

Insert

Henry Hitchings writes about the changing nature of the English language

- 1 No language has spread as widely as English, and it continues to spread. Internationally the desire to learn it is insatiable. In the 21st century the world is becoming more urban and more middle class, and the adoption of English is a symptom of this, for increasingly English serves as the lingua franca of business and popular culture. It is dominant or at least very prominent in other areas such as shipping, diplomacy, computing, medicine and education. A recent study has suggested that English “is symbolic of modernity and progress.” Indeed, the propagation of English is an industry, not a happy accident. 5
- 2 Wherever English has been used, it has lasted. Cultural might outlives military rule. In the colonial period, the languages of settlers dominated the languages of the peoples whose land they seized. They marginalised them and in some cases eventually drove them to extinction. All the while they absorbed from them whatever local terms seemed useful. The colonists’ languages practised a sort of cannibalism, and its legacy is still sharply felt. English is treated with suspicion in many places where it was once the language of the imperial overlords. It is far from being a force for unity, and its endurance is stressful. In India, while English is much used in the media, administration, education and business, there are calls to curb its influence. Yet even where English has been denigrated as an instrument of colonialism, it has held on – and in most cases grown, increasing its numbers of speakers and functions. 10 15
- 3 The term World English is still in use, but is contested by critics who believe it strikes too strong a note of dominance. There is an attempt to promote a neutral form of English, rather than one freighted with “Anglo” values, to form a part of a larger community, without territorial boundaries; to make its use prestigious; and to market it as a language of opportunity. This is supported economically, politically, in education and the media, and sometimes also by military force. Much of the endorsement happens covertly. As English continues to spread, it seems like a steamroller, squashing whatever gets in its way. True, it is often used alongside local languages and does not instantly replace them. Yet its presence shifts the cultural emphases in the lives of those who adopt it, altering their aspirations and expectations. English seems, increasingly, to be a second first language. It is possible to imagine it merely coexisting with other languages, but easy to see that coexistence turning into transcendence. 20 25 30
- 4 English remains the world’s auxiliary tongue. There are more people who use English as a second language than there are native speakers. Far more of the world’s citizens are eagerly jumping on board than trying to resist its progress. In some cases the devotion appears religious and can involve what to outsiders looks a lot like self-mortification. According to Mark Abley, some rich Koreans pay for their children to have an operation that lengthens the tongue because it helps them speak English convincingly. The suggestion is that it enables them to produce *r* and *l* sounds, although the evidence of the many proficient English-speakers among Korean immigrants in America and Britain makes one wonder whether the procedure is either necessary or useful. Still, it is a powerful example of the lengths people will go to in order to learn English, seduced by the belief that linguistic capital equals economic capital. 35 40
- 5 In places where English is used as a second language, its users often perceive it as free from the limitations of their native languages. They associate it with power and social status, and see it as a nimble medium for self-expression. It symbolises choice and liberty. But while many of those who do not have a grasp of the language aspire to learn it, there are many others who perceive it as an instrument of oppression, associated not only with imperialism but also with the predations of capitalism and Christianity. The Australian scholar Alastair Pennycook neatly sums up English’s paradoxical status as ‘a language of 45

threat, desire, destruction and opportunity'. Its spread can be seen as a homogenising (some would say, Americanising) force, eroding the integrity of other cultures. Yet it is striking that the language is appropriated locally in quite distinct ways. Sometimes it is used against the very powers and ideologies it is alleged to represent. Listening to Somali or Indonesian rappers, for instance, it seems sloppy to say that the use of English in their lyrics is a craven homage to the commercial and cultural might of America.

- 6 There are challenges to the position of English as the dominant world language in the 21st century. The main ones seem likely to come from Spanish and Mandarin Chinese. Both have more first-language users than English. But at present neither is much used as a lingua franca. The majority of speakers of Mandarin Chinese live in one country, and, excepting Spain, most Spanish-speakers are in the Americas. There is an argument that the revitalization of minority languages is good for English, because it weakens English's large rivals and thus removes obstacles to the language's spread. So, for instance, the resurgence of Catalan, Basque and Galician weakens Castilian Spanish, making it a less powerful rival to English.
- 7 In addition, there is a long history of people using the language for anti-English ends – of creative artists and political figures asserting in English their distance from Englishness or Britishness or American-ness. Hence, it challenges English as a cultural force. Many writers whose first language has not been English have infused their English writing with foreign flavours; this has enabled them to parade their heritage while working in a medium that has made it possible for them to reach a wide audience.
- 8 Yet, English is important for countries to pursue their global ambitions. In China the number of students learning the language is increasing rapidly. China's English Fever is caused by the ardent conviction that learning English is the essential skill for surviving in the modern world.
- 9 The embrace of English in the world's two most populous countries means that the language is changing. Some of the changes are likely to prove disconcerting for its native speakers. The "English-ness" of English is being diluted. So, more surprisingly, is its American flavour. English's centre of gravity is moving; in fact, in the 21st century the language has many centres. As this continues, native English-speakers may find themselves at a disadvantage. Native speakers freight their use of the language with all manner of cultural baggage. To non-native speakers, quirks and elaborations of this kind are confusing. Non-native speakers of English often comment that they find conversing with one another easier than sharing talk with native speakers. Already many people who learn English do so with little or no intention of conversing with its native users.
- 10 At the same time, native speakers of English tend to assume that their ability in this potent language makes it unimportant to learn other languages. The reality is different. British companies often miss out on export opportunities because of a lack of relevant language skills. Moreover, there is a chance that a command of English will within twenty or thirty years be regarded as a common basic skill for business, and native speakers of the language will no longer enjoy any competitive advantage. As Robert Phillipson punchily says, "English for business is business for English." But while English is being pushed, it is also being pulled; it is the language, more than any other, that people want to learn.
- 11 The consequences are complex. Some, it would seem, are not as intended. Even as vast amounts are spent on spreading British English, the reality is that English is taking on more and more local colour in the different places where it is used. Accordingly, while the number of languages in the world is diminishing, the number of Englishes is increasing.