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## The triumph of English

### A world empire by other means

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#### The new world language seems to be good for everyone—except the speakers of minority tongues, and native English-speakers too perhaps

IT IS everywhere. Some 380m people speak it as their first language and perhaps two-thirds as many again as their second. A billion are learning it, about a third of the world's population are in some sense exposed to it and by 2050, it is predicted, half the world will be more or less proficient in it. It is the language of globalisation—of international business, politics and diplomacy. It is the language of computers and the Internet. You'll see it on posters in Côte d'Ivoire, you'll hear it in pop songs in Tokyo, you'll read it in official documents in Phnom Penh. Deutsche Welle broadcasts in it. Bjork, an Icelander, sings in it. French business schools teach in it. It is the medium of expression in cabinet meetings in Bolivia. Truly, the tongue spoken back in the 1300s only by the "low people" of England, as Robert of Gloucester put it at the time, has come a long way. It is now the global language.

How come? Not because English is easy. True, genders are simple, since English relies on "it" as the pronoun for all inanimate nouns, reserving masculine for *bona fide* males and feminine for females (and countries and ships). But the verbs tend to be irregular, the grammar bizarre and the match between spelling and pronunciation a nightmare. English is now so widely spoken in so many places that umpteen versions have evolved, some so peculiar that even "native" speakers may have trouble understanding each other. But if only one version existed, that would present difficulties enough. Even everyday English is a language of subtlety, nuance and complexity. John Simmons, a language consultant for Interbrand, likes to cite the word "set", an apparently simple word that takes on different meanings in a sporting, cooking, social or mathematical context—and that is before any little words are combined with it. Then, as a verb, it becomes "set aside", "set up", "set down", "set in", "set on", "set about", "set

against" and so on, terms that "leave even native speakers bewildered about [its] core meaning."

As a language with many origins—Romance, Germanic, Norse, Celtic and so on—English was bound to be a mess. But its elasticity makes it messier, as well as stronger. When it comes to new words, English puts up few barriers to entry. Every year publishers bring out new dictionaries listing neologisms galore. The past decade, for instance, has produced not just a host of Internettery, computerese and phonebabble ("browsers", "downloading", "texting" and so on) but quantities of teenspeak ("fave", "fit", "pants", "phat", "sad"). All are readily received by English, however much some fogies may resist them. Those who stand guard over the French language, by contrast, agonise for years over whether to allow *CD-Rom* (no, it must be *céderom*), *frotte-manche*, a Belgian word for a sycophant (sanctioned), or *euroland* (no, the term is *la zone euro*). Oddly, *shampooing* (unknown as a noun in English) seemed to pass the French Academy *nem con*, perhaps because the British had originally taken "shampoo" from Hindi.

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**English has few barriers to entry. Terms from "downloading" to "phat" are readily received**

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## Albion's tongue unsullied

English-speakers have not always been so *Angst*-free about this *laissez-faire* attitude to their language, so ready to present a *façade* of *insouciance* at the *de facto* acceptance of foreign words among their *clichés*, *bons mots* and other *dicta*. In the 18th century three writers—Joseph Addison (who founded the *Spectator*), Daniel Defoe (who wrote "Robinson Crusoe") and Jonathan Swift ("Gulliver's Travels")—wanted to see a committee set up to regulate the language. Like a good protectionist, Addison wrote:

I have often wished that...certain Men might be set apart, as Superintendents of our Language, to hinder any Words of Foreign Coin from passing among us; and in particular to prohibit any French Phrases from becoming current in this Kingdom, when those of our own stamp are altogether as valuable.

Fortunately, the principles of free trade triumphed, as Samuel Johnson, the compiler of the first great English dictionary, rather reluctantly came to admit. "May the lexicographer be derided," he declared, "who shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language...With this hope, however, academies have been instituted to guard the avenues of their languages...but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain...to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride."

Pride, however, is seldom absent when language is under discussion, and no wonder, for the success or failure of a language has little to do with its inherent qualities "and everything to do with the power of the people who speak it." And that, as Professor Jean Aitchison of Oxford University points out, is particularly true of English.

It was not always so. In the eastern half of the Roman empire, Greek remained the language of commerce, and of Christians such as St Paul and the Jews of the diaspora, long after Greek political supremacy had come to an end. Latin continued to be the language of the church, and therefore of any West European of learning, long after Rome had declined and fallen. But Greek and Latin (despite being twisted in the Middle Ages to describe many non-Roman concepts and things) were fixed languages with rigid rules that failed to adapt naturally. As Edmund Waller wrote in the 17th century,

Poets that lasting marble seek, Must carve in Latin or in Greek. We write in sand, our language grows, And like the tide, our work o'erflows.

English, in other words, moved with the times, and by the 19th century the times were such

that it had spread across an empire on which the sun never set (that word again). It thus began its rise as a global language.

That could be seen not just by the use of English in Britain's colonies, but also by its usefulness much farther afield. When, for instance, Germany and Japan were negotiating their alliance against America and Britain in 1940, their two foreign ministers, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Yosuke Matsuoka, held their discussions in English. But however accommodating English might be, and however much of the map was once painted red, the real reason for the latterday triumph of English is the triumph of the English-speaking United States as a world power. Therein lies a huge source of friction.

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**The real reason for the triumph of English is the triumph of the United States. Therein lies a huge source of friction**

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## **Damn Yanks, defensive Frogs**

The merit of English as a global language is that it enables people of different countries to converse and do business with each other. But languages are not only a medium of communication, which enable nation to speak unto nation. They are also repositories of culture and identity. And in many countries the all-engulfing advance of English threatens to damage or destroy much local culture. This is sometimes lamented even in England itself, for though the language that now sweeps the world is called English, the culture carried with it is American.

On the whole the Brits do not complain. Some may regret the passing of the "bullet-proof waistcoat" (in favour of the "bullet-proof vest"), the arrival of "hopefully" at the start of every sentence, the wholesale disappearance of the perfect tense, and the mutation of the meaning of "presently" from "soon" to "now". But few mind or even notice that their old "railway station" has become a "train station", the "car park" is turning into a "parking lot" and people now live "on", not "in", a street.

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**Some may regret the passing of the "bullet-proof waistcoat". But they may welcome the "parking lot" instead of the "car park"**

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Others, however, are not so relaxed. Perhaps it is hardest for the French. Ever since the revolution in 1789, they have aspired to see their language achieve a sort of universal status, and by the end of the 19th century, with France established as a colonial power second only to Britain and its language accepted as the *lingua franca* of diplomacy, they seemed to be on their way to reaching their goal. As the 20th century drew on, however, and English continued to encroach, French was driven on to the defensive.

One response was to rally French-speakers outside France. Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia, obligingly said in 1966 that "the French-language community" was not "colonialism in a new guise" and that to join its ranks was simply to use the colonial past for the benefit of the new, formerly French states. His counterpart in Senegal, Léopold Senghor, who wrote elegantly in the language of Molière, Racine and Baudelaire, was happy to join La Francophonie, an outfit modelled on the (ex-British) Commonwealth and designed to promote French language and culture. But though such improbable countries as Bulgaria and Moldova have since been drawn in—France spends about \$1 billion a year on various aid and other programmes designed to promote its civilisation abroad—French now ranks only ninth among the world's languages.

The decline is everywhere to be seen. Before Britain joined the European common market (now the European Union) in 1973, French was the club's sole official language. Now that its members also include Denmark, Finland and Sweden, whose people often speak better English than the British, English is the EU's dominant tongue. Indeed, over 85% of all international organisations use English as one of their official languages.

In France itself, the march of English is remorseless. Alcatel, the formerly state-owned telecoms giant, uses English as its internal language. Scientists know that they must either “publish in English or perish in French”. And though one minister of “culture and the French language”, Jacques Toubon, did his utmost to banish foreign expressions from French in the mid-1990s, a subsequent minister of education, Claude Allègre, declared in 1998 that “English should no longer be considered a foreign language... In future it will be as basic [in France] as reading, writing and arithmetic.”

That does not mean that France has abandoned its efforts to stop the corruption of its beautiful tongue. Rearguard actions are fought by Air France pilots in protest at air-traffic instructions given in English. Laws try to hold back the tide of insidious Albion on the airwaves. And the members of the French Academy, the guardians of *le bon usage*, still meet in their silver-and-gold-embroidered uniforms to lay down the linguistic law.

Those who feel pity for the French, however, should feel much sorrier for the Quebeckers, a minority of about 6m among the 300m English-speakers of North America. It is easy to mock their efforts to defend their beleaguered version of French: all those absurd language police, fighting *franglais*, ensuring that all contracts are written in French and patrolling shops and offices to make sure that any English signs are of regulation size. But it is also easy to understand their concern. After all, the publishing onslaught from the United States is enough to make English-speaking Canadians try to put up barriers to protect their magazines in apparent defiance of the World Trade Organisation: Canada's cultural industries are at stake, they say. No wonder the French-speakers of Quebec feel even more threatened by the ubiquity of English.

## Germans, Poles and Chinese unite

French-speakers are far from alone. A law went into effect in Poland last year obliging all companies selling or advertising foreign products to use Polish in their advertisements, labelling and instructions. Latvia has tried to keep Russian (and, to be more precise, Russians) at bay by insisting on the use of the Latvian language in business. Even Germany, now the pre-eminent economic and political power in Europe, feels it necessary to resist the spread of *Denglisch*. Three years ago the Institute for the German Language wrote to Deutsche Telekom to protest at its adoption of “grotesque” terms like CityCall, HolidayPlusTarif and GermanCall. A year earlier, an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in which a designer had been quoted using expressions like “giving story”, “co-ordinated concepts” and “effortless magic” so infuriated Professor Wolfgang Kramer that he founded the Society for the Protection of the German Language, which now awards a prize for the *Sprachpanscher* (language debaser) of the year.

For some countries, the problem with English is not that it is spoken, but that it is not spoken well enough. The widespread use of Singlish, a local version of Shakespeare's tongue, is a perpetual worry to the authorities in Singapore, who fear lest their people lose their command of the “proper” kind and with it a big commercial advantage over their rivals.

In Hong Kong, by contrast, the new, Chinese masters are promoting Cantonese, to the concern of local business. And in India some people see English as an oppressive legacy of colonialism that should be exterminated. As long ago as 1908 Mohandas Gandhi was arguing that “to give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them.” Ninety years later the struggle was still being fought, with India's defence minister of the day, Mulayam Singh Yadav, vowing that he would not rest “until English is driven out of the country”. Others, however, believe that it binds a nation of 800 tongues and dialects together, and connects it to the outside world to boot.

Some countries try, like France, to fix their language by fiat. A set of reforms were produced in Germany a few years ago by a group of philologists and officials with the aim of simplifying some spellings—*Spagetti* instead of *Spaghetti*, for example, *Saxifon* instead of *Saxophon*—

reducing the number of rules governing the use of commas (from 52 to nine), and so on. Dutifully, the country's state culture ministers endorsed them, and they started to go into effect in schoolrooms and newspaper offices across the country. But old habits die hard, unless they are making way for English: in Schleswig-Holstein the voters revolted, and in due course even such newspapers as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* abandoned the new practice.

Spain strives for conformity too, through a Spanish Royal Academy similar to the French Academy. The job of the 46 Spanish academicians is to "cleanse, fix and give splendour" to a language that is very much alive, although nine out of ten of its speakers live outside Spain. The academy professes a readiness to absorb new words and expressions, but its director admits that "changes have become very rare now." No wonder Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America—as well as the Philippines and the United States—have set up their own academies.

## Keeping tiny tongues alive

Rules alone may be unable to withstand the tide of English, but that does not mean it is impossible to keep endangered languages in being. Mohawk, for instance, spoken by some indigenous people in Quebec, was in retreat until the 1970s, when efforts were made first to codify it and then to teach it to children at school. Welsh and Maori have both made a comeback with the help of television and government interference, and Navajo, Hawaiian and several languages spoken in Botswana have been reinvigorated artificially.

Iceland has been extraordinarily successful at keeping the language of the sagas alive, even though it is the tongue of barely 275,000 people. Moreover, it has done so more by invention than by absorption. Whereas the Germans never took to the term *Fernsprechapparat* when *Telefon* was already available, and the French have long preferred *le shopping* and *le weekend* to their native equivalents, the Icelanders have readily adopted *alnaemi* for "AIDS", *skjar* for "video monitor" and *toelva* for "computer". Why? Partly because the new words are in fact mostly old ones: *alnaemi* means "vulnerable", *skjar* is the translucent membrane of amniotic sac that used to be stretched to "glaze" windows, and *toelva* is formed from the words for "digit" and "prophetess". Familiarity means these words are readily intelligible. But it also helps that Icelanders are intensely proud of both their language and their literature, and the urge to keep them going is strong.

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Perhaps the most effective way of keeping a language alive, however, is to give it a political purpose. The association of Irish with Irish nationalism has helped bring this language back from its increasing desuetude in the 19th century, just as Israeli nation-building has converted Hebrew from being a merely written language into a national tongue.

For some nations, such as the Indians, the pain felt at the encroachments of English may be tempered by the pleasure of seeing their own words enriching the invading tongue: Sir Henry Yule's 1886 dictionary, "Hobson-Jobson", lists thousands of Anglo-Indian words and phrases. But for many peoples the triumph of English is the defeat, if not outright destruction, of their own language. Of the world's 6,000 or 7,000 languages, a couple go out of business each week. Some recent victims from the rich world have included Catawba (Massachusetts), Eyak (Alaska) and Livonian (Latvia). But most are in the jungles of Papua New Guinea, which still has more languages than any other country, or Indonesia, or Nigeria (India, Mexico, Cameroon, Australia and Brazil follow).

Pundits disagree about the rate at which languages are disappearing: some say that by the end of the century half will have gone, some say 90%. But whenever a language dies, a bit of

the world's culture, history and diversity dies with it. This is slowly coming to be appreciated. The EU declared 2001 to be "European year of languages", and it is striking that even France—whose hostility to linguistic competition is betrayed by the constitution's bald statement that "the language of the Republic is French"—now smiles more benignly on its seven regional tongues (Alsatian, Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Flemish and Provençal).

Yet the extinction of most languages is probably unstoppable. Television and radio, both blamed for homogenisation, may, paradoxically, prolong the life of some by narrow-casting in minority tongues. And though many languages may die, more people may also be able to speak several languages: multilingualism, a commonplace among the least educated peoples of Africa, is now the norm among Dutch, Scandinavians and, increasingly, almost everyone else. Native English-speakers, however, are becoming less competent at other languages: only nine students graduated in Arabic from universities in the United States last year, and the British are the most monoglot of all the peoples of the EU. Thus the triumph of English not only destroys the tongues of others; it also isolates native English-speakers from the literature, history and ideas of other peoples. It is, in short, a thoroughly dubious triumph. But then who's for Esperanto? Not the staff of *The Economist*, that's for sure.

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