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## AN ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

On 5 September 1977, the American spacecraft Voyager One blasted-off on its historic mission to Jupiter and beyond. On board, the scientists, who knew that Voyager would one day spin through distant star systems, had installed a recorded greeting from the people of the planet Earth. Preceding a brief message in fifty-five different languages for the people of outer space, the gold-plated disc plays a statement, from the Secretary-General of the United Nations, an Austrian named Kurt Waldheim, speaking on behalf of 147 member states -in English.

The rise of English is a remarkable success story. When Julius Caesar landed in Britain nearly two thousand years ago, English did not exist. Five hundred years later, *Englisc*, incomprehensible to modern ears, was probably spoken by about as few people as currently speak Cherokee - and with about as little influence. Nearly a thousand years later, at the end of the sixteenth century, when William Shakespeare was in his prime, English was the native speech of between five and seven million Englishmen and it was, in the words of a contemporary, "of small reach, it stretcheth no further than this iland of ours, naie not there over all".

Four hundred years later, the contrast is extraordinary. Between 1600 and the present, in armies, navies, companies and expeditions, the speakers of English - including Scots, Irish, Welsh, American and many more - travelled into every corner of the globe, carrying their language and culture with them. Today, English is used by at least 750 million people, and barely half of those speak it as a mother tongue. Some estimates have put that figure closer to one billion. Whatever the total, English at the end of the twentieth century is more widely scattered, more widely spoken and written, than any other language has ever been. It has become *the* language of the planet, the first truly global language.

The statistics of English are astonishing. Of all the world's languages (which now number some 2700), it is arguably the richest in vocabulary. The compendious *Oxford English Dictionary* lists about 500,000 words; and a further half million technical and scientific terms remain uncatalogued. According to traditional estimates, neighbouring German has a vocabulary of about 185,000 words and French fewer than 100,000, including such Franglais as *le snack-barre* and *le hit-parade*. About 350 million people use the English vocabulary as a mother tongue: about one-tenth of the world's population, scattered across every continent and surpassed, in numbers, though not in distribution, only by the speakers of the many varieties of Chinese. Three-quarters of the world's mail, and its telexes and cables, are in English. So are more than half the world's technical and scientific periodicals: it is the language of technology from Silicon Valley to Shanghai. English is the medium for 80 per cent of the information stored in the world's computers. Nearly half of all business deals in Europe are conducted in English. It is the language of sports and glamour: the official language of the Olympics and the Miss Universe competition. English is the official voice of the air, of the sea, and of Christianity: it is the ecumenical language of the World Council of Churches. Five of the largest broadcasting companies in the world (CRS, NBC, ABC, BBC, CBC) transmit in English to audiences that regularly exceed one hundred million.

English has a few rivals, but no equals. Neither Spanish nor Arabic, both international languages, have this global sway. Another rival, Russian, has the political and economic under-pinning of a world language, but far from spreading its influence outside the Soviet empire, it, too, is becoming mildly colonized by new words known as *Russlish*, for example *seksapil* (sex appeal) and *noh-khau* (know-how). Germany and Japan have, in matching the commercial and industrial vigour of the United States, achieved the

commercial precondition of language-power, but their languages have also been invaded by English, in the shape of *Deutschlish* and *Japlish*.

The remarkable story of how English spread within predominantly English-speaking societies like the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand is not, with the benefit of hindsight, unique. It is a process in language that is as old as Greek, or Chinese. The truly significant development, which has occurred only in the last one hundred years or so, is the use of English, taking the most conservative estimates, by three or four hundred million people for whom it is not a native language. English has become a *second* language in countries like India, Nigeria or Singapore where it is used for administration, broadcasting and education. In these countries, English is a vital alternative language, often unifying huge territories and diverse populations. When Rajiv Gandhi appealed for an end to the violence that broke out after the assassination of his mother, Mrs Indira Gandhi, he went on television and spoke to his people in English. In anglophone Africa, seizures of power are announced in English. Then there is English as a *foreign* language, used in countries (like Holland or Yugoslavia) where it is backed up by a tradition of English teaching, or where it has been more recently adopted, Senegal for instance. Here it is used to have contact with people in other countries, usually to promote trade and scientific progress, but to the benefit of international communication generally. A Dutch poet is read by a few thousands. Translated into English, he can be read by hundreds of thousands.

The emergence of English as a global phenomenon - as either a first, second or foreign language - has recently inspired the idea (undermining the claims we have just made) that we should talk not of English, but of many Englishes, especially in Third World countries where the use of English is no longer part of the colonial legacy, but the result of decisions made since independence. But what kind of English is it? This is a new and hotly contested debate which we shall explore fully in chapter nine. The future, of course, is unpredictable, but one thing is certain: the present flux of English - multi-national standard or international Babel? - is part of a process that goes back to Shakespeare and beyond.

### "THE QUEEN'S ENGLISH"

Throughout the history of English there has been a contest between the forces of standardization and the forces of localization, at both the written and the spoken levels. The appearance of the first substantial English dictionaries in the eighteenth century was a move towards written standardization. It was Victorian England that realized the idea of "the Queen's English", a spoken standard to which the "lesser breeds" could aspire.

There is an old Hindi proverb that "language changes every eighteen or twenty miles". Despite the influence of television and radio, you can still find a surprising number of regional varieties of spoken English within the United States, Canada and Australia, and especially within the British Isles. Here, depending on which county you are driving through, a donkey can still be called a *moke*, or a *cuddy*, or a *nirrup*, or a *pronkus*. In the English Lake District *deg*, *jrap*, *hejt*, *joggle*, *nope*, *scaitch* and *whang* all mean "to beat". While it is true that local idioms are not as strong as they were, we probably underrate their resilience and attribute more power to the levelling forces of television and radio than they deserve. A conversation between a Dorset shepherd and an Aberdonian farmworker can still be a dialogue of the deaf.

In the early nineteenth century, these regional differences were even more distinctive, but as the industrial towns of Lancashire and the Black Country mushroomed, and the countryside was stripped of its rural workforce, a steady improvement in literacy helped to disseminate more widely a standard of written English. The industrial revolution meant roads, canals and, above all, trains: people travelled more, both geographically and socially. We have only to read the novels of Charles Dickens to see the truth of George Bernard Shaw's famous dictum that "it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him". The pressures of class ambition speeded up the emergence of a standard form of English speech. Writing less than a generation after the beginning of universal

elementary education in England, Thomas Hardy, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, drew an interesting contrast between Tess and her mother:

Mrs Durbeyfield habitually spoke the dialect; her daughter, who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality.

The emergence of Received Pronunciation (RP) - the outward and visible sign of belonging to the professional middle class - went hand in hand with the rise of an imperial Civil Service and its educational infrastructure. The Education Act of 1870 not only established the English public school as the melting-pot of upper- and middle-class speech and society, but...

Extract from: "The Story of English" by Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil  
Guild Publishing London, 1987