Global English: gift or curse?

ROSS SMITH

The case against English as the world's lingua franca

The status of the English language as the *lingua franca* of the global information society is beyond dispute, but what is not so clear is whether it is capable of fulfilling that role efficiently. In the following article Ross Smith responds to the supporters of Global English by examining the qualities that an ideal international auxiliary language would possess and then discussing the extent to which those qualities are to be found in modern English.

Introduction: US English Inc.

'THE TIE of language is perhaps the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind.' This quotation, from the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, is to be found on the website of US English, Inc., an organisation which by its own account is 'dedicated to preserving the unifying role of the English language in the United States.' The site has little quotes of this kind on every page, most of them not requiring translation from French. There is even one from the former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who at some time apparently wondered, 'Why in the world anyone in America is allowing another language (i.e. other than English) to be his first… I don't know.'

Despite declaring that its unifying efforts are centred on the United States, US English, Inc., has an educational foundation called U.S. English Foundation whose website contains a link called 'English: The Global Language.' When clicked, this takes the user, unexpectedly, to a book of that title by David Crystal, the UK's most popular language scholar. There is a picture of the book and a self-interested summary of its content which ends: 'Professor Crystal's study enables the U.S. ENGLISH Foundation to highlight the importance of a common language and the harmful domestic policies that discourage the many opportunities afforded by it.'

Anyone who has read Professor Crystal's work on World English will know that he is entirely unimperialistic and stresses the importance of English developing as a vehicular language alongside other languages, not instead of them. However, as the world's leading expert on the globalisation of English, he is open to the risk of being seen as a potential champion of the 'English only' cause, irrespective of his own values.

As is well known, a certain sector of American society takes the view that what is good for America is good for the rest of the world, including the English language. The above site leaves us in no doubt: '[T]here is a global consensus on the need for children to learn English. Countries like Turkey, Egypt, Vietnam and Japan showed almost unanimous agreement on the importance of learning English.'

The fact that conservative Americans assume their language to be a positive force around the world reflects a broader trend among humanity, both past and present, of viewing one's own language as somehow superior to others.

ROSS SMITH (ross.smith@es.pwc.com) is manager in charge of the translation service at PricewaterhouseCoopers Spain. He was responsible for introducing computerised translation support systems at PwC during the 1990s and has given papers on his experience in this area at major international conferences on machine translation and computer assisted translation. He holds a degree in English from Edinburgh University, is a government-authorised 'intérprete jurado' ('translator under oath') in Spain and a member of the UK Institute of Linguists. He regularly contributes articles on language and translation to specialised journals.

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During the colonisation of large parts of the world by European powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was commonplace for the spin doctors of the time to advocate the supremacy of their language to help justify the pillage of the colonised territories and the subjugation of their inhabitants.

Imperial English, World English

The Europeans argued that they were ethically empowered to behave this way because they were a superior race, with superior means of verbal expression to go with their superior physiognomy. It was natural, indeed advisable, that the natives should be required to learn the conqueror's language. The most famous instance in English is Thomas Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835), referring to education in India, part of which is as follows:

> We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us; with models of every species of eloquence; with historical compositions, which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed, and which, considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equalled (…); with full and correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect of man.

By far the most successful implementation of a European language was achieved with English, as is evidenced by its continued use as a principal or auxiliary language in former colonies around the world many years after the decline of the British Empire.

However, the US has since replaced the UK as the driving force behind World English and the racist attitudes prevalent during the colonial period have mostly given way to more rational approaches to cultural diversity. Yet, as mentioned above, the notion that English is somehow superior is still present in certain quarters. The American organisations supporting English-only initiatives enjoy wide support in the USA and are happy to see their defence of English boosted by its pre-eminence as the world's common language. They are strongly patriotic Christian conservatives who, taken as a whole, currently form the world's most powerful political lobby. They are also keen users of the Internet, and their sites contain references to how young volunteers can work abroad and provide their overseas hosts with the 'gift' of the English language, or use that same gift on evangelising missions in the wider world.

Intrinsic pre-eminence?

The notion of the intrinsic pre-eminence of English recently received support from a considerably more erudite source, when one of the world's leading experts on translation theory and teaching methodology, Professor Peter Newmark, stated in a respected language publication (*The Linguist*, Vols 41:2 & 41:6, 2002–03, the journal of the Institute of Linguists, whose headquarters are in London) that English is the world's best language. He went on to support his theory by setting out fifteen reasons for the superiority of English over all other languages, and concluded that '[t]his is an argument in favour of English as the global *lingua franca*'.

Professor Newmark is a learned academic whose work certainly gives the impression that he is an enthusiast of linguistic diversity, in the opposite corner from the monolingual linguistic imperialists. However, he reckons that English is superior to the rest of the world's languages and that he has objective arguments to support his case.

Judging whether English is a 'gift', or generically 'the best language in the world', is a treacherous exercise: Which criteria for determining quality are to be applied? Debating whether English is an appropriate choice as a worldwide common language is however more straightforward, since we can establish objective qualities which most rational persons would wish such a common language to possess. Languages in everyday use fulfil a great variety of functions which reflect the multiple facets of human interaction. In contrast, a lingua franca has a single, overriding purpose: to achieve unambiguous communication between people with mutually unintelligible tongues.

There is no doubt that English has certain strengths which make it attractive to those who know it well, but it also has a number of weaknesses which – though mostly of no great consequence to native speakers (spelling being a major exception) – make it difficult to learn

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and understand and therefore unsuitable as a global *lingua franca*. What are the specific features of English that make it a poor choice as an international common language? This question can be approached from the opposite angle by first considering the features that most of us would like a common language to have, if we were free to choose. These would most likely include the following:

1 Maximum speakability, i.e., a range of phonemes as small as is feasible without restricting communicative capacity
2 Sensible orthography, i.e., words being spelt as they are pronounced, and vice versa
3 Regular inflection rules (such as no irregular verbs)
4 Uncomplicated grammar (that is, the absence of complexities which contribute little or nothing while making learning more difficult, as with the auxiliary verbs *avoir* and *être* in French)
5 Freedom from ambiguity.

The first four of the above points all combine in the most important feature of all:

6 The ideal *lingua franca* should be easy to learn.

These are uncontroversial criteria for a language to qualify as a good international auxiliary language. English however fails dismally to meet any of them, for at least four reasons: unpronounceability, irregularity, over-complexity, and ambiguity. We can take each in turn.

English is unpronounceable

English pronunciation is difficult for most non-native speakers. This is due in particular to English having an unusually large number of vowel phonemes. As represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet there are 12 vowels (other counts have 14) and 10 diphthongs. Compare this with Japanese and Spanish, which make do with five vowel phonemes, or with Italian, which by the highest count has seven. English language learners from practically all language backgrounds have problems with the pronunciation of English vowels because so many of them simply do not exist in their own languages. For example:

- speakers of Romance languages cannot pronounce the omnipresent *schwa* (/ə/ as in *ago* and in *but* when unstressed) or distinguish between /ɪ/ in *sit* and *bit*, and /iː/ in *seat* and *beat* (using the latter in all cases)
- speakers of German cannot distinguish between /æ/ in *bad* and /e/ in *bed*
- Japanese learners fail to differentiate, among others, between /æ/ in *ran* and /ʌ/ in *run*

Most foreign learners also find the long vowels in English (such as in *too* or *her*) difficult to cope with, since again there are no equivalent sounds in their languages.

English consonants also pose problems, again in part because there are so many of them. Correctly pronouncing *judge*, for instance, is a major achievement for a Spanish speaker, since both consonant and vowel have no corresponding Spanish phonemes: a typical attempt would give /ʧaʧ/. German-speakers famously have problems with *w* and *th* (both the voiced /ð/ and unvoiced /ɵ/), while French-speakers struggle to get their vocal muscles around *th, ch* (/ʧ/) and soft *r*. In geographically more distant languages the situation tends to worsen. A major language outside the Indo-European family is Japanese, whose speakers have dire problems with English pronunciation. They struggle with *l*, *th*, *v* and other consonant phonemes, as well as with the English vowels and consonant/vowel combinations. English's liking for consonant clusters (such as *ngths* as in *strengths*, *spl* as in *split*, and *sps* as in *crisps*) causes additional difficulties for speakers of the many languages which habitually have a vowel between each consonant.

It may be objected that any European language will be difficult for speakers of oriental languages, but this is not necessarily true. The Japanese, for instance, do not experience such problems with Italian and Spanish pronunciation. These examples indicate that the native speakers of the world's only other major widespread language (Spanish, with around 360 million speakers) and of the languages of the world's biggest non-English-speaking economic powers (Japan, Germany, and France, with a combined total of about 310 million speakers), all find English pronunciation problematic to at least some extent. Mandarin Chinese speakers (estimated at around 890 million) have problems with pretty well every aspect of English: Consonants /ɵ/, /m/, /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/ tend to be mispronounced or confused, and consonant clusters are a big problem. However, their phonetic scheme is so

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different from those of the major Indo-European families that similar difficulties would doubtless arise with any other hypothetical lingua franca among Western languages – even Esperanto.

English is irregular

The second thing learners discover about English, after the difficulty of its pronunciation, is that it bristles with irregularities, particularly with regard to verb inflection and orthography. During the early learning process students are hit by one irregular verb after another, basically because the ten most commonly used verbs (*be, have, do, say, make, go, take, come, see, get*) are all irregular. A total of around 180–200 English verbs are considered to be irregular (the absence of an exact figure results from discrepancies over which are actually in use) and they include many of the commonest. In fact, about 70% of verb use in everyday speech involves an irregular verb (figures from 'The Irregular Verbs', Stephen Pinker, *Landfall*, March 2000). In addition, they come in all shapes and sizes: some metamorphose internally, again not just in one way, but in many (as with *run/ran*, *meet/met*, *choose/chose*, *grow/grew*, *sit/sat*), some transform bizarrely (as with *am/was*, *eat/ate*, *see/saw*), others add *-t* instead of *-ed* (*learn/learnt*), while yet others are irregular because they do not change at all (*hit/hit*).

English irregular verbs cannot be classed into fixed groups to palliate the problems they cause, as they can in Romance languages. Similar patterns certainly exist, for example *ring/rang*, *sing/sang*, *spring/sprang*, or *blow/blew*, *grow/grew*, *know/knew*, but no rules can be formed as there are always exceptions: *ring/rang* does not breed **bring/brang*, and there is no *show/shew* to group with *know/knew*. Learners have no choice but to go through the monotonous process of memorising the irregular verbs through endless repetition exercises.

Further confusion is added by the fact that two of the verbs that English learners will find most useful in their practical endeavours to use the language – *must* and *can* – form part of the so-called modal verbs and follow rules which differ from other verbs. The inclination to say *I musted* or *I will can* is inevitable, yet these forms are not allowed. Another useful verb, *need*, turns out to be both ordinary and modal. English verbs are like tangled undergrowth which learners must somehow struggle through to reach their goal of competence in the universal language.

Even more daunting than its irregular verbs, however, is English's irregular orthography. The striking non-correlation between its pronunciation and spelling is probably the language's largest single disadvantage and a cause of endless misery for learners, from native infants to foreign business executives. Over the years there have been some efforts to improve the situation, particularly in America, but their impact has been minimal. With no governing authority to steer it, English spelling has drifted far away from the spoken form, to such an extent that the absence of any serious attempt at orthographical reform by governments is not usually justified on the grounds that such reform would be undesirable, but that it is unapproachable due to the scale of the task involved.

Attempts are occasionally made to defend English's chaotic spelling by arguing that it helps to distinguish between homophones in writing (e.g. between *write*, *wright*, *right*, *rite*) and to clarify etymology, for instance in place names (e.g. *Norfolk*, 'place of the northern people', from Old English *north* + *folc*). This is cold comfort for English learners, who would gladly relinquish these scarce benefits in return for a system which relieved them of the effort required to memorise most of the essential components of the English lexicon. The fact of the matter is that, while the spelling of much of English's vast vocabulary is quite rational, that of most of the commonest words reflects how these words were pronounced four or five centuries ago, not how they are pronounced now.

English-speaking children are actually placed at a disadvantage by this problem. According to recent research, they learn to read more slowly than speakers of other European languages. Children learning other languages master the basic elements of literacy within a year, but British infants take two-and-a-half years to reach the same point as their progress is hampered by the lack of correlation between the language's spoken and written forms (from research by Philip Seymour of Dundee University, as reported in *New Scientist*, 4 Sep 01). Such findings are backed by earlier research on the literary skills of English and Italian children, which estimates an even greater learning gap (cf. Gwenllian Thorstad,

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'The effect of orthography on the acquisition of literacy skills,' in the *British Journal of Psychology*, 1991). Learners of all ages from other countries will doubtless sympathise.

Irregular plurals are less problematic than irregular verbs or irregular spelling; nevertheless, it is hardly helpful for aspiring English speakers that so many nouns, including such common words as *man*, *woman*, *tooth*, *foot*, *mouse*, and *sheep*, should depart from the general rule, their plural forms having to be memorised individually.

English is too complex

A desirable trait for any global lingua franca would be for its grammar to be as uncomplicated as possible, without this hampering its expressive potential. To facilitate learning, it would be advantageous for the simplest constructions to have the simplest rules: for instance, the formation of negative and interrogative sentences ought to be as pain-free as possible.

English has become simpler in certain areas as it has evolved but in others it is over-complex. In particular, the formation of the most basic statements can be unusually complicated. Again, this is discouraging for learners of the language, who find that strange rules have to be followed to make even the simplest constructions. In this connection, it is illustrative to compare English with Spanish, as in the following examples:

English
I know how to iron.
They do not know how to iron.
Do you know how to iron?

Spanish
Sé planchar.
No saben planchar.
Sabes planchar?

In the interrogative forms above, English needs six words where Spanish has two: so much for its supposed concision. English also requires inversion and the use of an auxiliary verb, making life difficult for the early learner, where Spanish does not. The simple Spanish question *Hay pan?* must be rendered in English as 'Have you got any bread?', bringing into play the highly confusing *some/any* contrast, which contributes little but has to be included to make a proper English statement. (Learners also have to be taught that the answer is not: 'Yes, I have got any bread.') The use of *have got* makes the simple notion of indicating possession dishearteningly complex but must be learned, since this is the form English speakers most commonly use. After these and other initial difficulties have been overcome there are still plenty of pitfalls awaiting learners, including English's extravagant prepositions, the curious neutral *it*, totally inflexible syntax, and the diabolical phrasal verbs.

English is ambiguous

English has shed the case and gender inflections and noun-adjective agreement which were once part of its grammatical make-up and therefore relies almost exclusively on word order to identify the parts of speech within a given sentence. When this limitation is combined with the radical concision typically sought by English authors in certain contexts, particularly in business literature and press articles, a considerable amount of ambiguity can arise.

English newspaper journalists – always striving to squeeze as much content as possible into the available space – maximise English's potential for ellipsis and produce materials which are difficult reading for foreigners, including even advanced learners. Headlines of the sort 'Stolen painting found by tree' are an extreme instance of structural ambiguity and provide much entertainment for native speakers, the funniest examples being mailed around the English-speaking world or collected on websites. This is no consolation for struggling English learners, however, for whom such phrases, rather than comical, are impenetrable.

Business language (precisely the variety of English that most adult learners wish to master) also tends to generate ambiguity by seeking brevity. In strings of adjectivally used nouns such as *North sea oil drilling platform installations* or *public supply chain management information systems* it can take a non-native some time to figure out which noun is being qualified and which nouns are doing the qualifying. To be understandable, the latter phrase has to be restructured into *information systems which are used for managing public supply chains*. The fact that virtually any English noun can be used as a verb, and often as an adjective, without requiring any alteration in form is a great source of inventiveness, but inevitably gives rise to confusion: the absence of any kind of semantic

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markers means that readers or listeners have to rely on context, common sense or intuition, all of which are susceptible to failure.

Curiously, for English speakers wishing to practise their skills with genuine foreign language materials, the problems described above do not usually apply. Newspapers in other countries tend to use language which may not be particularly simple but which is usually clearly written and properly structured, and can be understood without excessive difficultly.

The ambiguity of English is particularly problematic for translators, and for computational linguists who try to devise programs capable of translating natural languages. Disambiguation is complex in English since (as mentioned above) the same word can be a verb, adjective or noun (as with *light*) with no change in form to provide clues for the program. Detailed programming designed to distinguish grammatical form from context can enable computers to know in a given sentence whether *bat* is a noun or verb, and whether it refers to a flying mammal or a wooden club, but sometimes there is no solution. In the written sentence *I read the paper every day*, there is no way of knowing whether we are referring to a habitual action in the past or the present. Machine translation (MT) programmers have no choice but to put up with the eccentricities of English since it is the most popular language for automatic translation. English language students will again sympathise.

Conclusion: English is a poor *lingua franca*

There is no doubt that English is a wonderful language for its own native speakers or those who have made the effort to achieve proficiency in it. Its broad range of phonemes, enormous lexicon, inherent onomatopoeia and morphological laxness offer a tremendous variety of creative possibilities.

However, some of these strengths become weaknesses when considering English as an international auxiliary language. As we have seen, the English language is hard to pronounce, irregular, and over-complex, making it difficult to learn; and it is ambiguous, making it difficult to understand. In addition, it resembles no other language closely enough for there to be a group of 'natural learners' among other language speakers, as occurs, for instance, among Romance or Nordic languages.

Dubious claims tend to be made about the supposed inherent benefits of English compared with other, more 'rigid' languages. English grammar contains elements which facilitate brevity, which is sometimes regarded as an advantage, but (as discussed above) concision is often gained at the expense of clarity. English is also said to be especially adept at absorbing loan words and creating neologisms to widen its lexicon (thanks partly to the absence of draconian restrictions imposed by some governing *Académie*), but this claim is also questionable. All the major languages contain loanwords; it could hardly be otherwise. The difference as regards English is simply one of scale, owing mainly to the large number of Britons who brought back new words after service abroad during the colonial period and to the large-scale immigration triggered by colonisation.

In fact, French, German, Spanish and Italian have all imported much larger volumes of loanwords in recent times, precisely from English, a process which their linguistic regulators have been unable to contain. Nor do these languages have any inherent difficulty in creating new words, as is evidenced by the proliferation of neologisms surfacing in the wake of the Internet and mobile telephone messaging. All languages mutate naturally, and in this English is not exceptional.

It is interesting to speculate about whether an 'English Academy' would have had a positive or a detrimental influence on the development of the language. The real influence of these institutions in continental Europe is very limited, which is hardly surprising since they are trying to place restrictions on an intrinsically uncontrollable process. However, they do have one genuinely useful function: striving to keep spelling within the bounds of rationality. The top performer in this respect is Spain's *Real Academia Española* ('Royal Spanish Academy'), which has succeeded over the centuries in keeping Spanish spelling almost perfectly in line with its pronunciation. France's *Académie* also does its best (its most recent attempt to reform spelling dating from 1990), though the earnest efforts of its members are hampered by the institution's old-fashioned image. English might have benefited over the centuries from having its own orthographical watchdog.

It is never too late to make amends. From the viewpoint of both linguistic equality and easy learning, it would be gratifying if the US and

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EU authorities decided that, as from a certain date, Esperanto was to be their official language for international communication, but that is evidently not going to happen (On the subject of Esperanto as the single European language, see Ross Smith, 'Single Market, Single Currency… Single Language?', in *ET*46, Apr 96).

More realistic would be a genuine push for spelling reform in the major English-speaking countries in order to rectify at least one of the weaknesses discussed above, by putting into practice the recommendations that have been painstakingly put together by such organisations as the Simplified Spelling Society (SSS) <www.spellingsociety.org>. It may seem a colossal task, but there are several precedents in other countries (for a list see the SSS website). The most impressive is that of Turkey in the 1920s, which changed not only its orthographical system but its entire alphabet. For the British, a step of this kind would in some ways be comparable to the impact of currency decimalisation in 1971 (perhaps to be repeated one day if the euro is adopted). There was some fretting about lost values and scorned traditions, but in the end the dust settled and most people realised that certain day-to-day processes had become considerably more simple. Nowadays, nobody misses shillings, pennies and ha'pennies; surely in thirty years, no one would miss *bough*, *ache*, or *sew*.

A challenge from the East?

English is here to stay as a world language, for the time being at least. The global information society needs a lingua franca, and English, despite its imperfections, is the unchallenged incumbent. Whether this will still be the case in the second half of this century is not so clear.

The current dominance of English rests on the economic might of the USA, but authoritative organisations in the financial sector predict that this situation will not last much longer. Goldman Sachs, an investment bank, forecasts that China's GDP will have overtaken America's by 2040, making it the world's number one economic power. The International Monetary Fund predicts that at current rates of growth and reform, China's GDP measured on a purchasing power parity basis will overtake America's as soon as 2020.

Once China becomes the world's biggest economic power, it is quite feasible that Chinese politicians and businessmen will consider that their language should also be pre-eminent. By 2050, the 'let them learn English' attitude typical in the US and Britain may have become 'let them learn Mandarin'. The outcome of this potential struggle of titans will depend very largely on whether, in fifty years' time, a knowledge of English is regarded as an essential and irreplaceable component of people's educational baggage, on a level with the three Rs. If this is the case, the Chinese may accept the status quo and resign themselves to learning English in order to communicate, not just with Anglophone countries, but with everyone.

However, if they feel that economic prowess should be matched by linguistic strength, not only to make their lives easier in international liaisons but also as a vehicle for their culture, English will cease to be the single world language and will have to share the stage with Chinese, or revert to being a merely regional linguistic power. ■

Further sources for general information on languages:

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