



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE RISE OF WORLD ENGLISHES: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT, GLOBAL SPREAD, AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of English as a global language represents one of the most influential linguistic trends of recent times. This article identifies and analyses the various historical, political, economic, technical and educational factors which have led to the growth of English as a world language. From the beginning of Britain's colonial domination in the sixteenth century onwards through the political and economic influence of the United States in the 20th century, English was institutionalised across all continents. In addition to the mechanisms of diffusion identified above, other examples include the press, advertising, radio broadcasting, television, international trade, scientific literature, digital communication technologies etc. We engage with some of the key conceptual frameworks relevant to this study (notably Kachru's "Three Circles" model) and discuss alternative accounts of the global spread of English (such as "linguistic imperialism", or "grassroots" theories of language spread). We particularly focus upon the transition from a single conception of "English" to recognising "world englishes," which illustrates how English is becoming increasingly diversified and localised in post-colonial and global environments. Although English can function as a lingua-franca to facilitate international co-operation, economic mobility, and academic exchange, the rapid expansion of English around the world creates problems related to linguistic equality and endangered languages. Ultimately, we argue that English is not at present a globally-dominant language because of its supposed superior properties as a language, but due to the consequences of long-standing histories of power relationships and current processes of globalisation. Although there are no signs that English will lose its status as a dominant global language anytime soon, its future will undoubtedly involve increased levels of diversification and changing patterns of multilingualism.

## INTRODUCTION

There have been many debates among linguists, social scientists and policymakers regarding what constitutes a language being "global". The question of what defines a language as "global" has evolved from early intuitions of language dominance towards more systematic research in the latter half of the last century (Crystal, 1997; McArthur, 1998; Graddol, 1998). A "global" language is not solely defined by having a large number of native speakers. Rather it is when a language becomes institutionally recognized and functionally important in diverse geographical settings (Crystal, 2003; Crystal 2019). Many countries have large numbers of native speakers who speak English, e.g., USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Nonetheless, English' global status cannot be attributed solely to this native speaker base. On the contrary, English is used as an official/semi-official/educational language in approximately 100+ countries and as a primary means of international communication in fields such as diplomacy, science/technology, aviation, business, higher education and digital communication.

Estimates indicate that there are more than 1.5 billion people using English for various purposes around the world, and thus non-native speakers far exceed the number of native speakers (British Council, 2023; Eberhard *et al.* 2023). Therefore, understanding the increase in usage of English requires consideration of various processes that occurred historically including colonial expansion, industrialisation, economic globalisation, technological advancements and cultural dissemination. Colonial powers employed English during their expansion in the sixteenth-19th centuries in administration and education throughout multiple continents. During the 20th Century, U.S. geo-political and economic ascendancy further solidified English' global presence. The establishment of mass media, international trade networks, aviation standards and digital communication technologies have supported its function as a lingua-franca.

**Historical Contextual Factors:** English grew from being a small country's national language to becoming a globally recognized language. To trace how English evolved over the centuries, we have to study its history beginning in the

sixteenth century. English expanding across the globe, as well as the extent of each continent it reaches on, are largely influenced by the extent of England's influence in various areas including; government, trade, war, technology and cultural.

Since the sixteenth century and through colonialism, the British Empire contributed greatly to spreading English across all continents. In the nineteenth century, the British Empire was the largest empire in history. The use of English in colonial administration, settlement, trade, missionary work created environments where English could be spoken widely throughout North America, the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. With English spreading throughout the world, it also came into contact with local languages and cultures creating new and diverse forms of English that were specific to each region. At the end of the nineteenth century, the British Empire was referred to as "the empire upon which the sun never sets," a metaphor indicating that the empire was global. Through colonial rule and institutions, English was incorporated into law, education and public service administrations in much of the world establishing a base for English to continue to expand internationally.

**Political Factors:** British expansion of its empire in the nineteenth century provided a foundation for English to be an international language of diplomacy and governance. Previously there were several international agreements that were written primarily in both French and English to reflect the equal status of those two languages (Crystal, 2004). However over time, English began to displace French in international contexts. Throughout the twentieth century, English solidified its standing as one of the main languages of international organizations. English is one of the official languages of the United Nations and most of the world's global institutions. By the 1990s, the UN had 191 member countries (Crystal, 2004) and English was one of the primary working languages for many of the UN's activities. According to data from the Yearbook of the Union of International Associations around 85% of the world's international associations use English as an official language with French being second. Even though Britain lost its global political and economic influence during the early part of the twentieth century, the U.S. emergence as a global superpower in later years provided additional support for English's standing as a global language. The political, military and diplomatic power of the U.S., therefore may have supported English becoming a dominant language of international communication even more so than Britain did previously.

**Economic Factors:** Economic strength has also been an important factor in providing influential positions for languages. During the nineteenth century Britain led the world in industrial production and trade. Britain's continuous economic growth during the Industrial Revolution placed English at the center of science, technology and industry communications. Technological developments were developed, documented and distributed in English and therefore tied English to modernization and progress. Britain's emergence as a major financial center in the late nineteenth century combined with the growth of international banking networks and global trade networks further solidified English' role as a global language. By the nineteenth century London was one of the main financial centers in the world. New York would emerge as another main hub for global finance (Crystal, 2004) by the twentieth century. As international commerce

increased, English became more prominent as a lingua franca of international trade and banking. As the U.S. economy dramatically improved during the twentieth century, this trend became stronger still. As the U.S. gained greater economic power than ever before, English was now an integral part of multinational corporations operating globally, international markets, technology innovation and global finance. Therefore, globalization has helped increase rapidly the numbers of people using English as either a second or foreign language worldwide.

**Press & Advertising:** Mass printing in England during the 19th century was a pivotal time in developing English. Advances in printing helped spur the proliferation of newspapers and magazines greatly contributing to making English an official language for public communication. For over four hundred years, English has served as the de facto "press" language of both Britain and America. High literacy rates in these two nations created a large body of people who could read, creating an extensive print culture. The number of dailies in the U.S. grew from about 400 to roughly 2,000 dailies by the close of the 19th century (Crystal, 2004). Thus, this tremendous increase allowed for English to expand its reach and influence. As we enter the late-20th century, there are about 1/3rd of all newspapers printed in English. Mass communication through news agencies accelerated with the advent of the telegraph in the middle of the 19th century. Prior to the advent of the telegraph, news agencies did not exist. And when they finally did begin to be developed, virtually all of the Associated Press's news releases sent via telegraph were in English (Crystal, 2004), further solidifying its role as the global news exchange language.

Simultaneously, with the proliferation of the press came the emergence of modern advertising. With rapid economic and social changes in predominantly Anglophone countries, especially America, a vast consumer culture was born. As consumers began to demand products, advertising was given a place of prominence. Many publications lowered their cover prices by adding ads, thus expanding their readership base and spreading English even farther. Multinational corporations such as Coca Cola and Kodak became recognized names across the globe. Also, the English-language advertising sector has had a profound impact on non-Anglophone countries. According to Crystal (2004) prior to 1972, only thirty advertising agencies existed worldwide that were not owned by Americans. Therefore, it can clearly be seen how much the use of English-language commercialism has influenced global marketing.

**The Media:** The 20th century saw a surge in new forms of mass media that greatly contributed to the globalization of English. One form of mass media that greatly impacted the globalization of English was cinema. The film industry became a strong medium for transmitting languages. Although silent films dominated in the early 20th century, once synchronized sound arrived in 1927, audiences around the world were now able to hear spoken English. The continued predominance of Hollywood in producing films for global consumption means that today nearly 80% of all films distributed internationally are produced in English (Graddol, 2000). Prior to the advent of sound in cinema, radio broadcasts began to emerge in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Radio broadcasts enabled English-language programs and music to be broadcast around the world. Popular music in English became one of the largest

industries in terms of global sales over the course of the 20th century (Crystal, 2000; Graddol, 2000). Film, radio and eventually television were vehicles for English language transmission and cultural values, ways of life and identities.

**Education:** Education has played a key role in establishing English as an institutionally accepted language worldwide. Because English has become the predominant language used for scientific research, technological advancements and publishing scholarly works, speaking English proficiently is necessary for participating in international collaborative research efforts. A sizeable portion of current scientific research is written in English which facilitates international access and collaboration. Therefore, many countries have integrated English into their national curricula either as a required course or as a language of instruction. Ramphal (1996) states that acquiring proficiency in English is crucial for any country wishing to develop economically or technologically. Numerous countries introduce English into their students' curriculum at some point after elementary school. Some countries like the Netherlands offer select post-secondary courses taught in English to improve competitive advantage within Europe (Crystal, 2004; Graddol, 2000). These educational policies further reinforce English as an international academic lingua franca.

**Communication:** Technologically advanced methods of communication (e.g., the Internet; mobile devices; e-mail) enable global communication faster and over larger distances than ever before. According to Crystal (2004), "the Internet represents a revolutionary medium, which allows instant global communication on an information and interpersonal level." Even though digital communication can take place using any language, English has traditionally dominated online communications. Crystal (2004) found that when he studied the use of electronic mail, nearly three quarters of all global electronic mail usage took place in English. Some researchers have viewed the Internet as a way in which American culture could spread globally and support previously established hegemonies of linguistic and cultural power. A very visible illustration of this spread is the incorporation of English words into the informal registers of a variety of languages. For example, young people around the world frequently incorporate English words like "cool" into their informal register of communication. In addition to being used informally, Crystal (2004) noted that there is a large increase in the number of non-native speakers who access the Internet using English. Today there are more people who communicate in English online as non-native speakers than as native-English speaking users. This trend exemplifies the multilingual nature of English in online environments and lends support to the concept of World Englishes as a dynamic and constantly changing phenomenon.

**The Future of English as a Global Language:** According to Burchfield (1994), there were already distinct national varieties of English developing in several post-colonial countries -- specifically India, Singapore and Ghana -- each with their own unique characteristics of local linguistic, cultural and social identity. Such developments have resulted in new literature traditions emerging particularly in Africa and South Asia. Such developments indicate that English is becoming more diversified rather than becoming less so. Standard English, however, is still predominant in written forms (e.g., textbooks, news articles, academic journals and books, web sites etc.) and

formal broadcasting (e.g., BBC News etc.) (Crystal, 2004). Additionally, even Standard English itself exhibits different grammatical structures, vocabularies, and pronunciations across major Standard Varieties (e.g., British English vs. American English). As illustrated by a historical context, English has always exhibited a vast amount of lexical borrowing. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, there are almost 350 languages whose lexemes are borrowed into English. Thus, today's English is greatly different from that spoken during the 16th Century. Lexical borrowings often retain semantic/cultural implications from their original languages, yet they typically undergo adaptation into English grammatical and phonetic systems. Conversely, English has impacted upon other languages via lexical borrowing/switching. Approximately 6,000 languages -- about half of what we know are spoken today -- are threatened with extinction within the next few decades. Colonialism/globalization has caused significant losses of languages in certain areas -- i.e., North Africa/Australia -- with English replacing indigenous languages in most official/educational settings. There is considerable debate regarding whether English borrowing should be regarded as an advantage (i.e., enriching our vocabulary), or disadvantageous (i.e., diminishing linguistic diversity/culture). Crystal (2004) identified two categories of loanwords: new conceptual terminology (i.e., mostly Internet-related vocabulary); replacement for existing local terms. The latter category attracts much greater criticism since it can lead to the suppression/marginalization of native lexical sources.

**How English Reached Its Present Position:** Graddol (1997) reported that approximately 1.4 billion people reside in nations where English is an officially recognized language. Graddol (1997) also stated that one out of every twenty-five individuals worldwide possess at least some ability to speak/write/speak English. Therefore, it is clear that English has become the most widely communicated language in history. Therefore, the present-day status of English is largely due to numerous factors -- namely: historical growth/expansion; political influence; economic predominance; technological advancement; education policies; and cultural exchange. Additionally, because of increasing globalization/localization of cultures, the future of English will likely be characterized by the development of multiple World Englishes based upon localized contexts/globally connected communities. Graphical depictions, such as "trees" (Stevens, in Crystal, 2019) demonstrate how English dispersed geographically and how it diverged linguistically. Nonetheless, graphical representations have come under increasing criticism for their static nature and for neglecting the more complex dynamics of multilingualism, mobility, and hybrid linguistic practice in the 21st century (Pennycook, 2017; Jenkins, 2015).

**From "English" to "Englishes":** As well as the geographical dispersal of English throughout the world since the late eighteenth century, the language was also subject to colonization. Colonization allowed English to extend beyond Europe and North America and enabled the creation of new varieties of English. Through colonialism, English was introduced into the majority of African and Asian regions. England's colonies spanned all continents -- including South America and Oceania. When these colonies were formally included within the British Empire, then English became part of the administrative, judicial and educational infrastructures of each colony. After the British Empire began to decline

toward the end of the twentieth century, its legacy continued in terms of the widespread use of English. At the same time, the U.S.A. rose to become a dominant force in world affairs -- economically, militarily and culturally -- thereby reinforcing English as an international language. Today, however, English is no longer limited to its original locations of production. Rather, it has taken shape as many different varieties -- commonly known as "world englishes". People using English in various parts of the world have drawn upon English to create forms of expression suited to their local environments -- both linguistic and social-cultural. As a consequence, English has changed from being a single form of expression to a variety of expressions (Kirkpatrick, 2020; Kachru, 1992). This process represents a larger process of sociolinguistic change: English is becoming increasingly shaped by its non-native speakers. Therefore, authority regarding norms and standards for English usage is shifting away from Britain and the U.S.A. (Jenkins, 2015).

### The Spread of English

**According to Graddol (1997), there are four main processes responsible for the development of English:**

- Growth of the global entertainment sector via satellite broadcasting and films.
- Development of electronic communication technologies (e.g., Internet).
- Increasing economic interconnectedness due to globalization.
- Developing country perceptions that proficiency in English provides individuals greater access to jobs and opportunities.

While all four mechanisms continue to play significant roles in the current era, they have gained strength and intensity. Internationalized communication technology systems, increased mobility among peoples internationally and globalizing higher education institutions have solidified English within the structures of contemporary global systems (Rose & Galloway, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2020). In addition to having large numbers of speakers, according to Crystal (2003; 2019) what characterizes a global language is not merely the quantity of its users but rather the political, economic, military and cultural authority possessed by those who speak it. Thus, while there may have been certain features of English that facilitated its global spread, it became a global language due to the authority of its early speakers.

### Kachru's Three Circles Model

**Based on his three-circle model (1992), Braj Kachru identified types of communities using/teaching English:**

- **Inner Circle:** First language users/territories of former European colonizers (UK, US etc.)
- **Outer Circle:** Post-colonial nations using/enforcing English officially/ institutionally (India, Nigeria etc)
- **Expanding Circle:** Nations using/learning English as a foreign language (China, Japan etc)

Estimates based on Kachru's model indicated that over 1.5 billion people could functionally communicate in English. However more recent studies have criticized Kachru's model for being too static and geographically bound. Additionally

recent studies have shown that modern communication patterns are highly fluid -- influenced by migration, technological connectivity and transnational networks (Schneider, 2018; Jenkins, 2015).

**Theories of Language Globalisation:** There are two opposite ideological stances expressed in Debates about how quickly english will become the new "global" language.

**English as a Neutral Global Lingua Franca:** Some people believe that english is simply a useful medium of communication that allows people to communicate across the globe. It enables trade, academic exchange, tourism, and digital interactions. These advocates see english as providing opportunity, mobility, and modernity (Graddol, 2006; Galloway & Rose, 2015).The idea of **\*\*english as a Lingua Franca (elf)\*\*** also supports this view, because elf refers to the fact that english is increasingly being used as a means of intercultural communication by people who are not native speakers of english. Furthermore, the use of elf does not necessarily require the adherence to native speaker norms (Jenkins, 2015).

**English as cultural Hegemony:** On the other hand, critical scholars have viewed the spread of english as an expression of what is called **\*\*linguistic imperialism\*\***. Linguistic imperialism is when the structure of society (i.e. Social hierarchies) is reinforced through the mechanisms of language. Phillipson (1992) has argued that english serves as One such mechanism. He believes that english reinforces the dominance of Western cultures in the realms of politics, economics, and culture. Therefore, english cannot be considered to be neutral on issues of ideology. Rather, it carries with it certain cultural and worldview assumptions that may serve to suppress local identities and languages. UNESCO (2023) estimates that thousands of languages are now endangered. One major factor contributing to their decline is the pressure exerted by dominant languages -- including english -- on local languages. In this context, therefore, while english might still function as a neutral tool of communication, it might also serve as a means of cultural homogenisation.

**Implications for English Language Teaching (ELT):** The two opposing viewpoints outlined above have important Implications for ELT policy throughout the world. One viewpoint advocates for ELT programs that teach english using standards based on those found in native speaker communities. The rationale behind this viewpoint is that language and culture are intertwined and therefore teaching english without incorporating elements of culture would result in students learning an unauthentic version of the language. A second viewpoint argues for ELT programs that incorporate elements of local cultures and recognize local varieties of english. Advocates of this viewpoint suggest that ELT programs that reflect multi-lingual realities and promote inter-cultural competence are superior to ELT programs focused solely on native speaker models (Rose & Galloway, 2019; Kirkpatrick, 2020). This viewpoint aligns with the broader movement toward decolonizing language education.

**American vs. British English:** Another issue related to the spread of english globally concerns the relative weights assigned to American and british varieties of english. Historically, british english was the standard model for colonial education systems.

However, American English has come to dominate much of contemporary education due to the geopolitical, economic, and cultural influences of the United States. The global presence of U.S.-based media outlets, technology companies, and universities has also contributed to the widespread adoption of American-based norms in many areas. It is worth noting that the distinction between American and British English continues to lose relevance as hybridized and localized varieties emerge around the world. As World Englishes continue to evolve, no single variety will likely hold sole authority.

### Official status and education priority

#### Crystal (2003; 2019) identified two distinct paths through which a language attains global status:

- Official status: when a language is officially recognized by governments or supranational bodies as an official or semi-official language used in government agencies, administrative institutions, media outlets, scientific journals and/or educational institutions.
- Education priority: when a language becomes a mandatory course of study within national education systems.

As Crystal points out, education priorities can fluctuate over time. During the Cold War era, for instance, Russian became an important part of many countries' school curricula. After 1990, however, with Russia's declining influence in regional affairs, many countries shifted their educational priorities away from Russian and toward English. Examples include Vietnam, which once required students to learn both Vietnamese and Russian but since then has moved toward requiring students to learn only Vietnamese and English. Such changes illustrate the fluid relationships between geopolitics and language policy.

### Why English over any other language?

Two fundamental questions remain unanswered: why has English become the de facto global language instead of another language (French, German, Spanish or Mandarin)? Why did England's former colonies and territories continue to expand English usage even after Britain lost its empire?

### Three factors account for these developments:

- Early global outreach through British colonization
- Subsequent global economic and military hegemony by the USA
- Incorporation of English into various global institutions at critical times (post-WWII rebuilding)
- Timing of technological innovations (industrialization, mass media, digital technologies) primarily driven by English-speaking countries

### Exploitation Theory vs. Grassroots Theory

To summarize the preceding discussion about English as a Global Language, Mair (2002) identifies two theoretical approaches toward understanding how English came to be the most widely spoken language globally.

**Exploitation Model:** According to the exploitation model, English is a deliberate part of a plan to maintain an indirect hold on post-colonial societies. It is used as a means to limit the ability of developing countries to have their own culture

and politics, based upon Western knowledge systems. Therefore, it is assumed that English continues to reflect past imperialisms and power relations. This model suggests that the continued spread of English around the world is a manifestation of previous forms of imperialism.

### Grass Roots Model

On the other hand, the grass roots model presents a different perspective. It emphasizes that the current widespread adoption of English can be explained by the voluntary choice of individuals and communities. People adopt English as a practical tool to facilitate cross border communication for various reasons. According to this model, there is no single entity controlling English — it is being constantly modified by people using it locally throughout the world. It is important to note that recent research in this area has identified a middle ground position. That is, while acknowledging the existence of structural inequalities and the reality of local choice. These authors argue that English reflects both the historical inequality of power among nations and the ongoing local uses of English (Schneider, 2018; Pennycook, 2017). Therefore, the spread of English can be better described as the product of both past histories of imperialism and local choices made in the face of these histories.

## CONCLUSION

Globalization has created a new global language called "English" with a history dating back centuries. This new global language is a result of a unique combination of historical events and factors including: politics, economics, technology, and culture. The original spread of English into many parts of the world occurred during the era of British colonialism when British colonial authorities installed institutional support for English in almost every country they colonized. England's colonization of much of Africa, Asia and Latin America provided the foundation for English to be embedded into governments, schools, universities, and businesses. When Britain lost its empire at mid-20th century, the United States took advantage of the collapse of European colonial empires to establish itself as a superpower after World War II. As a result of U.S. leadership and economic domination in many regions, especially after World War I, English gained even greater momentum as an instrument of international communication. However, English did not emerge as a truly global language simply due to having so many native speakers. According to Crystal, a language does not achieve true global dominance until it is spoken by those with significant power. Thus, in addition to establishing itself as an international business language and gaining widespread acceptance as an international language for science and technology, English had to be associated with institutions with significant impact on the world economy -- namely, multinational corporations, major banks, scientific journals, and eventually digital technologies like computers and cell phones. Moreover, these institutions were largely based in countries whose primary language is English. For example, many multinational companies began operations in Europe after World War II under U.S. leadership. Notwithstanding its growing use around the world, however, the globalization of English has not led to a single standard language or unified way of speaking English. Rather, it has given rise to diversity. The study of World Englishes shows that each region or community where English is learned and

used creates its own version of the language. Furthermore, non-native speakers are becoming key figures in defining what constitutes acceptable usage and what variations are acceptable. Increasingly authority over English is decentralized -- i.e., away from traditional centers of authority such as London or New York. While the increasing spread of English undoubtedly facilitates participation in global capitalism for many people, it also raises legitimate issues regarding linguistic equality and language loss. While access to English provides opportunities for mobility and employment in today's interconnected world, it could lead to exclusionary effects for speakers of local languages and cultures. One of the main debates in modern sociolinguistics is whether the spread of English should be viewed as empowering or hegemonic. Future developments regarding the nature of English as a global language suggest that it will not continue to be homogenized. Rather, ongoing processes of globalization, migration and digital communication will likely increase differences in terms of variation and multilingualism. Although it is difficult to predict exactly how English will evolve in the years ahead, it seems probable that English will remain a dominant global lingua franca for some time yet. However, its structure and ownership will likely continue to evolve in response to changing social conditions. Thus, the movement from "the English language" to "the varieties of English" indicates not fragmentation, but rather an evolving relationship between multilingual communities and a rapidly changing language.

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