# Twenty years on

TOM McARTHUR

## A 1980s interview re-visited, and up-dated

IN 1986, I was interviewed by a long-standing colleague and friend, Arnold Pitt, for the British journal *The Esperanto Teacher*. As editor of that periodical he referred to the journal I had recently begun to edit, *English Today*, as 'the other *ET*'. His interview questions began with English worldwide, and ended with his key concern, Esperanto as a (or *the*) world's auxiliary language. I have always had a strong fellow feeling for 'Esperantism'. Many artificial languages have been 'manufactured' for commendable philanthropic reasons, but only Esperanto has had any kind of impact on the world, and, to my mind, it is admirable in its cosmopolitanism. That said, however, my views on the pre-eminence for good and/or ill of English and, sadly, the limited prospects of Esperanto have not changed in the twenty years since that interview. The interview is therefore reprinted here with some further reflections [in square brackets]. Comments are welcomed.

### *What is the present situation of English worldwide?*

The received statistics at present are: 300 million native speakers, 350 million users of English as a second language, and 100 million foreign users of the language, totalling 750 million. Nowadays, however, we generally take this as the minimum number. Estimates run from one billion to two billion people who – from academe to begging – make use of English. My personal compromise is 1,250 million people, or a quarter of the human race.

[*Update note* It should be no surprise that no one knows for sure. In the *Oxford Guide to World English* (2002–3) I used the following statistics for the language worldwide, taken from the British Council English 2000 campaign, David Crystal's *English As a Global Language* and David Graddol's *The Future of English?* – in millions:

| | ENL | ESL | EFL | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| BC:E2000 | 350 | 350 | 100 | 800m |
| Crystal | 320–380 | 150–300 | 100–1000 | 570–1680m |
| Graddol | 375 | 375 | 750 | 1,500m |

The reality: no one knows for sure, because we can't identify precise parameters for the concept *user of English* and have trouble even with *native speaker*. Here I used 'native speakers', 'users of English as a second language', and 'foreign users' in my response, and brought them together under the deliberately vague umbrella phrase 'make use of English'. Can we improve on this?]

### *What has led to the present dominant position of English?*

Firstly, the pre-eminence of Great Britain in the 19th and earlier 20th centuries, then the United States in more recent times. Secondly, English is the main vehicle of commerce, technology, scholarship, publishing, pop culture,

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and modernity itself. Thirdly, the more a language is used, the more it will be used, unless countervailing processes operate against it. At present there is no sign of any such processes on a large enough scale.

[*Update note* We can safely date the global US impact as consequent on the Second World War *(BrE)*, World War II *(AmE)*, then such other factors as the Cold War (political), Hollywood (cultural – although some may have distinctive views on putting Hollywood and culture together).]

### *Has English any linguistic strengths which suit it for its world role?*

It is dominant because of historical processes that could have promoted any 'developed' language. However, it has always been a mongrel tongue. It carries within it, for example, a large part of the vocabularies of classical Greek and Latin [I could also have added 'a great deal of adapted French']. No academy defends it against the world, with the result that much of the world ends up, as it were, inside English. Some people argue that it has a simple grammar and is therefore attractive to learn. It is probably more accurate to say that English is a good language to *begin*. Becoming adept at using it is not so easy: witness learners' struggles with phrasal verbs: *put out the light – put the light out – put it out; a party going on after midnight – a bomb going off after midnight – getting away on time; getting away with murder*. Nor is the spelling system a great gift to the world.

[*Update note* On reflection I would now pay more attention to inertia or, better, *momentum*: once something is institutionalized and gathers power it becomes harder to stop, displace, or replace; the more we invest, the more we want a strong steady safe return, in communication and education as much as in banking and investing (cf. the image of English as hard currency).]

### *French and Latin have in the past had similar pre-eminence, but have declined. Do you foresee English losing its position?*

Usually, international languages have gained prominence for particular reasons: scriptural and missionary (Arabic), commercial and colonial (Portuguese), or cultural and diplomatic (French). Latin was a bit of everything, and English is a bit of everything today. It could retain its pre-eminence indefinitely, but *will* eventually falter. Any successor will probably contain a lot of English, just as English contains a lot of Latin. I suspect there will be a lot of Japanese in it too.

[*Update note* Today I would bring in, as *ET* has been doing in recent years, the significance in world terms of Chinese, which has markedly over-shadowed the global prospects of Japanese.]

### *How long does it take for a foreign student of average ability to gain a mastery of English?*

That's an impossible question. There are too many variables, like experience of the world, years and kinds of education, knowledge of and aptitude for languages, degree and kind of literacy, personal motivation, areas of interest, career needs, and so forth. Northern Europeans do well because of their cultural proximity and educational styles. Arabic-users do less well, because of cultural and linguistic distance, and literacy in a different script.

[*Update note* Again, today, I would bring in China and its vast drive towards English: perhaps the single most significant feature in the globalization of the language since the mid-1980s.]

### *What percentage of students who start learning English reach fluency?*

I doubt anyone will ever know, until we have the Universal Computer and have defined 'fluency' to its satisfaction. It all depends on appropriateness. For example, some foreign users of English are fluent readers but can't understand casual, spoken usage. And vice versa.

[*Update note* It depends on what purpose English serves: why do people learn English and how do they apply or appropriate it in their lives? Many learn it only because school curricula impose it; many learn it because their parents see its value; many learn it because it is useful in educational and/or career terms: many learn it as one of several languages functioning in their environment, or because certain subjects can 'best' be reached through (or reached more extensively in) English.]

### *How much money is currently being spent on the promotion of English?*

The question implies that governments like the UK and the US have well-worked-out policies



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and budgets. In fact, they spend very little promoting the language. The British Council regularly complains of lack of funding. The real promoters are the publishers of teaching materials. But they only invest small sums compared with, say, armaments and telecommunications. They do well, but largely as a response to demand. They do not create or greatly influence that demand.

[*Update note* As far as I can tell, nothing has changed here, except that more people than ever are learning and using the language, or seeking it for their children in whatever ways they can. It is certainly clear that better-off middle-class non-native-English-speaking parents are buying extra tuition for their children or sending/taking them for extended stays in Anglophone environments, often including full-time schooling.]

### *English is strongly associated with certain countries and a particular ideology. Can it be acceptable to those with different nationalisms and ideologies?*

Courses in English for foreigners were once replete with London bobbies and Union Jacks. Nowadays, publishers [wherever they are] provide liberal humanism laced with popular-cum-airport culture. Meantime, dictators use English, communism is promulgated in English, and the martial arts [of East Asia] are popularized in English. Air crews use it, whether they are Egyptair or Cathay Pacific. Certainly, much of English is coloured by Western views and expressions, but many of the 'new Englishes', as they are called, have other angles of vision.

[*Update note* Some forces in the world are far less significant now than in the 1980s. Because communism has faded and the Cold War ended after 1989, Russian has lost most of its international appeal, and if the world's interest in Chinese/Putonghua and China's interest in English are increasing it is because of a shared interest in capitalism, consumerism and high technology.]

### *How do people employed in spreading English regard Esperanto?*

There is no one shared response. Some never think about it; some are well disposed and may learn it; some are well disposed (as I am) but don't learn it; some are indifferent; and some may find it amusing. I've never met anyone *hostile* to it. Esperanto is part of a drive towards one world that began in the 19th century. Many people engaged with English on the international scene are also part of that drive. But English was already steaming ahead as an international medium when Zamenhof was creating his remarkable Euro-synthesis. I recall the apocryphal tale of a Japanese urged to learn Esperanto. He was informed that it took one-tenth the time needed to learn English. His reply was: 'That means I would have wasted one-tenth of the time necessary to learn English.' It is pragmatism like this, rather than idealism, that shapes the destiny of tongues. It has certainly shaped the destiny of English.

[*Update note* And is still shaping it. It is true, however, that commercial pragmatism carried English into the world at the beginning of the 17th century, with the formation of the East India Company. Trade has always notably needed lingua francas, as has also proved true for science, which began to use English as its universal medium at the beginning of the nineteenth century – replacing that earlier religious, academic, and scientific world language, Latin, while continuing to draw vast stores of Latin and Greek lexis into English – as the underlines indicate.] ■



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