THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH

Alan Maley
Assumption University

Introduction

The spread of English as a global vehicle of communication since the 1950s is perhaps the biggest linguistic success story of all time. In his recent book (Crystal 1997), David Crystal estimates that some 670 million people use English with a native or near-native command. This increases to 1,200 to 1,500 million if the criterion of 'reasonable competence' is adopted. In virtually every sphere of human activity English now holds a preponderant position. Somehow it has always managed to be 'in the right place at the right time' to take advantage of developments on the world stage.

Not surprisingly perhaps, as English has become 'Top Language', a whole structure of support for that position has grown up around it. There is now a plethora of organisations, publications and other structures for the exaltation, promotion and commodification of English. It is unsurprising, if unedifying, to read reports of English as a 'multi-million pound export business for UK Ltd'. The British Council and BBC English assiduously promote this business. Even the Prince of Wales is wheeled in to do his bit for the language! Most tertiary colleges and universities in the UK offer courses related to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language, and compete ferociously with the hundreds of private language schools for 'clients'. UCLES (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) has become a multi-million pound business for examinations in English as a Foreign Language, including teacher training certification. A large sector of the British publishing scene is dedicated to English language publication—从 dictionaries to simplified readers, from learned books on discourse analysis to books of language teaching games and activities. A torrent of new publications pours annually from the presses. There are even journals dedicated exclusively to charting developments in the English language such as English Today and World Englishes.

And new books continue to trumpet the triumph of the language. The most recent include David Crystal's English as a Global Language' and David Graddol's The Future of English', to which I will refer again later. A fashionable new vein of inquiry into the phenomenon of English as a world language are studies which 'critique' this role. These include Robert Phillipson's Linguistic Imperialism' (1192) and Alistair Pennycook's The Cultural Politics of English (1994). These critical works enjoy simultaneously the luxury of self-righteous criticism and the privilege of conducting it in the language which is the very subject of that criticism! We shall return to them later.
It seems then that nothing succeeds like success; once the momentum for using English gathers pace, it is unstoppable. Is this in fact the case? In the rest of this article, I shall look at two main 'threats' to the current position of English. The first concerns the linguistic changes the language is undergoing. The second has more to do with political, social and economic issues and their impact on the language.

**Language Change**

All languages change over time. But arguably English is changing faster and across a wider range than most other languages. Why is this? And is it likely to continue into the future? And if it does, what are the likely effects?

**Changes based on 'field'**

Many of the rapid changes and innovations in English owe their origin to fields of activity, many of them new, such as the entertainment industry (especially popular music), computing, consumer capitalism and youth culture. Thousands of new terms have come into daily use in these fields. (See box below)

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<tr>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>Computers</th>
<th>Consumerism</th>
<th>Youth Culture</th>
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<td>hip hop</td>
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<td>riff</td>
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<td>reggae</td>
<td>laptop</td>
<td>one-stop</td>
<td>like</td>
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<td>heavy metal</td>
<td>log on</td>
<td>DIY</td>
<td>scene</td>
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<td>DJ</td>
<td>surfing</td>
<td>convenience(adj)</td>
<td>trendy</td>
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<td>funky</td>
<td>programmer</td>
<td>wheelie bin</td>
<td>nerd</td>
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<td>CD</td>
<td>microchip</td>
<td>beeper</td>
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Clearly, many of these are ephemeral, and are quickly replaced by other terms. And most of them are lexical, involving little or no change in pronunciation. (Though so-called 'Estuary English' depends heavily on phonology.) Few involve grammatical change either, though it is interesting to note the use of all-purpose fillers such as 'like'. (So I was like standing there and like this guy like comes up and like looks at me—know what I mean, like?)

As such, this massive inflow of new words, and words with expanded meanings, such as 'mouse', are easily absorbed by most people. In fact, they hardly notice that they are new. As technological and socioeconomic changes gather pace, so the language will adapt itself to cope with them.

**Changes based on geographical spread**

Much more far-reaching are the changes which result from the geographical spread of English. English has been transplanted to many new contexts, initially under the impetus of colonialism and latterly as the vehicle of international commerce. Recognisable new varieties of English have taken strong root in India, Africa, Malaysia and Singapore, the Philippines and
Oceania, in addition to the already well-established varieties in North America, the Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand.

These evolving varieties of English encompass all aspects of the language. The variations in pronunciation alone are spectacular, ranging from the strongly retroflex marking of Indian varieties to the glottalised variants in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. And patterns of stress and intonation are similarly unmetropolitan. At their most marked, they make the language seem quite different from the English we thought we knew.

Lexical variation is similarly luxuriant both with new coinages and with new meanings for old tokens. 'I so blur today, you know,' my students in Singapore would say, where 'blur' denotes feelings of confusion and distraction.

So too is grammar. For example, there is a widespread tendency to use a Topic + Comment structure in Asian varieties rather than the canonical Subject + Verb + Object structure. 'This man, I don't like him.' rather than, 'I don't like this man.'

Clearly, with this degree of variation, there are bound to be worries about comprehensibility. I shall return to this in the final section.

Changes based on statistical mass

As I noted at the outset, English is now spoken by very large numbers of people worldwide. And increasingly, it is not confined to former colonial territories. Many of the people who use it no longer feel a historical rootedness or connection to it. It is simply a means of getting things done, a pragmatic communication tool. This may well lead to even more radical 'stretching and bending' of the language than we have seen to date. When a Dutchman is dealing with a Russian, a Peruvian and a Korean through the medium of English, none of them is likely to be concerned with anything other than getting their messages across. Two possible results may ensue: there may be a tendency towards a simplified, pidginised version of the language. Alternatively, there may be radical innovation in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. (See some of the more humorous results in the box on page 69).

What is more, statistically, the larger the number of speakers, the more chance there is of linguistic mutation. A random 'error' stands a better chance of being perpetuated in a large than in a small population. Out of a large number of such 'errors' we can expect to find many gaining widespread currency. For many people, this evokes a vision of the language spiralling out of control.

Changes in the Patterns of Use

The phenomenal success which English enjoys may also not last for ever.

Rival Claims

The most articulate case for this thesis is the recent book by David Graddol, referred to above. He compares the world linguistic
In a Tokyo hotel: Is forbidden to steal hotel towels please. If you are not a person to do such thing is please do not read notis.

In a Paris hotel lift: Please leave your values at the front desk.

Outside a Hong Kong tailor's: Ladies may have a fit upstairs.

In a Bangkok dry cleaners: Drop your trouser here for best results.

In a Japanese hotel: You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.

On a Swiss menu: Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.

In a Norwegian hotel bar: Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar.

On a Moscow hotel room door: If this is your first visit to the USSR, you are welcome to it.

In a Rhodes tailor's shop: Order your summers suit. Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation.

system to 'complex systems' which are best dealt with by 'Chaos Theory'. This theory helps to explain how stable states or trends can, without much warning, become unstable. An apparently unstoppable trend towards global English usage could change direction in the future as the consequence of some surprisingly minor event. (Graddol p. 21)

Graddol forecasts that, 'In four key sectors, the present dominance of English can be expected to give way to a wider mix of languages: first, the global audio-visual market, and especially satellite TV; second, the Internet and computer-based communication (generally), including language-related and document handling software; third, technology transfer and associated processes in economic globalisation; fourth, foreign language learning, especially in developing countries, where growing regional trade may make other languages of increasing importance'. (Graddol p. 4)

His conclusions are that English, though it will remain the most important world language, will increasingly find itself in competition with other major languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Hindi, Spanish, Arabic and Bahasa Indonesian. Particularly in regional settings, a local language may present distinct advantages. Satellite television, for example, may well find it better to broadcast in a majority local language rather than in English. Transactional companies selling style have no particular loyalty to the English language: they will follow the market...' (Graddol p. 49).

**Polycentrism**

As English gains ground in many different places, so we are likely to see the evolution
of local varieties into local standards. Such standard varieties will often become the marker of national or regional identity, and as such will resist adherence to metropolitan standards. 'English belongs to us now! We’ll use it as we see fit!'

One undoubted benefit the 'new Englishes' have brought has been the development of creative writing. There is now a literature of unparalleled richness in English, yet not rooted in the traditional centres of English. Indian literature in English alone would fill a library, with names as well known as R.K. Narayan, Vikram Seth and Rohinton Mistry. And the same can be said for Africa, the Caribbean, Singapore and Malaysia, and the Philippines. There is even a nascent literature in English in Thailand.

Such polycentrism could of course lead to the development of mutually incomprehensible dialects of English, but there will always be a strong counter-current aiming at international comprehensibility. Ultimately there is little point in adopting a global language and then speaking it in a way no one else can understand!

**Down With English!**

As I mentioned earlier, there is a vigorous current of criticism of English and the negative effects it has had. Criticisms boil down to the following:

- The success of English takes place at the expense of smaller, less powerful languages, which cannot sustain the competition with this linguistic predator. Many such languages, in parts of North and South America, and in Oceania, in particular, are either already extinct, or will shortly become extinct. Apart from the demoralising cultural and social effects on speakers of these languages the loss of linguistic diversity is held to be as deplorable as loss of genetic diversity in the biological sphere.

As people adopt English, they take on more than just the language. English carries with it a world view of 'the way things are'. It transmits messages about how knowledge is to be conceived and developed. It subtly conveys attitudes. Those who use it, therefore, unwittingly adopt this same framework of beliefs and attitudes, which may well not be in their own interests, but rather in the interests of the original stakeholders in the language. There are, of course, counter arguments. Most importantly, to deprive third world population of access to English would be to severely limit their opportunity to improve their educational and economic prospects.

Nevertheless, this view of English as a hegemonic system keeping the powerless in their place and the powerful in power is a persuasive and telling argument against the wholesale adoption of English, and deserves to be taken seriously. It could, if widely shared, work against the current widespread use of English.

- There are those who criticise English as the vehicle for...
consumerist capitalism, with all its negative cultural, educational and environmental effects (Maley 1996). The spread of McDonald Duck across the world, with its trivialisation of local cultures, its ravenous appetite for market share at any price, its diffusion of 'American' values, has been widely documented. Perhaps the most illuminating, and deeply worrying book on the subject is Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Postman 1989). In this 'californication' of the globe, English bears a heavy responsibility. It is English which carries the messages, which serves as the language of the multi-national corporations, which moulds opinion through advertising. However, given the scale of indifference among the population at large, this criticism is unlikely to affect the further spread of the language.

Conclusions

Despite the issues raised above, English is clearly alive and well, and living in the world. It is the major language of scientific inquiry, commercial activity, international diplomacy, international agencies, the media, tourism, the Internet, and global publishing, and plays a key role in aesthetic expression worldwide. However much one may regret its more invidious role as the language of economic hegemony and political (in its widest sense) control, this seems unlikely to erode its spread.

While other major languages may well reduce the importance of English, especially in regional settings, its pre-eminence as the language of global communication seems secure. Though, as Graddol warns, even a small change could have dramatic effects.

The most common concern continues to be fears of fragmentation. Will things fall apart, the centre not hold? Will standards crumble away and leave the language in a state of anarchic and random fission? The question of 'standards' is frequently evoked in this context, so it is perhaps worth making a number of points in conclusion:

- Describing a standard for a language is near-impossible. It might more easily be done for the written form of the language but even there experts and the populace at large will have conflicting views. Consider the 'rules' for punctuation as an example of fluidity!

In recent years researchers using computer corpora have made great progress in describing English. The Cobuild project, directed by John Sinclair at the University of Birmingham, is perhaps the best example. What the research has revealed is that many of our hallowed beliefs about the way English works as a system have no basis in fact. When we examine what people actually say or write, it is at variance with what grammarians and others have been telling us they should say or write! More recently Ron Carter and Michael McCarthy have developed teaching materials based on the findings of such research
Imposing a standard is, if anything, even more difficult. The English-speaking countries have, probably wisely, declined to set up an Academy. Securing adherence to accepted standards, however vaguely they may be apprehended, is best left to such institutions as schools, the media, especially the press, publishing in general, and the common sense of the educated user.

It is in the nature of language to change, and resistance is futile (Aitchison 1991, 1997). It does not follow that anarchy will be loosed upon the world. At the interpersonal level, humans have a remarkable facility for convergence when they interact. Very quickly they mutually adjust to a strange accent or mode of expression. At the international level, the way English is used seems governed by a sort of homeostasis. In other words, it finds its own level according to the circumstances of its use. For purely internal, national or regional communication, a more or less marked local variety may be used. For international purposes, the variety used will converge with an accepted, internationally comprehensible variey. English is unlikely to build a new Tower of Babel!

Reference:


Alan Maley is the Dean of the Institute for English Language Education (IELE). Professor Maley has been in the field of TESL for over 35 years. He has published over 30 books and numerous professional articles. He has worked in eight countries, including PR China, India and Singapore. His main interests are in creative methodology and the teaching of communication skills, including writing.