

# English

## One Tongue, Many Voices

Second Edition

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## English: The Working Tongue of the Global Village

English, no longer an English language, now grows from many roots.

Salman Rushdie

*The Times* (3 July 1982)

Ahead of his time, the Canadian writer Marshall McLuhan predicted that electronically connected media would eventually transform the world into a huge 'global village'. English has become the working tongue of that village.

It is a new feature in the history of languages and language learning that this demand for English comes largely from the grass roots, not from society's elite, as was the case with Latin forced down the throats of previous generations of school pupils, or as the English language itself was imposed in earlier times on speakers of many other languages. The most remarkable thing about English today is not that it is the mother tongue of over 370 million people, but that it is used as an additional language by so many more people all around the globe. Non-native speakers in fact hugely outnumber native speakers – probably a unique situation in language history. There are estimates suggesting that about a third of the world's population know, or think they know, some English. But, of course, sheer numbers mean little here – the expression 'know English' has plenty of latitude.

According to Ethnologue, a database maintained by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Dallas, Texas, there are today about 7,000 living languages in the world. Yet just five languages – Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian and Hindi – are spoken by more than half of the world's population. And English cannot claim the highest number of native speakers; Chinese has about three times as many. What gives English its special status is its unrivalled position as a means of international communication. Most other languages are primarily communicative channels within, rather than across, national borders. Today, English is big business and the most commonly taught foreign language all over the world.

So why this demand for English among language learners around the world? The reason is not that the language is easy, beautiful or superior in linguistic qualities. Most people who want to learn it do so because they need it to function in the world at large. Young people, finding it both practical and cool, are attracted by things they can do with English, such as listening to music, watching films and surfing the web. For scientists and scholars, English is a necessity for reaching out to colleagues around the globe, publishing results from their research and taking part in international conferences. For tourists, English is the most useful tool for getting around and communicating with people all over the world.

### English is spoken in circles

The Indian-American scholar Braj Kachru has taught us to think of English, as used around the world, in the form of three concentric circles (see Figure 1.1). The Inner Circle represents a handful of countries where most of the inhabitants speak English as a first language. The Outer Circle includes a larger number of countries where English is a second, often official or semi-official language, but where most users of the language are not native speakers. Beyond the Inner and Outer Circles, English is learned and used as a foreign language in the huge Expanding Circle, which in fact includes every country in the world.

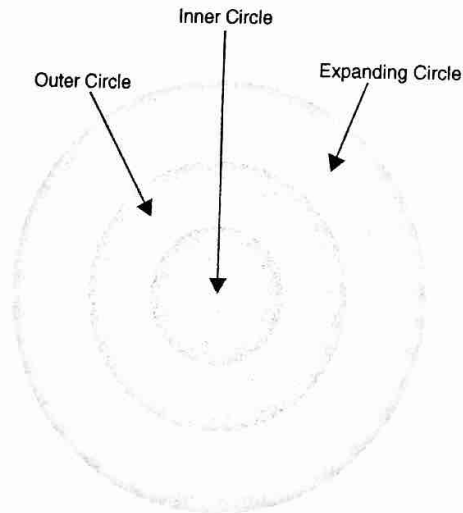


Figure 1.1 The three concentric circles of English worldwide

### The Inner Circle

The Inner Circle includes, above all, three geographical blocs: the United States, Canada and the West Indies in the New World; the United Kingdom and Ireland in Europe; Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in the Southern Hemisphere. In these eight regions there are over 370 million people speaking English as a first language, and two out of three of them live in North America. Speaker estimates are always very approximate, because censuses typically do not distinguish clearly between levels of fluency in production and comprehension, or take account of such factors as bilingualism; and estimates increase greatly if they include all the creoles and pidgins that historically derive from English. But certain general trends are apparent in the data reported below, taken from censuses since the year 2000 or United Nations surveys.

In some countries there are different figures for total population and speakers of English as a first language. For some 38 million Americans the first language is Spanish – in fact, Hispanics have now replaced African Americans as the largest minority group of the United States. Canada is officially a bilingual country where almost a quarter of the population report French to be their mother tongue. In addition, native Americans and Canadians speak various indigenous languages. The Republic of Ireland has two official languages, Irish Gaelic and English, but only a small proportion of the population use Gaelic. In the United Kingdom, Welsh is an official language in Wales, spoken by about a fifth of the population, alongside English. Taking the United Kingdom and Ireland together, English is the first language of around 64 million inhabitants, with a steadily growing number of immigrants (especially from the European Union) who have a mother-tongue other than English. What many people find surprising is that neither in the United States nor the United Kingdom, the two countries that historically have had the major role in the spread of their language around the world, has English ever been formally declared the official language.

In the Southern Hemisphere, English is spoken as a first language by around 20 million Australians and New Zealanders. While this is a modest figure compared with the number of native speakers in North America and Europe, English is an important means of communication around the expansive Pacific basin. South Africa is a special case with 11 official languages, one of which is English. The number of speakers of English as a first language is less than 10 per cent, yet this total is comparable in size to those of Ireland and New Zealand, and in South Africa today English retains a dominant position: it is the main medium of instruction in higher education and the language most commonly used in Parliament and courts of law.

People who happen to be born in the Inner Circle of course enjoy a privilege since they learn, for free (more or less), to speak this global language as part

Countries in the Inner Circle		
Countries	English as a first language	Population (2015 est)
United States	260 million	321 million
United Kingdom	59 million	64 million
Canada	20 million	35 million
Australia	16 million	23 million
Caribbean	5 million	5 million
Ireland	4 million	4.5 million
New Zealand	4 million	4.5 million
South Africa	5 million	54 million
Totals	373 million	511 million

of the normal process of child language acquisition. This gives them a certain global reach and an advantage in many walks of life, whereas those who happen to be born into the Outer and Expanding Circles have to put years of time and effort into attaining an advanced level of mastery of the language. For obvious reasons, in English-speaking communities there is a widespread lack of enthusiasm for learning other languages. But life in this 'fast language lane' of native English speakers comes at a price. Having English as your only tongue means you lose the direct experience of feeling at home in other cultures and life-styles. You view the world through English-tinted glasses. The other side of this coin is that, among speakers of the world's other languages, there are fears that the pervasive influence of English will undermine their own cultural and linguistic identities.

### The Outer Circle

In countries outside the Inner Circle, English has different societal functions, and it is therefore practical to place these countries in two different circles: the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. Yet there are linguists who argue that, today, a distinction between English as a second and a foreign language is not relevant. In their view, it doesn't really matter whether you learn English in, say, Nigeria (where it has official status) or Japan (where it hasn't). Recently, English linguistic influences have been penetrating further into countries like China, Mexico and Norway, for which it has always been a foreign tongue.

In the Outer Circle we mostly find people who live in former British colonies, such as Kenya and Tanzania in Africa, and India, Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore in Asia. In many of these countries, English is an official language and widely used in administration, education and the media. India is a striking example of the spread and importance of English in the Outer Circle.

In this country, with more than a billion inhabitants and over 400 languages, English has held its position and is widely used in government administration, the law courts, secondary and higher education, the armed forces, the media, commerce and tourism. Estimates suggest that at least 10 per cent of the population – more than 125 million people – now make regular and fluent use of English as a second language. If more basic conversational abilities are included, the figure is probably two or three times this. Whichever total we accept – and such estimates are bound to be hazy – India is clearly among the leading English-using nations in the world.

However, as we shall see, the question of whether a country belongs to one circle or another – like the question of what makes a speaker a native speaker of English – is trickier than one may think.

### The Expanding Circle

The Expanding Circle encompasses large parts of the world where English is learned as a foreign language because it is found useful, or indeed indispensable, for international contacts in such areas as industry, business, politics, diplomacy, education, research, technology, the Internet, sports, entertainment and tourism. Today there are hundreds of millions of people who, though not living in an English-speaking country, have acquired a good working knowledge of English. This circle now seems to be ever-expanding, strengthening the claims of English as the international language of today. Is this expansion of world English going to reach saturation point? Arguably, it is, and in the not-too-distant future, it will be appropriate to rename the 'Expanding Circle' the 'Expanded Circle'.

### Do we need a world language?

In the history of the world up to now, there has never been a situation where one language could claim global currency. There have been languages, like Latin during the Roman Empire, that gained widespread international currency through military might or economic influence. But this was not a worldwide conquest: even in Roman times there were 'barbarian hordes' living beyond the empire, and there were vast tracts of the world that the Roman legions never reached. So why should we now think in terms of a world language? Is there any need for one?

The answer to such questions, above all in the globalized society we live in today, must be 'Yes'. To overcome the confusion of tongues, people have tried in the past to make up artificial international languages, such as Esperanto, Ido, Volapük, Novial, Interglossa and Interlingua. The most successful of these has been Esperanto, yet, despite the high hopes of previous generations that Esperanto would take over the world, artificial languages have met with little

success. It is true that the grammar of artificial languages has been planned to be regular and easy to learn and their vocabulary combines elements from different languages. Yet somehow, these advantages have not weighed against the built-in advantages of a natural language that already has a head start in the international language stakes. English already had this head start, and gradually extended its hegemony through the twentieth century.

As a bonus, a natural language also offers a cultural milieu and a rich canon of literature. In the case of English, this literary canon originates both in the Inner and Outer Circles, embracing not only William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Ernest Hemingway, Patrick White and William Butler Yeats, but also Arundhati Roy, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o and Derek Walcott.

### Why English?

English did not become a world language on its linguistic merits. The pronunciation of English words is irritatingly often at odds with their spelling, the vocabulary is enormous and the grammar less learner-friendly than is generally assumed. There are people who think it is much to be regretted that some other language, like Italian or Spanish with their pure vowel sounds and regular spellings, did not achieve the status of a global lingua franca. David Abercrombie, a well-known Scots phonetician with a keen interest in English teaching, once suggested that spoken Scottish English, not English English, should be used internationally because of its superior clarity. In fact, foreigners often find Scottish English with its clear *r*'s easier to pronounce and understand than Southern British English with its *r*'s either not pronounced (as in *girl*) or obscurely pronounced (as in *right*) – see pp. 125, 147. Also, with few diphthongs, Scottish vowels are similar to those widely heard throughout the world, including on the European Continent. But, as we shall see, the southern British English accent is changing, and is in any case dominated in terms of numbers by speakers of American English, who for the most part articulate those final *r*'s.

True, English grammar has few inflectional endings compared to languages like German, Latin or Russian, but its syntax is no less complex than that of other languages. A comprehensive grammar of English is definitely no shorter than, say, a grammar of French or German, as has been demonstrated by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum's *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* with more than 1,800 pages. So it is totally wrong to suppose, as some native speakers actually do, that English has no grammar. The grammar of English not only exists, but has been subjected to more detailed study than that of any other language.

As everybody knows, the English word stock is vast. Any major dictionary of the English language has over 100,000 headwords, and the most comprehensive of them all, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), defines a total of

over 600,000 word-forms. With its 20 volumes this lexical whopper occupies a great deal of shelf space but, fortunately, is now available in electronic form. Oxford University Press feels it unlikely that it will ever be printed but will probably appear only in electronic form. Yet, while all these words exist in the dictionary, no native English speaker knows them all. The average native speaker probably uses no more words than a speaker of any other major language.

So what made English the world language? Behind its success story there are two main factors: first, the expansion and influence of British colonial power – by the late nineteenth century the British Empire covered a considerable part of the earth's land surface, and subjects of the British monarch totalled nearly a quarter of the world's population; second, the status of the United States of America as the leading economic, military and scientific power of the twentieth century.

And there are yet other contributing factors. One is the increasing need for international communication as a result of modern technology: such innovations as the telephone, radio, television, jetliner transport and computers each introduced a step-change in the potential for international communication. Air traffic controllers all over the world use English when talking to pilots, whether Russian or Danish or Chinese, and whether at John F. Kennedy or Schiphol or Narita airport. And, of course, in information technology, American English is king.

Yet another factor: in countries or groups of countries where people have several or many different first languages, English may be the preferred lingua franca because it is felt to be neutral ground. In the global economy, many multinationals have adopted English as the workplace vernacular. Half of all Russian business is said to be conducted in English. In the European Union (EU), the practical 'working language' in communication across language barriers is usually English, often reluctantly adopted as the only language that is sufficiently widely used. Across the EU (excluding the British Isles), nine out of ten students choose to study English as a foreign language. English is said to permeate EU institutional activities and many areas of cultural and economic life more and more thoroughly. Today, it is hardly possible to pursue an international career without English. As a window on the world, English is looked upon as the best means to achieve economic, social and political success.

The aim of this book is to explore this astonishing global phenomenon. The history of English as a separate language started about CE 500, when its ancestor was a collection of dialects spoken by marauding Germanic tribes who settled in the part of the British Isles nearest the European Continent. Over the next 500 years, this proto-English came to be spoken by less than half a million illiterate people. Compared with the prestigious Latin language, which



dominated western Europe at that time, it was a totally insignificant tongue. In the 1,000 years since then, the English language has come heavily under the influence of other languages, especially Old Norse, French, Latin and Greek. Eight hundred years ago it was a humble medley of native dialects in a country where the rulers spoke French. Yet it somehow survived as a basically Germanic language, and has now come to be known to over two billion people (see Figure 1.2).

This fantastic story needs to be told, and so, in Chapters 2–6, we look back and trace the history of English as it developed in the British Isles and later in territories conquered and settled through the growing British maritime and commercial power. But when we reach the last two centuries, the story of English becomes international and worldwide. Around 1880, the United States became the leading English-speaking nation, in both population and wealth. Chapters 7–8 tell the story of how the English language has evolved today in the British Isles and the United States, building on the historical foundation already described. Chapters 9–10 deal with pidgins, creoles and the standard language. Chapter 11 describes some of the ongoing changes in current English. Chapter 12 deals with the current e-revolution and its effects on the English language. Finally, Chapter 13 looks to the future: all languages being works in progress, what will happen to English? Will it split into several different languages, as Latin did? Or will it remain a single language, in spite of all the variety of its manifestations around the world? Will it remain the leading language of international communication? Or will it be overtaken by another language? We don't know the answers to these questions, yet they are worth asking and debating in an informed way.

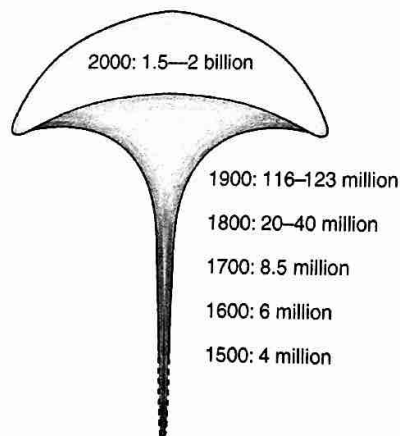


Figure 1.2 The mushroom of English

Over the centuries, the number of users of the English language can be seen as forming a mushroom with a slim base and a huge cap. These statistics, necessarily approximate of course, derive from Otto Jespersen's *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (pp. 233–4) and David Crystal's *English as a Global Language* (pp. 62–5). Yet what can be stated with some certainty is that, in the long history of the English language, the mushrooming effect is quite recent. In the 1936 edition of *The American Language*, H. L. Mencken gave 174 million as the estimated number of native speakers. As for speakers outside what we have called the Inner Circle, he wrote: 'it is probable that English is now spoken as a second language by at least 20,000,000 persons throughout the world – very often, to be sure, badly, but nevertheless understandably' (p. 592). How things have changed!

### One or two explanations

First, why are three chapters (2–4) of this book devoted to what happened in remote periods of history? The answer is simple. What the English language looks and sounds like today is fundamentally due to distant events: the Germanic migrations and invasions, the Norman Conquest, the introduction of printing, and the Renaissance. Recent centuries have brought their own story of the growing international dispersion of English, but this story builds crucially on more ancient foundations.

Second, we try hard to avoid confusion between describing linguistic realities (which we aim to do) and making value judgements (which we do not). It is easy to fall into the trap of considering English a successful language because of its inherent qualities, as Melvyn Bragg arguably does in his book *The Adventure of English*, rhapsodizing over the Elizabethan age of English: 'English was now poised to grow into a richness, a subtlety and complexity which would enable it to become a world language.' There is no room in this story for triumphalism. On the other hand, it is easy to fall into the opposite trap of seeing the spread of English on a global scale as a linguistic form of imperialism, as has been argued by Robert Phillipson in his book *Linguistic Imperialism*.

We believe it is better to see the rise of English in more objective terms. It has won out in the linguistic ecology of the twentieth century rather as dinosaurs won out in the battle for survival above other species in the Jurassic period, or as *homo sapiens* is dominating other species in the survival battle of the present age. But there is a crucial difference: the English language has won out, at least for the present, because of the political, economic and military success, at a crucial period, of the people who were its speakers, not because of the features of the language itself. This is an amazing story to tell, but if we give any impression of glorifying English or the English, this is far from our intention.

The avoidance of value judgements is important, too, in discussing the different kinds of English – the many *varieties* of the language, as they are called. We have inherited a tradition of such judgements: for example, in the assumptions that some kinds of grammar are 'correct' and others 'incorrect'; that standard language is somehow superior to non-standard dialects; that English as a mother-tongue is somehow superior to the English of non-native speakers. It would be foolish to lay much store by such traditional attitudes. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves that non-natives speakers of English in the world now outnumber native speakers by at least five to one. Further, it is quite possible, and is seriously argued today, that the future of English will be more determined by the majority of its users – those in the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle – than by the Inner Circle, the traditional heartland of English. We return to this discussion in our final chapter.

## Part I

### History of an Island Language