

ENGLISH TAKES OVER

Will English become the official language of the enlarged 27-nation European Union? It's only a matter of time, says Iain Fraser Grigor, who argues that the sweep to global domination of English is now - for good or for ill - unstoppable.

CONSIDER THIS. The United Nations (membership: just about the whole world) makes do with 5 official languages. The European Union (membership already 15, and rising) needs that number of official languages in the cause of pleasing those members whose mother tongue is something other than English. But with 27 members within the next decade or two, the need in the Union for a single working language will become more and more pressing. And that language - without any shadow of doubt - must be English. On an unofficial basis, after all, English is already the working language of Europe. And as in Europe, so in growing areas of the wider world.

English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. A quarter of the world's population speaks it; for half of them, it is a first or second language; for all of them, it is the principal language of commerce and tourism and technology. Mother-tongue speakers, according to minimum estimates, have now reached 300 million; another 350 million use English as a second language; and a further 400 million employ it competently as a foreign language. This is an increase of over 40% since the Second World War. More generous

estimates, meantime, put the overall total at something closer to two billion users rather than one.

Over two-thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three-quarters of the world's mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. It is the language (in the shape of Seaspeak) of maritime transport, of Hollywood, of international aviation, of television news networks, increasingly of the world's stock exchanges, largely of the Internet - and also of an awful lot of popular music.

This globalisation of English is not everywhere met with approval, of course, notably among the European and North American speakers of French. But while they attempt to stem the flood of English words into their language, the rest of the world has been voting with its mouths. It's a very long time, after all, since French was the chosen language of the Tsarist (and other) ruling-class: even longer since it was the language of international diplomacy.

And in recent years, the rest of the world has caught-on to this decline. In the early 1980s, the Spanish switched wholesale from French to English as the principal foreign language taught in their schools. Rather more recently, Francophone states in Africa such as Algeria and Zaire have been doing the same - an unspectacular but eloquent comment on the way the wind blows. And something over a year ago, the French themselves followed suit, making a small virtue of a large necessity by announcing a major overhaul of the teaching of English in their own schools.

This resistance to English may be laudable on grounds of linguistic diversity. It is certainly comical in the land of 'le Big Mac' (from which land English took at least 10,000 words in the wake of

the Norman invasion all those years ago). For instance, last March the French finance ministry wanted to ban everyday *franglais* expressions like *les start-up*, *stock-options* and *e-mail* - though in this respect the finance ministry might as well go jump in the Seine.

Not that the French are alone. Even the Poles are in on the purity act, with a strong new law last autumn to combat the spread of 'Polglish'. A language police from the new Polish Language Council would enforce the spirit of the new legislation with heavy fines. (Its parliamentary supporters initially wanted to penalise Poles for using English in private conversations!) Out then, go those grand old Polish expressions like *sex-shop*, *music-club*, *computer*, *internet* and *e-mail* - and in come manufactured and cumbersome equivalents that not too many people will actually use.

Even the Italians are in on the anti-English act. Last September, for the third time in three years, politicians tried to roll-back the three thousand English (Italish? Englian?) expressions now common in everyday Italian. Among others, the purists cited: *outing*, *transgender*, *new-economy*, *blockbuster*, *call-centre*, *newsgroup*, *grunge*, *megastore*, *hairdresser*, *new-age* and *squatter*.

But meantime, in the real world, the demand for English just keeps growing - as is evidenced by the pages and pages of TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) jobs in the education press every week. As well as an insatiable demand from Japan and Turkey, scores of advertisements solicit teachers for every part of - Poland!

Much of this is driven by the demand of young people for a knowledge of English. Just a year ago, a British Council report spoke of a 'global rush to English' in international youth cultures in particular. In the next half-century, it said, the number of 15 to 24

year olds speaking English as a first language will rise by one third: with equally striking rises in the number of second- and other-language users of English.

And with the ongoing globalisation of economic and political activity, the trend is likely to continue. Already, English is the lingua franca of the European Union, membership of which will in due course be 27. The pressure for an official single working language, sooner or later, will become irresistible: and that language, for good or ill, will be English.

And as in Europe, so in the rest of the world. It could hardly be otherwise. For a variety of reasons, not one of the languages or language-groups that presently rival or exceed English in gross numbers of speakers can expect to be the pre-eminent world language of the coming century. Today, the world's five largest tongues in terms of first- or second-language use are: Chinese (1123 million); English (470 million); Hindi (418 million); Spanish (372 million); and Russian (288 million). (The next four are Bengali, Arabic, Portuguese and Japanese).

But these figures understate the real clout of English. For one thing, it can claim 1,730 speakers if the figure includes the populations of countries such as India where it is an official language (though it may not be widely spoken as a first-choice language).

And nobody in their right minds would suggest that Chinese will suddenly expand across its mighty borders to colonise the world. Spoken Chinese isn't one language anyway, but a collection of tonal dialects, many of which are to a greater or lesser extent mutually incomprehensible, and all of which are exceedingly difficult for learners. The written form of Chinese, comprising a couple of

thousand very complex characters (for high-school starters) is another nightmare. And attempts to render a standard form of Chinese in Roman letters isn't much better: which is why, incidentally, (and omitting a few diacritics) Peking became Beijing and Mao Tse-tung became Mao Zedong a few years ago.

As for the other languages in the top five: Hindi and Russian are doomed to remain in their birthplaces and Spanish, albeit a second language in the United States, especially in Florida and California (Spanish words anyway), and the principal language in central and south America, is still in no position to challenge the pre-eminence of English (which may be a pity, as it is much easier to learn).

What all this means for the world's small, smaller and simply tiny languages remains to be seen. It is a comment on the prevailing fragility of many of them that no one knows for sure how many there exactly are. The Summer Institute of Linguistics, which primarily exists to translate the Bible into every language it can find, no matter how remote or tiny, reckons there to be a little less than 7,000. And recently the Observatoire Linguistique (based in Wales) claimed to have identified some ten thousand living languages.

Taken together, these languages arguably represent a cultural heritage of staggering importance, whose loss might be equivalent to the loss of biological species consequent on the destruction of rainforests and other eco-systems. Language, after all, dates from the early days of humankind as a distinct species, and may be supposed to encompass intellectual and scientific possibilities of which we are not yet in any way aware.

Some experts estimate (very roughly indeed) that over the fifty millenia or so since we developed language, somewhere between

half a million and fifty thousand languages have flourished and died, leaving no trace of their natures.

And the resilience to the globalisation of English of those that remain is open to question. Some observers estimate that half of today's languages will become extinct at some point during the coming century, and that only 1,000 will remain by the end of it. In other words, between six and nine thousand languages will disappear within the next 100 years. Indeed, some linguists say that 3,000 of these languages are already in imminent danger of death.

After all, the speed with which a language can die in the smaller communities of the world is truly remarkable. Within a generation, almost all traces of a language can disappear. In the 19th century, there were over 1,000 Indian languages in Brazil; today, there are only 200. A quarter of the world's languages have fewer than 1,000 first-use speakers; half have fewer than 10,000 first-use speakers. It is very likely that all, or most, of these will die out within the next fifty years.

Some are very tiny indeed. Bikya is now spoken (presumably to, or with, herself) by nobody but a very elderly woman on the Nigerian border of the mighty footballing nation of Cameroon. In a nearby village, Bishuo is the exclusive property of a father and son. Nearer home, Liv - a relative of Finnish - commands just 200 speakers in a corner of the Baltic presently unoccupied by the Russians. In North America, meanwhile, there was once 300 Indian languages (said to have had grammars of devastating subtlety).

About half remained in use by the 1970s; about fifty have more than a thousand speakers, and just a handful have more than ten thousand. And in Australia, where once there may have been

500 languages, less than half remain. Only five have more than a thousand speakers; most of the rest are effectively extinct already.

And meantime the noble instrument of Britney and Westlife and Mrs. Victoria Beckham shows every sign of going from strength to strength: a trend that will certainly survive the marvellous developments in machine translation which are just around the corner.

It could yet, of course, go all wrong. It could face the fate of French which, having reigned from the time of the Crusades to the mid 19th century, went into long term decline, for no precisely identifiable reason. The same, after all, did happen to Latin, which in the medieval world of Europe must have seemed immortal to any sane observer (though it lives on in a huge number of loan-words to English, and just about every other European language).

Or will English (with just five million speakers in the time of Shakespeare) gradually develop in a score of directions, leaving British and American English as mere dialects of world English, and mutually incomprehensible with it?

The language, after all, has been relentlessly re-inventing itself from the very start: as Christian 'New Testament' translations incomparably demonstrate.

Here, for instance, is Mathew 8 (i) in the Anglo-Saxon of 995, the Wyclif of 1389, the Tyndale of 1526, and the New English Bible of 1961.

1. Sothlice tha se Haelend of tham munte nyther astath, tha fyligdon hym mycle maenio.

2. Forsothe when Jhesus hadde comen doun fro the hil, many cumpanyes folewiden hym.

3. When Jesus was come down from the mountayne, moch people folowed him.

4. And after he had come down from the hill he was followed by a great crowd.

So how will it look, this verse, in another century or two, when English is more than ever the principal world language and has absorbed (as it absolutely must absorb) the influences of languages of the lands it will increasingly colonise?

In recent years English has welcomed a continuing invasion of new words. Some will remain, some will die. From Russian, for instance, just a few decades ago, sputnik blazed a fiery trail: but it is already consigned to the dustbin of 20th century English. How will perestroika and glasnost fare? Will English in the years to come adopt some of the marvellous augmentatives and diminutives of Russian (and Spanish?) Are the ubiquitous woollen 'mills' of tourist Scotland here to stay (for shops they may be, but mills they are not)? Must that sorry roadside sign 'Sorry for the delay' be now considered acceptable English?

What about the all-encompassing colonisation of gay: a shift of meaning that radically affects even a cursory reading of rather a lot of Yeats and Hopkins and Shakespeare, not to mention a clutch of the Romantics? (After all, when the redoubtable Fergie MacDonald grits his teeth at a Mallaig dance and announces the Happy Gordons, we know for sure that something has changed for good, or at least for ever, in the world).

What about stalking (though not in plus-fours), and mission-statement and zinger and sound-bite and spin-doctor, and the neologistic genius of dykon (lesbian icon)? How durable are the names of the urban tribes of the last half century: among them

Beats and Mods and Rockers and Hippies and Punks and Yuppies and New Agers and all the rest? And what about dope and blow and grass and whizz and E and coke and acid and K?

Certainly, the sound of English will change in ways that cannot be predicted. But will spelling-reform ever take off (and English could do with twice as many letters in its alphabet as it has at present)? What about some of the odder characteristics of other languages? Ritual-boasting as a public-house form is as yet in its relative infancy; while the charming concept of politeness-duelling is unknown (unless, perhaps, in the older parts of the Highlands). Nor can English begin to match the magnificence of cursing in Turkish or Arabic or Chinese (though the precise significance of tango-dancer as a Chinese curse is still elusive).

The short answer is that absolutely nobody knows; and the long answer - involving the warm travails of vast armies of linguists - is still that nobody knows: because nobody can predict these changes with any degree of certainty.

But one thing is absolutely certain. By the end of this present century, and to a greater extent than at any previous time in human history, it will be possible to talk of a world language. And that language - without any doubt - will be called English