



| David Crystal on language |

# THE WORLD'S FAVOURITE LANGUAGE

Potere politico. Potere economico. Potere culturale. Solo dal potere angloamericano, secondo David Crystal, deriva il fenomeno dell'inglese come lingua franca. Sarà a lungo andare sostituito dal cinese? Crystal ne dubita. L'inglese resisterà, dice, ma trasformato dai non madrelingua, ormai in netta maggioranza. La parola al professore! BY DAVID CRYSTAL

C1 ADVANCED



SPEAKER  
DAVID CRYSTAL



TRACK 15

**W**ell, a language becomes an international language and then eventually a global language for one reason only and that is the power of the people who speak it. There's nothing intrinsically wonderful about the English language that makes people say, you know, "I want to learn it because it sounds so wonderful" or because "its structure is such and such." No, it's power, power, power, but power means different things at different times. Now, the original source of the power of English came for political reasons, as everybody knows, the power of the British Empire originally, and then eventually<sup>1</sup> the power of the "American Empire," in inverted commas<sup>2</sup>. Between them English became the dominant voice of that kind of political history.

## KNOWLEDGE

But that's only one kind of power. A second kind of power, which is also very, very important, is the power of knowledge<sup>3</sup>. The Industrial Revolution arrives in the 17th, 18th centuries, something like two thirds of the people who've made that revolution possible, the people who invented the

new roads and textile machines and locomotives and so on, these were English speakers. So English quickly became the language of science and technology, and still is, of course. Something like 80 per cent of all the science in the world is mediated through English, still. So scientific power, technological power.

## MONEY TALKS

The third kind of power and probably the most important of all these days is economic power. The fact of the matter is<sup>4</sup> that at the beginning of the 19th century Britain was the most economically powerful nation in the world, it was called "the workshop<sup>5</sup> of the world." By the end of the 19th century, the United States was the most powerful nation, economically. The only other nation that had real strength in the 19th century was Germany, who invented much of the international banking system, but the First World War changed that balance<sup>6</sup> of power, leaving Britain and America as the two dominant economic voices. So they say "money talks." Well, what language was it talking? It was talking the pound and the dollar, and these days chiefly<sup>7</sup>

the dollar. So, that's the third kind of power.

## CULTURE

And then the fourth kind of power is cultural power. So most people around the world now encounter English first probably through pop songs or the Internet or something of that

## GLOSSARY

- 1 **eventually**: infine
- 2 **in inverted commas**: tra virgolette
- 3 **knowledge**: conoscenza
- 4 **the fact of the matter is**: il punto è...
- 5 **workshop**: laboratorio, officina
- 6 **balance**: equilibrio
- 7 **chiefly**: principalmente
- 8 **you pick up**: impari, cogli
- 9 **setting**: ambientazione
- 10 **remotely achieving that kind of public view**: arrivare neanche lontanamente a questo tipo di visibilità
- 11 **maintain**: rimangono, durano
- 12 **would dare**: oserebbe
- 13 **there's no likelihood**: non c'è nessuna probabilità
- 14 **taking over from English**: prendere il sopravvento sull'inglese
- 15 **are falling over backwards**: stanno facendo di tutto (lett. si inchinano piegandosi all'indietro, cioè facendo un movimento impossibile)
- 16 **to foster**: promuovere
- 17 **to an extent**: in una certa misura
- 18 **the figures speak for themselves**: le cifre parlano da sole
- 19 **billion**: miliardi
- 20 **steadily**: regolarmente
- 21 **has shifted away**: si è allontanata
- 22 **patterns of use**: modelli di utilizzo
- 23 **what it is going to sound like**: come suonerà



Below: David Crystal's book,  
*The English Language - A Guided  
Tour of the Language.*

Second Edition

David Crystal



'An illuminating tour of our common  
treasure by one of its most lucid and  
sensible professionals'  
*The Times*

kind. English has been the voice of most cultural 20th century developments from radio, television, air traffic control, you know, all of these things, international advertising and all of that. When you see posters all over the world advertising Coca Cola or Kellogg's Cornflakes, this is where you pick up<sup>8</sup> so much English in an everyday kind of setting<sup>9</sup>. You don't see any other language remotely achieving that kind of public view<sup>10</sup>. And so these four kinds of power, political, technological, economic and cultural, together, have caused English to become the global language that it is.

### THE BIG QUESTION

Will it stay that way? That will depend on whether those kinds of power maintain<sup>11</sup>. It's perfectly possible for an alternative power structure to enter the world and for another nation, or another group of nations, to become the dominant voice and to have the dominant power. Nobody would dare<sup>12</sup> predict the future with language, ever. So it's perfectly possible one day that a different language could become the voice of the planet. It could be Chinese, it could be Arabic, could be Spanish, could be anything, really, it could be



Martian, depending upon what happens. At the moment there's no likelihood<sup>13</sup> of anything else taking over from English<sup>14</sup> because all these other nations are falling over backwards<sup>15</sup> to learn English. You might expect the Chinese to foster<sup>16</sup> Chinese, well they do, to an extent<sup>17</sup>, but, well, the Chinese are learning English at the moment, and have been for decades.

### VITAL STATISTICS

So the figures speak for themselves<sup>18</sup>. We're talking about a world English language-speaking population of something like 2 billion<sup>19</sup>, a third of the world's population. And, it's a figure that's growing steadily<sup>20</sup>, there's no sign of its diminution at the moment. The interesting statistic about that though, is that, of those 2 billion, only about 400 million or so are first language speakers of English, in countries like Britain, the United States, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, countries of the

Caribbean, and a few other territories, which means that for every one native speaker of English there are between four and five non-native speakers of English, which means that the centre of gravity of the language has shifted away<sup>21</sup> from the native speaker to the non-native speaker.

### TOMORROW'S WORLD

So one can predict that the future of English is going to be increasingly influenced by the patterns of use<sup>22</sup> that non-native speakers actually manifest. And this is a dramatic change in the history of English, in the history of any language. No language has ever been influenced by a preponderance of non-native speakers before, in the way that English is. And so the future of English is really fascinating from this point of view. I wouldn't dare predict what it's going to sound like<sup>23</sup> and look like in a 100 years' time. ☒

 [L'intervista continua](http://www.intervistacontinua.it)   
[www.speakup.it](http://www.speakup.it) > magazine extras