

English as a Global Language

Sarah Kay

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Dr. James S. Fleming

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Rochester Institute of Technology

There are 6,912 languages in use around the globe today [1]. While this is less than in previous years, such a large number of languages make communication between people in different countries—or even in the same country in some cases—very difficult. There has been talk for years of a “global language” for the future, a single language to be used in place of the thousands spoken today. While the benefits of a global language seem obvious, in terms of ease of communication and business dealings, there are also potential negative effects, including the deaths of currently spoken languages and the alteration of cultures from forced outside influence. In addition, there is also the issue of which language would become global. Mandarin Chinese is spoken by almost 900 million people according to a 1998 census, almost three times as many who speak Spanish or English, which are the next two most commonly used languages with approximately 330 million speakers each [2]. Perhaps Spanish or English might be better candidates since they are official languages in 20 and 51 countries, respectively, as opposed to only three countries claimed by Mandarin [2]. There is also the option of using an artificial language such as Esperanto, designed as an international language with a structure and pronunciation key that allow for ease of learning and use [3].

In recent years, there has been a great increase in globalization, or the sharing of ideas and information worldwide. Due to advances in communications technology, including the telephone networks and the Internet, a global language will be required in the future. This language may not be officially acknowledged, but even today several candidates for a global language are emerging. Because of its presence in many countries around the globe and its entrenchment in science and technology, English is the best available candidate.

English is a Germanic language which has passed through three major stages in its history: Old English, Middle English, and Modern English [4]. The first ancestor, Common Germanic, came into being approximately three thousand years ago in the Elbe river region and eventually split into three distinct subgroups [5]. West Germanic invaders from Jutland and southern Denmark between 500 and 800 AD brought about the rise of Old English in the British Isles. As the invaders spread through the area, the Celts were pushed north and west, into Scotland and Ireland, but pieces of their languages remained behind to be incorporated into Old English [5]. In 850, Norse invaders came to the shores and brought their own language, a derivative of North Germanic [5]. Some of these words were also eventually incorporated into English. Although the majority of the words currently included in an English dictionary are originally from foreign languages, almost half of the most common words have roots in Old English [5].

English entered its second phase in 1086 when William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, conquered England [4]. English became the language of the Anglo-Saxon peasants while the new nobility spoke Anglo-Norman, a variant of Old French. Although it also had Germanic influences, Anglo-Norman was a Romance language and brought back the influence of Latin to England [5]. In some cases Anglo-Norman words replaced Anglo-Saxon, particularly in areas where the nobility ruled, such as the courts. In other areas, words from the two languages combined to form new words. For example “gentle” from French and “man” from Germanic become “gentleman.” There were also times when words from both languages were used interchangeably, one of the reasons there are so many synonyms today [5]. In the twelfth century, the French nobles who remained in England were becoming more estranged from their relatives back in their

home country, and as their English holdings became more important they began to use a more modified version of English to communicate with their subjects [5]. When the bubonic plague passed through England, about a third of the population was killed and the lower classes became more prominent, raising the use of English over Anglo-Norman and contributing to the end of class differences in language use [5].

The language recognized as English today, Modern English, came into being during the Renaissance[5]. This was the language of Shakespeare, and many Latin and Greek words were revived and introduced to the population of England. During the late 1400s the printing press was developed in England, bringing literacy to the masses and helping to standardize the language. The first English dictionary was published in 1604 [4]. Since then, the structure of the language has not changed a great deal, but the number of words included has greatly increased. This is due in part to the Industrial Revolution when Latin and Greek terms were often used to describe the wonders that were developed, and partially due to British colonialism [5]. With portions of the Empire spread across the globe, words from many different languages were incorporated into English. In the twentieth century, two world wars brought words from even more languages. Also, since the majority of the male populations of Britain and the United States served in the military, several military slang terms such as “ASAP,” for “as soon as possible,” also became common in everyday speech [5]. American English was also influenced by many Native American languages, as well as Spanish and French from other colonial expansions and West African languages due to the slave trade [5].

English was not the only language that developed through the ages. Spain, France, and Portugal were developing their languages, also Germanic and Romance

based, in the same time period and region [5]. What gave English an advantage over these other languages was the military power of the British Empire. Although the phrase, “*El imperio en el que no se ponía el sol*” or “The empire on which the sun never sets” was used originally by Charles V to describe his Spanish empire, in the nineteenth century it applied far better to the British [6]. Spanish is second only to English in the number of countries where it is an official language, but Britain truly had an empire that spanned the globe until the middle of the twentieth century. The figure below shows some, but by no means all, of the countries held by Britain before World War II.

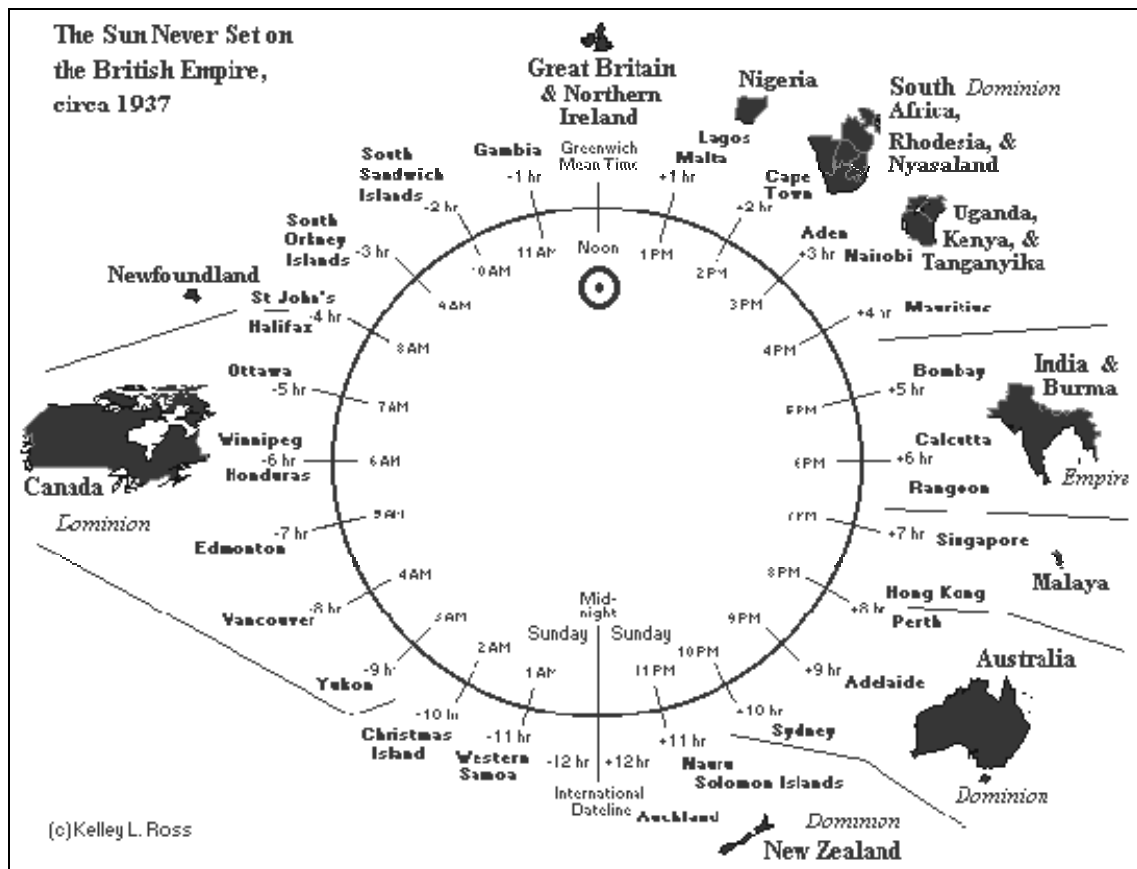


Figure 1: The British Empire [7]

At its peak, the British Empire covered almost a third of the world's surface and encompassed approximately a quarter of the world's population [7]. When the British

colonized portions of India and Africa as well as America, sent their convicts to Australia, and had military and colonial presence on various islands around the world as well, they took their language with them [5]. While many of the native words influenced English, English also had an effect on the native speakers. Today, although there is no longer a British Empire, many of these places retain use of the English language. The United States, Canada, and Australia are three of the most obvious examples, although English is also considered an official or national language in Kenya, India, Singapore and many other countries [1]. Today, although not technically “empires,” with territories and military presences around the world, both Britain and the United States can claim the sun never sets on their citizens [6].

Another major cause of the rise of English as a possible global language has been access to knowledge [7:71]. Between 1750 and 1900, about half of the major scientific and technical advancements came from Britain and the United States. These innovations greatly increased the amount of written material in English, particularly in the sciences which had previously had most publications done in French or Latin. Taking advantage of these advancements required an understanding of the English language [p. 73]. At the same time, international banking firms, such as those owned by J.P. Morgan in New York and the Rothschilds in London, were investing far more money in foreign trade than their counterparts. Since both primarily conducted their business in English, it gave the language a stronger foothold in the business world [p.74]. The acceptance of English into the scientific and business communities was an important step in its development as an international language.

The spread of English has continued, and in recent years the number of people speaking English has increased even faster than it did at the turn of the twentieth century. This is due to increased globalization, as technology makes travel and communication around the world much faster and more accessible than in previous years. Tourism and travel to foreign countries is becoming common, and being able to communicate upon arrival is convenient. Because English does have a presence around the world, it is often used for communication.

Three of the other main mediums for the transmission of the English language in the twentieth century were advertising, media broadcasting, and the Internet. Advertising is the oldest of the three mediums and actually started back in the Industrial Revolution with magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* [7:85]. Publications were able to reduce selling prices and therefore attract more consumers by allowing advertising in their pages, and today two thirds of a newspaper might be devoted to ads. Other forms of advertising, such as posters and billboards, became common in the 1920s. Firms such as Ford and Coca-Cola became household names in this decade [p. 86]. As these products began to spread to the international community, English was carried with them. Today, even in countries where English does not have any recognized status, English advertisements are common [p.. 86].

Broadcasting started with radio when KDKA of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania broadcast its first program in November, 1920 [7:87]. In Britain, the British Broadcasting Corporation was established in 1922, and in the next five years other broadcasting companies appeared in cities all over Europe as well as in places such as Bombay and Calcutta [p. 88]. Agreements over frequency usage were necessary, and

while it makes sense that organizations such as the International Broadcast Institute would use English since it is based out of London, the only official language of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union is also English [p. 89]. Nearly a third of all the radio broadcasts around the world were in English, and not all of these originated in countries where English was an officially recognized language. After World War II the number of English radio broadcasts increased, with new areas of coverage including the Soviet Union, Germany, and Italy [p. 89].

Movie and television broadcasts also brought English to the rest of the world, since the majority of them were in fact in English. Although the movie industry actually began in England and France, World War I caused a great deal of disruption and the industry became centered in the United States, specifically Hollywood, California. When sound was added to films, English was the language broadcast [7:89]. In 1996, 80% of all movies released were in English, and not only is the major awards ceremony, the Oscars, English-based, half of the awards given at the Cannes Film Festival in France are given to English-language films [p. 89]. Oftentimes the same movies showing in both Spain and Russia will be the same English film, either dubbed or with subtitles added. The fact that the actors and actresses in these movies are speaking primarily English is an important factor because, according to David Crystal, an authority on the English language and author of *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (1987) and *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995), “‘People increasingly believe in what they see, and they buy what they believe in...People use, drive, wear, eat, see, and buy what they see in the movies.’ If this is true, then the fact that most movies are made in the English language must surely be significant, at least in the long term” [p. 91].

The Internet, and computers in general, have been major proponents of the English language in recent years. In fact, ASCII, the display language of computers, uses single byte codes allowing for 2^8 (256) possible characters. For languages requiring more characters or characters not supported by those eight bits, other means of translation have to be not only devised, but means of encoding and decoding must be available for translation on both ends. Messages in languages such as Chinese and Hindi often have to be transmitted as images or special libraries downloaded in order to view them.

Another technological factor giving English an advantage over many other languages is that computers were first developed in the United States. Computer keyboards only have character keys for the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, the corresponding numbers, and various punctuation marks. While there have been keyboards designed for other languages, for example the Bicameral Pictographic Keyboard for Chinese [9], and the addition of diacritical markings for languages such as Spanish and French, these have been more recent developments and require specialized software to run. Companies such as Microsoft have foreign language plug-ins of their products, but these are often released after their English counterparts and do not always contain all of the same features. For example, while Microsoft Office can have its home language set to Russian, the spell check, grammar check, and thesaurus functions are no longer usable without the addition of more software. On the same note, many games released in the United States are put through only rough translation before being sent abroad. Many games developed internationally come into the United States after the same type of limited translation. One example of this is the game *Zero Wing* which was developed for the arcades in Japan by a company called Toaplan. In the early nineties it

was ported to video game consoles and released in the United States [10]. The following is a section of dialog shown on screen:

“In A.D. 2101

War was beginning.

Captain: What happen?

Mechanic: Somebody set up us the bomb.

Operator: We get signal.

Captain: What !

Operator: Main screen turn on.

Captain: It's You !!

Cats: How are you gentlemen !!

Cats: All your base are belong to us.

...

Cats: You have no chance to survive make your time” [10].

Obviously this makes very little sense and leaves a player wondering just what the game scenario actually is.

The Internet is seen in many countries as a way of gaining knowledge from around the world and providing opportunities in many different industries, including promoting tourism and crafts. However, on the Internet, over half of the available websites are in English [7:107]. Although this is an approximate number since it is impossible to survey all websites in existence, the fact that the Internet was developed from the ARPANET in the 1970s in the United States meant that English speaking countries had an advantage from the start. According to Anatoly Voronov, a director of

GlasNet in Moscow, “It is far easier for a Russian language speaker with a computer to download the works of Dostoyevsky translated into English to read than it is for him to get the original in his own language” [p. 108]. This is slowly changing, but it is still common to see “also available in English” on foreign websites, making it likely that English will continue to be a formidable presence on the Internet. Although there are translation mechanisms available, human translation is costly and time-consuming, and machine translation on sites such as FreeTranslation are often incorrect since they simply translate the words rather than the meaning [11]. This is the equivalent of picking up a foreign language dictionary and expecting to be able to speak fluently because all of the words are known. These translation programs also do not currently take into account words that exist in two languages and mean completely different things, or common idioms in any language, making them poor substitutes for real translation.

English has come a long way from the language of commoners in England a thousand years ago, spreading all over the globe and becoming the third most common language on the planet [1]. The question now is what does this rapid spread of English mean for the future? Now that a conversation with someone on the opposite side of the planet is available with the punch of a button or the click of a mouse, it is reasonable to think that some common method of communication will have to be devised. Despite the fact that English has spread widely in recent years, it is still not the most common language available. Why does English seem to be the language of choice for the future, and will it be able to hold that status?

At first glance, the most obvious option for a global language would be Mandarin Chinese. It is spoken as a first language by over three times as many people as the

English language [1]. The major disadvantage Chinese has in becoming a global language is that the majority of its speakers live in China. Whereas English is the most common second language around the world, Chinese is taught at a much lower rate. Also, education in Chinese tends to occur later in students' lives, such as at a university rather than in primary school, leading to a lesser degree of fluency.

A major distinction between Chinese and English is that Chinese is primarily a pictographic language, one of the reasons that the same set of characters can be used for the many varieties of the language [9]. Figure 2 shows a paragraph comparison, one version in Chinese pictographic symbols and one in English.

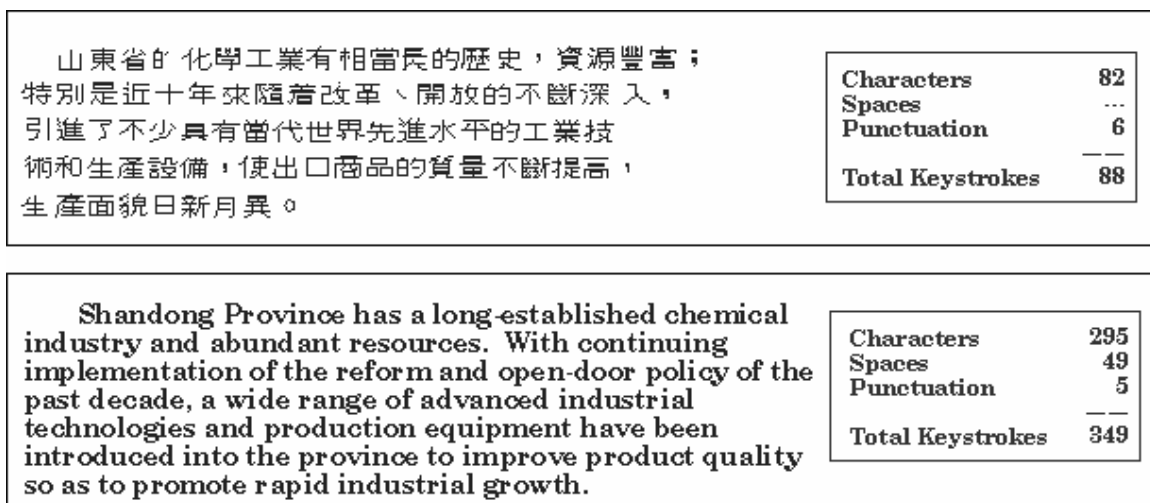


Figure 2: Chinese versus English Paragraph [9]

As shown, the English paragraph takes two-hundred ninety-five total characters to produce while the Chinese paragraph needs less than a third of that. However, the English paragraph is made up of only twenty-two *different* characters in varying combinations. The Chinese version requires that sixty-eight of the eighty-eight characters in the paragraph be different. In fact, in normal day-to-day communication, English only requires sixty different symbols. This number includes upper and lowercase

letters as well as punctuation. In the technical disciplines, where the use of Greek letters such as Ω for “ohms” or μ for “micro” is common, the total character count is slightly above a hundred characters. With some creativity, it is possible to create keyboard shortcuts or “hotkeys” for all of these characters on a standard Western keyboard. In Chinese, however, there are 3,000 characters used in normal correspondence and up to 12,000 that may be found in technical and business journals [9]. Specialized keyboards or simplified character sets have to be used for communication. There are representations of Chinese word pronunciations in the Latin alphabet, but generally the pictographic form is still used [12].

An example of a specialized keyboard for Chinese characters is the Bicameral keyboard shown in Figure 3.

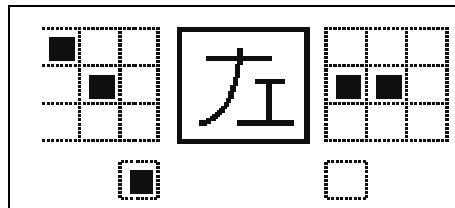


Figure 3: Bicameral Keyboard Example [9]

Although this is not the only specialized keyboard available, it makes clear the difference between a pictographic language like Chinese and a language such as English. In order to produce this character, five keys must be held down simultaneously. However, using this type of keyboard, over 2900 of the Chinese symbols used in day-to-day conversation can be produced, and with the addition of ‘option’ and ‘shift’ keys, almost all of the rest necessary for technical communication can be created [9]. Still, this requires memorizing the codes for each of these characters as well as what each of the characters mean. This may change with further development of character-recognition technology and the ability

to “write” onto computer screens; by drawing the characters directly the problems with representing the full character set with a limited number of keys become moot. However, the incorporation of character-recognition technology will not change the time commitment necessary to read and write Chinese. Instead of using basic symbols, for example English letters, which can be learned very quickly individually and then later combined to produce different words, in the Chinese language a symbol can represent a syllable or an entire word. Some of these may stand alone; others can be combined with additional symbols to vary the meanings. Students learning English are able to read and write simple sentences fairly quickly, but learning to recognize and write the several thousand Chinese characters required to be considered literate can take years [12].

Computers and the Internet are ‘fast’ technology. Because of the amount of time required to truly become fluent it is highly unlikely that Chinese characters will ever become the most popular medium for written communication. If written Chinese does not become a common means of communication in the technology medium, it is unlikely that spoken Chinese will be able to have as much of an impact as English, which is currently dominating in both the technological and verbal realms.

If Chinese is unlikely to become the language of the future, what about Spanish as a global language? It uses basically the same key set as English, removing the advantage of the available technologies, and as a first language it is more common than English [1]. Spanish is common in many cities in the United States, and in several of these cities there has been a push to have Spanish declared an official language alongside English. However, Spanish is only recognized as an official language in half as many countries as English, and many of the countries where it is recognized are in Central and South

America [1]. These countries have not had the same technological advances that have been occurring in English speaking countries in the past hundred years, and although their populations may be larger, their ability to spread languages to other countries outside the region is more limited. Because of the similarities in the languages, Spanish is more likely than Chinese to contribute new words to English, but the likelihood of it surpassing English as a potential global language is very low.

Esperanto, a language specifically designed for international communication at the end of the nineteenth century, seems to avoid both problems with the two previous languages. Unlike Chinese, it has a limited character set, and unlike Spanish it is not tied to a particular set of countries [3]. It has a very regular structure, a limited number of root words to learn, and very simple rules of pronunciation. All of these are issues that non-native speakers trying to learn English, or even native English speakers faced with unusual vocabulary, typically encounter [3]. There is no advantage to a particular country since it was designed as an international language. However, by the same token, there is therefore no pressure for a particular country to stress the use of Esperanto as a second language. Until Esperanto is adopted as an official language by some governing body, the odds of it becoming used in daily situations are very low. As of this decade, although there is a thriving international population using the language, there is no sign of it becoming more prominent than it is already [3].

Despite the fact that English is not an easy language to learn, the fact that it is firmly entrenched in technology and international communication seems to indicate that it will be the language of the future. There is, of course, no guarantee that the use of English on an international scale will continue; after all, the scientists of the fifteenth and

sixteenth centuries hardly expected their Latin to disappear. There have been attempts to stop the spread of English in some places. For example in France, at the behest of the Académie Française, the French government imposed fines on officials who used “Americanisms” where French phrases were available [13]. Using “software” in place of “logiciel” would incur such a fine. In some countries, English is seen as the language of domination and is believed to be causing harm to the local culture by supplanting native languages [14]. In others, its association with the British Empire and colonization casts the language in a negative light [5].

Although it appears today that English will be the global language of the future, it is entirely possible that in doing so it will become an English so completely different than that used today that it will be almost unrecognizable. As indicated earlier, the history of the English language contains three distinct languages within itself: Old English, Middle English, and Modern English [5]. The development of a fourth version of English would hardly be surprising. Even today, English speakers around the globe are separated into different regions where diverse flavors of the language are spoken. These include the “familiar” English with a variety of dialects spoken in the United States, Britain, Canada, and several other countries, a second version in South Asian and African countries encompassing many different pidgin varieties of English, and a third “broken” version used for fast communication in Latin American, Eastern European, East Asian, and Middle Eastern countries [15]. According to Prince Charles of Britain during the initialization of an attempt to preserve “English” English, “People tend to invent all sorts of nouns and verbs and make words that shouldn’t be” [15]. This trend will no doubt continue into the future as new words and phrases enter the English lexicon both from

other languages and as ways to express new ideas and technologies. With the advent of world communication, English appears to be the global language of the future, but what version of English it will be remains to be seen.

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