareness of the language. He refers, for instance, to the 24.4 million students who are enrolled in English classes, to the 23 percent of the reading public who take an English newspaper, to the 74 percent of scientific journals published in India in 1971. He points out that English is the language of the legal system, a major language in Parliament, and a preferred language in the universities and all-India competitive examinations for senior administrative, engineering and foreign service positions. In terms of some such notion as ‘educated awareness’ or ‘fluent command’, we must accept his figure of 3 percent, at least until a better survey is carried out. But is this the most relevant criterion?

I am struck by the remarkable amount of semi-fluent or ‘broken’ English which is encountered in the Indian sub-continent, used by people with a limited educational background. The important point to appreciate is that this is broken English, not French, or Swahili, or anything else. And just because it is ‘broken’ does not make it any the less English. There is surely a sense in which these people have a developing awareness of the language which has to be taken into account in any totals of language in use? Everyone agrees that it is difficult to define bilingual competence – but why should the only criterion for statistical inclusion be educated excellence? Some lower level of competence might just as justifiably be proposed.

The usual response to this kind of reasoning is the ‘thin end of the wedge’ argument. If we allow in speakers with only 90% competence, why not 80%, or 50% or 5%...? What about the many children, running about India at this moment,

who have learned but a few English words and phrases as part of their restricted language of begging? Can they be said to know English, in any sense? My point is, they do not beg with smatterings of Spanish, or Russian, or Chinese. A French visitor told me that he was approached in this way, and he held an effective conversation with some of these children in a pidgin English of their devising. They had no pidgin French. Is this kind of competence to be ignored totally, in discussing speaker estimates?

It usually is, but I think we are wrong to do so. There is a sense in which English is the language of most of the population of the sub-continent. It is a language which is part of their cultural milieu, which rubs off onto them in all kinds of ways, and which many will have some primitive, native, systematic awareness of. The important point to stress here is that the awareness must be ‘systematic’ – that is, something more than simple rote learning of individual lexical items, involving some degree of generalization in phonology and grammar. If we use this criterion to replace the criterion of ‘fluent command’, then I wonder just how much of the population would have to be included? Half? Two-thirds?

I don’t *think* I would want to use the same flexible criterion for countries where English has no official status. Doubtless there are people in all parts of the world who have developed a smattering of English for trade and other purposes. After all, this is how the pidgin Englishes of the world emerged in the first place. An important constraint on the criterion is that the language must be a culturally significant element. There must be an element of genuine ‘nativeness’ in the learning context. There also has to be a learning continuum available for people to follow – at least in principle, should opportunity permit.

On this basis, we could perhaps accept Gunnemark and Kenrick’s figure. But could we ever go beyond it? The field of teaching English as a foreign language is ripe for serious study. What is amazing is that there are no reliable figures available for the number of learners under this heading – even for Europe. While preparing this article, I thought that at least the member states of the European Economic Community would have some data available. None of them have. Against this must

be set such quasi-facts as the following. English radio programmes are received by 150 million people in over 120 countries. 100 million receive programmes from the BBC External Service. The tip of how large an iceberg?

And all of this is but the beginning, for we have to take into account the uncertain exception which I referred to earlier, and which I have so far conspicuously ignored – China. In 1983, around 100 million Chinese watched the BBC television series on the English language, *Follow Me*. As far as I know, the Chinese were not watching similar programmes in French, German or Arabic. China has always been excluded from the statistical reviews, because of the shortage of information from inside the country. But these days, because of the numbers involved, special efforts should be made to obtain accurate information from there. The total number of English learners as a foreign language doubles, when the Chinese are taken into account. Or quadruples, if we do not insist on the passing of an English language examination as a standard of entry.

So, if you are highly conscious of international standards, or wish to keep the figures for world English down, you will opt for a total of around 700 million, in the mid 1980s. If you go to the opposite extreme, and allow in any systematic awareness, whether in speaking, listening, reading or writing, you could easily persuade yourself of the reasonableness of 2 billions. I am happy to settle for a billion, myself, but would welcome comment as to whether I am being too conservative or too radical. If the criticisms balance, I shall stay with this figure for a while. **EE**

References and Related Reading

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