

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 15 (2002)

**Artikel:** World English : unity and diversity, profit and loss  
**Autor:** McArthur, Tom  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100002>

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# World English: unity and diversity, profit and loss

Tom McArthur

There has never been a language as vast and varied as English. There has also never been a greater demand – or need – for a standard international variety of English that can be taught and learned consistently worldwide. And there has never been a time when so much English was being used in Continental Europe, which, paradoxically, has been the last significant land mass for English to penetrate.

However, while the English language provides an essential service as the world's lingua franca (at all social and communicative levels: high or acrolectal, middle or mesolectal, and low or basilectal), its role also includes miscegenation, notably both the casual formation of hybrids with other languages, such as Spanglish in the US and Taglish in the Philippines, and a considerable transfer to such languages of words, phrases, idioms, and concepts, at the same time as it famously draws in other languages for its own purposes. And all the time, along with the world's other larger languages, it poses a threat to the survival of thousands of the world's smaller languages.

This paper seeks to place English in the largest possible sociolinguistic context, and includes a tentative framework for describing and discussing the expansion of English within a hierarchy (a pecking order?) of languages that can be discussed in terms of at least three parameters: size, distribution, and, as it were, "gravitational pull." In addition, I am interested here in what is increasingly being called the world's "language ecology" as well as a condition of massive language loss that is increasingly being compared to – and even linked with – the planet's loss of biological diversity.

In the years immediately after the Second World War, when I was at primary school in Glasgow, the statement I have just made about language ecology could not have been made: even the notion of biological ecology had yet to make headway in the world. To indicate however the kinds of things that *were* being said about, for example, English worldwide, I would

like to quote a statement made by a British commentator of the period, C. L. Wrenn. It runs:

English is now well on the way to becoming a world-language: and this means many types of English, many pronunciations and vocabulary-groups within the English language. There is, for instance, an Indian – and even a Bengali form of English. . . Language is a social activity: and whether it is really desirable for English or any other language – real or invented – to become a world-medium, is a question which perhaps concerns the anthropologist and other students of the “social sciences” rather than the student of the English language. (185, 205)

Wrenn's remarks intrigue me. If for example the issue of a world language ever was a question only or mainly for anthropologists and social scientists, it is certainly far beyond that stage now. Academic students of English are of necessity interested in why English is now the way it is, and in the process many have become social scientists. Wrenn also says that English was in 1949 “well on its way to becoming a world-language” (*world* and *language* getting a hyphen that few would give them now). This, it seems to me, was a remarkable way of putting the matter, because he surely knew that English was already a world language at least a century before his book was published. After all, a Bengali English needs time to grow; it couldn't just burst on the world in the 1940s, and indeed the presence of English in Bengal dates from 1690.

My guess is that Wrenn was in the business of catching up, even the business of breaking the news gently. He may also have been feeling for the best words and concepts to describe the astonishing linguistic state of affairs that was emerging out of the influx of American forces into Europe towards the end of the Second World War – American forces whose successors are still in place in 2001. Wrenn's statement marks a mid-point, a moment of truth, as it were, between the long slow build-up of world English and the riot of expansion and recognition that has been accelerating since the late 1940s.

However, English (although its accelerating spread has been phenomenal by any standard) is not alone at the top, at least in terms of numbers of users. Three other language complexes currently operate on a comparable scale to English – Spanish, Chinese, and Hindi-Urdu. But none has a matching global distribution. And (tellingly) there are immensely more users of Spanish, Chinese, and Hindi-Urdu learning English than there are users of English learning Spanish, Chinese, and Hindi-Urdu. Size, distribution, gravita-

tional pull. At the same time, however, we can note that Spanish, uniquely, is the only language making significant territorial inroads into the English-speaking world, and this in its most powerful region, the United States. The demographic and linguistic advance of the Latinos in the US has been so marked that many American linguistic conservatives have for years been campaigning for English to be made the official US federal language. Thus, intriguingly, in its most powerful fortress some people seriously consider that English is in danger.

In its unique mix of statistics, distribution, and variation, the English language is used more, and more widely, than any other language, past or present. Chinese is statistically larger, but its speakers are in the main ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and its distribution is massively centred in one part of the world. Spanish is widely distributed, and is powerfully present in the Americas, but is absent from Europe beyond the Pyrenees, is in contention in Spain at least with Catalan, and is minimal in Africa, Asia, and Australasia/Oceania. Hindi-Urdu has its diasporas, but they are relatively small, and the mass of its speakers are in the north of the Indian subcontinent.

English has long been a key spoken and written language of the Indian subcontinent, in its own right and mixed with (among others) Hindi and Urdu, so that the major language complex in northern South Asia may well be better described as Hindi-Urdu-English. Additionally, something over two hundred million mainland Chinese are acquiring – and actively using – English. By 2020, the majority of the world's regular users of English ("semi-native speakers," as it were) will be in Asia.

Other very large languages are all less widespread than English, but may be more widespread than Spanish, Chinese, and Hindi-Urdu, despite having smaller numbers of users. French is notable in terms of world distribution, as are Arabic, Russian, and Malay in terms of regional distribution, while German and Japanese are associated with powerful economies and populous countries. Again, however, more speakers of these languages are investing time and effort in learning and using English than in learning and using one another's languages. There is a pattern here, and with this group of major languages as a starting point, and in line with my three criteria of numbers, distribution, and gravitational pull, one can extrapolate a set of seven categories of language at the present time. The edges of each category may be fuzzy, not all languages fitting neatly, but the continuum represented by the categories seems clear enough. They are:

*Category 1*

English, the universalizing language, in a set of one: used by well over a billion people, being learned by millions more, distributed worldwide, and in the forefront of commerce, technology, science, and popular culture.

*Category 2*

Spanish, Chinese, and Hindi-Urdu: each complex used by hundreds of millions, Spanish widely disseminated but not as widely as English, the other two with massive population bases in single specific regions, and all three central to major world cultures and economies.

*Category 3*

Such large, culturally significant languages as Arabic, French, Russian, Malay, German, and Japanese: internationally powerful languages in social, cultural, demographic, and economic terms.

*Category 4*

Such major national and regional languages as Hausa in West Africa, Swahili in East Africa, Italian and Hungarian in Europe, Persian in Western and Central Asia, Tamil in India, Guarani in Paraguay, all with significant histories, cultures, and populations of users.

*Category 5*

Smaller but socially strong languages within one or more territories, such as Catalan in Spain and France, Berber in Morocco, Ilocano in the Philippines, and Nahuatl in Mexico.

*Category 6*

Small languages worldwide that belong to minor (often depleted) communities, such as Gallego in Spain, Welsh in Wales, Maori in New Zealand, Navajo in the United States, and Romansch in Switzerland.

*Category 7*

Very small languages whose numbers are in the low thousands, or hundreds, or fewer still, spoken by shrinking communities in or across nation-states, as with the Aboriginal languages of Australia, the “heritage languages” Kwakiutl and Ojibway in Canada, and the “Indian” languages Seminole and Cherokee in the United States.

These are rule-of-thumb categories, but they have a *Realpolitik* about them, from the immensely powerful and prestigious to the small, local, and endangered. In such a world, there is profit (in all senses of that word) in using and learning the large languages but, as David Crystal shows in *Language Death*, there is immense social, emotive, and intellectual loss in the steady current extinguishment enveloping and threatening hundreds of tongues. The

stories of English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French in the Americas *vis-à-vis* a former multitude of indigenous regional languages are already a terrible case in point.

Never a greater demand – or need – for a standard international variety of English . . .

Certain things have traditionally been required of languages at the large end of the spectrum, pre-eminent among them a “cultivated” or “educated” or “standard” variety channelled pre-eminently through writing and print, and perhaps also one or more distinctive and prestige-laden ways of speaking. It is a feature of English today that there has never before been such a demand for a standard international language that can be taught consistently well worldwide (although that demand is currently far from being fulfilled in many places). There is a paradox here too: that the entity called “English” is known to be varied, yet in spite of knowing about this vast creative soup we demand a high degree of intercommunicability – demand, in other words, a manageable, teachable, and learnable acrolect to serve world commerce, world travel, and world culture. Although the current technical terms for the variety in question are rarely used – World Standard English and International Standard English – the demand is now deeply entrenched worldwide.

I am using a Scottish version of this super-acrolect (and only one of several possible Scottish versions, alongside innumerable other versions). I am also using it in a setting that is entirely typical of where and when and how it is supposed to be used – and supposed to be used *well*. There are serious brownie points to be earned by using it well: natively or otherwise. Judgements are made, points on a scale of competence are overtly or covertly assigned. Beyond such settings as this (the really-truly acrolectal environments, as it were), other kinds of internationalized English are used, right through to the “broken” or “fractured,” and they are largely tolerated because they get things done (somehow). But for many users of such make-do English that is not enough, and they want the *real thing* for their children.

This is one of the most important issues in the world today: access to the “best possible” English – and the global English language industry knows very well that many people will pay over the odds for the right courses for their children, and will if necessary ship them across the world to get to those courses. People – native and non-native alike – also have their worries about the local as opposed to the global, the basilects as opposed to the

acrolect, so that within English itself there are league tables not all that different from the seven-point scale just discussed for the distinct languages of the world. There are pecking orders in world English, and people have a pretty good idea of what they are.

There is also ignorance – a lack of awareness of the kinds of English one may meet on one's travels. Take for example Newfoundland English in Canada – an often Irish-like variety that few people worldwide know about. Or Puerto Rican English as used in both Puerto Rico and New York City – where the subvariety is sometimes called Nuyorican and shades into Brooklyn, which is a truly demonized dialect. Or take two Creole varieties of English in Surinam in South America that are hardly known outside Surinam but are unintelligible both to speakers of English at large *and* to one another. The more intelligible of the two is Sranan; the wholly unintelligible one is Saramaccan. On encountering such centuries-old forms of speech, one has to acknowledge that they can on the one hand be kinds of English and on the other be distinct languages when compared with more conventional Englishes. These are examples of why not long ago I wrote a book called *The English Languages*, but there are also difficult varieties that one could meet any day of the week, from Liverpool to Houston and Calcutta to Lagos.

Those are the basilects and mesolects, generating all kinds of social and linguistic responses, but there is also the high variety, increasingly conceived as shared worldwide by a media-centred global élite that watches CNN and BBC World and reads “quality” newspapers and newsmagazines. I recently wrote about them, along with other related matters, in the journal *Language Teaching*, in a survey called “World English and world Englishes: Trends, tensions, varieties, and standards.”

A central point in that survey was that the media and publishers at large are the prime users (and therefore editors) of a single world print standard – dominated by the US and the UK (in that order), and linked with other established or emerging national print standards in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa, India, Singapore, and elsewhere. Of necessity this is a fuzzy-edged standard, and it is federative rather than unitary. It is also powerfully affected by the electronic revolution. Such a print-based standard necessarily relates to a range of speech styles whose “educated” forms – a risky concept but one that can hardly be avoided – have much in common. It is difficult to find a single label for the phenomenon, but the phrase “English as an international language” has the advantage of suggesting the usage of a kind of global civil society. The concept of a teachable EIL has even been incorporated into the TEFL/TESL/TESOL complex as TEIL,

"Teaching English as an International Language," whose co-creators in the 1980s were the British linguist Peter Strevens and the American Larry Smith at the East-West Center in Hawaii (cf. Smith, 1981).

This perspective differs from the conventional approach to English as a foreign or second language by emphasizing that *everybody* has to become fluent in it, whether native users or foreign learners, and that it has a cultural, social, and even *sociable* dimension to it. In addition to the management of their pronunciation and rhythm, listening comprehension, syntax, vocabulary, and idiom, both sides have to adjust and make concessions, not just the foreign learners. This appears now to be a direction in which the English language industry is moving, despite the emergence of "brands" of English teaching, whether focused on national standard Englishes (US, UK, Australia, Canadian, etc.), on techniques (such as the communicative approach and Suggestopedia), or on international groups or franchisers (such as International House and Eurocentres), or on a mix of all three.

Never a time when so much English was  
being used in Continental Europe . . .

2001 is the European Year of Languages. "European" is now however almost as odd a word as "American," in that both terms can refer to a whole geographical region or to the key political entity within that region. Just as "America" commonly means the *United States of America* and not the whole continent so "Europe" has become shorthand for the *European Union*, presumably an interesting development for the Swiss, who are manifestly European but not part of the "Europe" of the headlines. The idea of a European Year of Languages, however, was initiated by the Council of Europe, which has concerns wider than the EU. My interest here however is both Europes: the slowly federalizing and expanding Union, and the traditional land mass and offshore islands. And this is in relation to a point made by the Danish scholar Cay Dollerup in 1996:

Worldwide, English spread in the wake of British conquests. It was diffused as the language of the peoples of North America. And in African and Asian colonies it often came into use as the language of communication with the original population, and . . . often as the common vehicle for communication. Yet it is a veritable newcomer on the European Continent.

Dollerup's remark echoes from a distance the comment of the Elizabethan lexicographer John Florio in *First frutes* (1578) which, turned into present-day usage, runs: "English will do you good in England, but past Dover it is worth nothing" (Edwards 4). The times have certainly changed, and once again it took till around 1950. English is manifestly in origin a European language, influenced by such other European languages as French, Latin, and Greek, but in a significant sense "the Continent" had little use for it and speakers of English by and large returned the favour. A notable exception, however, is a tradition of English philology and literature in Continental universities, as well as the inclusion of English in school syllabuses, especially in the north-western countries. It was conceived in at least the last two centuries as a language worth knowing because of its literature and its usefulness *outside* Europe, and increasingly through the twentieth century as a language of scholarly publication, largely because of the United States.

Indeed, when change came in Europe, the impetus was not from across the Channel but from across the Atlantic, centring on the worldwide economic, political, military, cultural, and social power of the USA. Inevitably any emerging English in mainland Europe would remain fully aware of the traditional UK brand, but the potent and innovative US brand has been difficult to deny. Teachers of English in European schools and Anglicists in European universities have in fact been markedly loyal to British norms and forms, but in recent times observers such as the American linguist Marko Modiano in Sweden have reminded us that much of mainland Europe's English today is "mid-Atlantic" ("International English" and "Standard English[es]").

Indeed, especially among younger people, mainland Europe's English may well be located even farther west, closer to CNN and California (with its heady blend of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and MTV). In that, however, they would be no different from younger people in Britain and Ireland; in a serious sense, US usage has been influencing all the languages of Europe, including both English in the UK and English on the Continent, whose natures are rather different. In effect, there are now at least two distinct kinds of English in Europe: a native-speaker variety in Britain and Ireland, and what might be called an instrumental or lingua franca variety in mainland Europe, with distinct institutional aspects within the European Union, and considerable use elsewhere.

Writing in 1995 in *English Today* about English in what duly became the European Union, the American linguist Margie Berns noted:

It is, in my view, likely that English will become the primary language of the citizens of the EC. Whether or not it is ever officially declared such, it will be even more widely used as a vehicle for intra-European communication across all social groups . . . It is possible that British English will come to be considered as one of several sub-varieties of English in the EC – along with French English, Dutch English, or Danish English. Continental users of English are already in the process of nativizing English and as contact with speakers and users of English increases, nativized varieties will result and, when blended with British English, have the capacity to develop into a distinct variety. This European English would have the potential to become institutionalized. (9-10)

This remains a bold statement in 2001, but it is somewhat less radical now that a range of people are beginning to think in terms of “Euro-English,” an entity that does not directly relate to anything either British or American, but belongs specifically to mainland Europe. Such an English is conceived as more the outcome of internal necessity than external pressure or cultural hegemony. If this is so, then the emergence of such an English is more in line with the emergence of Indian English than, say, the spread of English in Ireland, where English eventually usurped the role of Irish Gaelic. For decades Indians have described their English as “a link language” and “a window on the world.” This would appear to be what has been happening recently in Europe. And just as there has been massive hybridization between English and many Indian languages, so there has also recently been an increased hybridization between English and many European languages, and an increasing willingness, especially in Scandinavia and the Netherlands, to use English for significant purposes at home as well as the near abroad within the EU and the further abroad beyond the EU.

Most recently, however, attention has been turning to the use in mainland Europe of “English as a lingua franca” (ELF), largely regardless of the off-shore presence of two English-speaking member states. In a three-part article in the October 2001 issue of *English Today*, Jennifer Jenkins, Marko Modiano, and Barbara Seidlhofer discuss what this kind of Euro-English could be like, particularly in terms of pronunciation and the pragmatics of non-natives using a third party’s language. Barbara Seidlhofer in particular discusses the compilation of a corpus at the University of Vienna “that seeks to capture exclusively lingua franca English” from a range of speakers of different European languages (no native speakers involved at any point). Because of the involvement of Oxford University Press, the project is known as the *Vienna-Oxford ELF Project*.

Recordings are made in environments where English might be used but is not particularly expected or required. From this perspective, although stu-

dents in schools may have British and/or American English as their targets for production and comprehension, and have accurate natural English as their target, in reality what they use for communication across language groups in multilingual areas is much less formal and precise: indeed, it is a makeshift whose *lingua franca* elements might indeed become more or less institutionalized.

The writers also describe some features of Euro-English that “though clearly different from Standard English, are usually unproblematic, i.e., they do not tend to cause misunderstanding.” They include such generic types as: “He look very sad”; “Our countries have signed agreement about this”; the interchangeability of *who* and *which*, as in “The picture who . . .” and “The person which . . .”; “I look forward to see you”; and “You’re busy today, isn’t it?” All such studies, especially if they have some kind of facilitating aim, will undoubtedly face the age-old charge of encouraging error and legitimating “broken” and “fractured” usage.

If one thinks in terms of that high Standard English usage desired worldwide by middle-class parents for their children, then that is a hard charge to answer. If, however, one accepts the historical evidence that communities in linguistically complex circumstances often first create then conventionalize all kinds of “interlanguage” features, then such matters are simply a fact of life. But to legitimate them – or look as though one is legitimating them, or indeed actively crusade for their legitimization – may be doing the speakers no favours. The jury within and beyond the EU will probably be out for some time on such a “Euro-English,” but certainly a great deal of academic literature will be generated by the phenomenon. In my own view, in mid-2001, there are already many kinds of Euro-English, most of them not much removed from the well-understood (and often caricatured) “French English,” “German English,” and indeed “Scottish English,” “Irish English,” and indeed again kinds of “English English.” The English language in Europe will certainly be a *lingua franca*, but only in the same way that it is a *lingua franca* everywhere else in the world.

The term *Euro-English* will probably do well (it has a kind of buoyancy to it), and will I suspect describe a broad church, drawing on both US and UK usage, building its own terminologies, and using many voices, much as in India (a region with which it may well have much in common in linguistic terms).

The cardinal thing for Europe, as elsewhere, is how the continuum of its languages works out, from the almost monolithic World Standard English through to its endangered languages. The member states of the EU will also

have to address in some form or another an issue that grows more significant by the year: the language in which scholars should publish their work. The universal trend is powerfully towards English, manifestly the primary medium for academic communications. This state of affairs does not in the least endanger small languages, but rather it threatens to slice off the highest levels of rigorous discussion in many languages that already have illustrious heritages of academic reporting. More and more Europeans of all linguistic backgrounds now routinely seek to publish in English, both to reach the widest possible readership and, I suspect, to show that they have the ability not only to do the research but to report it in polished prose in the universal acrolect. We live in interesting linguistic times.

### Postscript

We do indeed. The issue of English in Europe is nothing if not dynamic. In less than three months since delivering the paper at the SAUTE conference in St Gallen, I find it necessary to revise my comment (above) that Margie Berns's 1995 statement that "English will become the primary language of the citizens of the EC" remains a bold one. A report in *Business Week*, by Stephen Baker and Inka Resch in Paris, is flamboyantly stark about the current position of English in the EU. Their title is "The Great English Divide" and their lead-in runs, "In Europe, speaking the lingua franca separates the haves from the have-nots." The following quotation highlights the points these writers have sought to make:

English is becoming the binding agent of a continent, linking Finns to French and Portuguese as they move toward political and economic unification. A common language is crucial, says Tito Boeri, a business professor at Bocconi University in Milan, "to take advantage of Europe's integrated labor market." English, in short, is Europe's language. And while some adults are slow to embrace this, it's clear as day for European children. "If I want to speak to a French person, I have to speak in English," says Ivo Rowekamp, an 11-year-old in Heidelberg, Germany. . . The English-speaking children appear to be in charge, ordering food in English for their parents, and arranging early-morning taxis to the airport. (36-40)

Baker and Resch note that "[t]he need for a lingua franca is most pressing for global technology players," with striking results, as for example when such companies as Alcatel and Nokia "embraced English as the corporate language." The authors also point to a neutrality offered by English in certain increasingly common situations. An example is the coming together of

the company Rhone-Poulenc in France and Hoechst in Germany as the new futuristic-sounding *Aventis*. The headquarters of Aventis is in Strasbourg, a Franco-German city in northern France — and, the writers add, the two organizations “further defused cultural tensions by adopting English as the company language.”

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