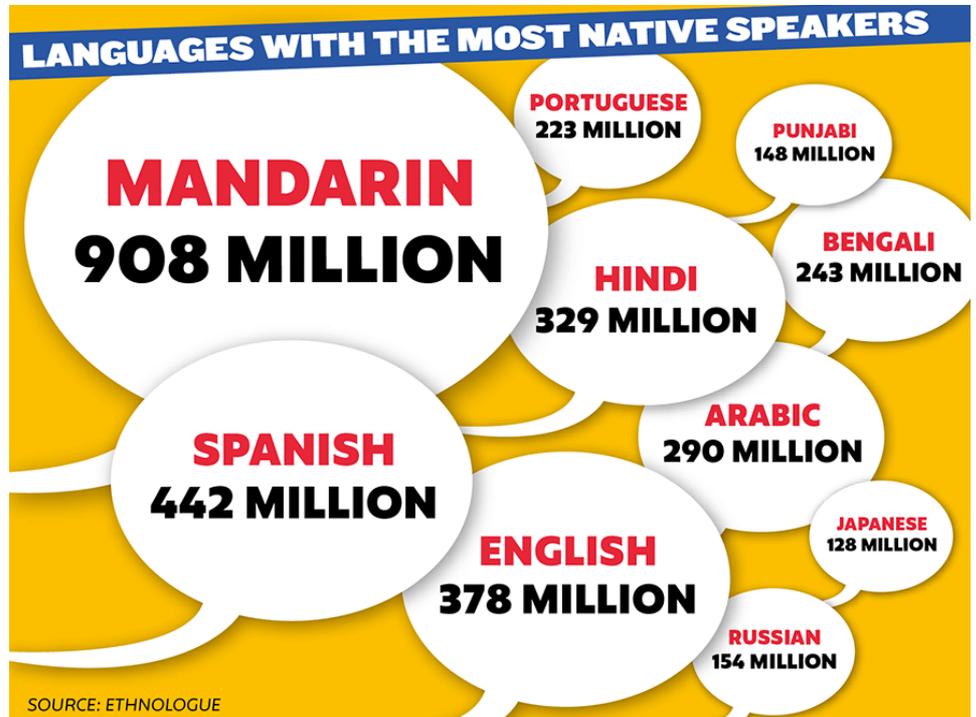


BRIEFING

The future of English

English has long been known as the language of the world. It is estimated that 1.5 billion people around the world speak some English. But new translation technology might threaten its dominance.



Chinese whispers: Is it true that English could become a world-leading language of the past?

Q: How many people speak English?

A: It is a simple question with a complicated answer. According to the latest estimates, around 1.5 billion people — or 20% of the global population — speak some English. The vast majority of these people speak English as their second language. Around 378 million speak English as their mother tongue.

Q: Which country has the most English speakers?

A: China.

Yes, China. According to a study by Cambridge University Press, up to 350 million people there have at least some knowledge of English. This would mean that there are more people in China who speak English as a second language than there are Americans who speak it as their first.

English is the world's main lingua franca — the name given to a language used between two people who do not share the same first language.

Q: How did it become so dominant?

A: English owes its status as a dominant language to its link to two of the world's most powerful — until recently — nations: the US and the UK.

It also benefits from being a varied, flexible tongue, with **more words than any other language**. This is a consequence of history. English is a Germanic language (like German

and Dutch), but England was hugely influenced by Norman French, which became the language of the **ruling class** for a long period, and by Latin, which was the language of scholarship and of the Church.

English is the common language in every major scientific and technological endeavour. It has ridden the wave of globalisation and advances in technology to become even more dominant. According to linguist David Graddol, 80% of the world's electronic information is stored in English.

Q: Has any other language ever come close to this?

A: Other languages have transcended different cultures before. **Sanskrit** was dominant in ancient India and, as historian Nicholas Ostler says, "If you stay in the mindset of 15th-century Europe, the future of Latin is extremely bright."

But David Crystal, author of *English as a Global Language*, is sceptical of any claims that English could go the same way. "This is the first time we actually have a language spoken genuinely globally by every country in the world," he said. "There are no precedents to help us see what will happen."

Q: Could anything stop it?

A: Perhaps. There is the looming presence of China. With its growing influence in Africa, it might be more worthwhile for a young Ugandan

to learn Mandarin than English. The number of Americans learning Mandarin has doubled in the last decade.

Translation technology is also advancing apace. It is likely that, quite soon, a French person and a Chinese person will no longer need a lingua franca.

At Stanford University, Wonkyum Lee, a South Korean computer scientist, is working on translation and voice-recognition technology that will, one day, be so good that when you call a customer service helpline, you won't be able to tell whether you are talking to a human or a computer.

Christopher Manning, a professor at the same American university, insists there is no reason why computer technology cannot be better than human alternatives.

Q: If the computers take over, will there be only one world language?

A: Almost certainly not in the near future. But globalisation is having an effect. Scientists believe that **one language dies out roughly every 14 days**.

Around the world, English is **blending with other tongues**. In India, for example, you can find Hinglish (Hindi-English) and Benglish (Bengali-English). In the US, many Hispanics speak Spanglish.

English will probably be the dominant world language for the rest of your life. But it may not be a version of English you recognise.

YOU DECIDE

Would it be a good thing if there was only one language spoken around the world?

ACTIVITY

List the three foreign languages that you think are the most important for English speakers to learn. Be prepared to defend your choices.

WORD WATCH

More words than any other language – This does not count “agglutinative” languages, such as Finnish, in which words can be stuck together in long strings of indefinite length that, therefore have an almost infinite number of words.

Ruling class – William of Normandy’s defeat of

Harold II at the Battle of Hastings, in 1066, heralded the end of Saxon England. English did not become the official language of the English Royal Court until the mid-1300s under the reign of Henry IV.

Sanskrit – Most familiar terms from Buddhism and Hinduism are from the Sanskrit language.

One language dies out every 14 days – There are still over 7,000 languages in the world.

Most dying languages are spoken by remote tribes, especially in New Guinea, Brazil and Central Africa.

Blending with other tongues – Iceland is another good example of this. Only 330,000 people speak Icelandic, and many young Icelanders sprinkle their language with English, leading to fears that Icelandic will die out in the not-too-distant future.

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Notes

