

THE RISE OF ENGLISH AS THE GLOBAL LINGUA FRANCA Is the world heading towards greater monolingualism or new forms of plurilingualism?

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Abstract – English has become the most influential language for international discourse (Weber 1997; Graddol 2006) and it is tempting to foresee a largely monolingual future at the international level, where other languages become irrelevant. Such a simplistic view sees the adoption of English as something universal and uniform with little room for variation, local identity, or other lingua francas. Data shows that other lingua francas are not inevitably in decline. Diverse languages – e.g. Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, French – continue to be important regionally or in certain discourse contexts (Weber 1997; Ostler 2010; Ronen *et al.* 2014) and on the internet. In this paper, we look at recent data from a variety of sources (Ronen *et al.* 2014; Olivié *et al.* 2015), in an attempt to examine the situation regarding languages and their influences in the world today. In particular, we will attempt to take into account the fact that much language distribution is today no longer tied in with territorial dimensions. New media such as the internet, as well as mass migration between countries, have made it less easy to identify specific languages with precise geographical areas. Furthermore, although the world is increasingly globalised, significant regional divisions still exist in the use of media (especially in the case of China) making it difficult at present to make direct comparisons about language use. In this complex scenario, it is also apparent that as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) variations emerge and gain in influence (see Seidlhofer 2011), the identity of English will change and become itself a reflection of a plurilingual reality in which speakers typically have at their disposal a repertoire of different languages.

Key words: ELF; Lingua Francas; Plurilingualism; Global Language Networks.

1. Introduction

The rise of English to become the world's most influential language has been a long, seemingly inexorable process and has led many to conclude that, on an international level, English is the only language that counts. To quote one representative proponent of this view (Chevillet 1994, p. 118):

Depuis le milieu du XIXe siècle, le rôle de l'anglais n'a fait que croître. Le déclin de l'empire britannique n'a pas entraîné le recul de la langue (cf. le sort du français), bien au contraire. L'anglais n'est pas une langue internationale, à l'instar de l'espagnol ou du russe, mais c'est une langue mondiale, en raison de la puissance économique et culturelle du monde anglo-saxon (États-Unis) et du rôle croissant des médias.¹

¹ “Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the role of English has done nothing but grow. The decline of the British Empire has not entailed a corresponding decline in the language (compare the fate of French) – quite the contrary. English is not an international language, after the fashion of Spanish or Russian, but a world language, a consequence of the economic and cultural strength of the Anglo-Saxon world (The United States) and the increasing role of the media.” (Translation: McArthur 1998, p. 31)

The idea that English is the only language worth considering internationally assumes that all other languages, e.g. French in the quoted extract, are inevitably in decline and shrinking back into their homelands in the face of the steamroller of English.

In the following sections, we will try to gauge, using data from different sources, the relative status of languages on a worldwide stage. First, in Sections 2, we will try to establish whether such a narrative is true by looking at a selection of the available data on language use worldwide in territorial contexts (i.e. specific to determined geographical areas) which is available, although as we shall see the picture that emerges is not always clear also because various interpretations are possible. In Section 3, we will concentrate on the use of various languages in what we call non-territorial contexts (in diverse discourse contexts and on the internet), while in Section 4, we will discuss some recent research into Global Language Networks (Ronen *et al.* 2014) examining the relationships between languages where speakers are plurilingual.² The latter constitutes a new line of enquiry that allows one to focus not on relative rankings of languages within hierarchies of importance or influence but also on how speakers in a multi-lingual world may *translanguage* (García and Wei 2014) i.e. draw upon different linguistic resources from within their repertoire.

2. Language in territorial contexts

Conventionally, languages, like ethnic groups, are associated with specific geographical areas or territories, often, but not always, identified as nation-states. The idea that languages, like ethnic groups, are rooted exclusively in specific places does not reflect reality. Indeed, many languages or varieties exist which do not usually appear on a language atlas. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is one example of this. Reliable estimates of the number of people who use it are hard to come by. It is used predominately by African Americans,³ but it is neither exclusive to this group nor employed by all members of it (see Wheeler 1999). In terms of cultural impact, particularly in popular culture and slang,⁴ it is one of the most important varieties of English across the globe. However, because it lacks an identifiable geographical territory of its own, it often receives only scant attention in studies of world or international English. By contrast, national, often localised, varieties like Australian, Canadian, Irish, Indian, Jamaican, Kenyan, Singaporean or South African, are regularly discussed even if, in comparison to AAVE, they have far fewer speakers.⁵

Even when languages can be identified with a specific region, counting the number of people who use them is not always a simple enterprise. As Weber notes in his widely cited article (“Top Languages: the World’s Ten Most Influential Languages” 1997), apart from the problems in conducting surveys in general (particularly in countries where resources or organisational ability may be lacking) data on language use is often interfered with to fit the agendas of those in power:

² i.e. the ability of an individual speaker to manage communication in different languages, sometimes even switching from one code to another in the same speech situation (see *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 2001, pp. 4-5).

³ In the US census of 2010, 38.9 million people identified themselves as African American.

⁴ *Rock ‘n’ roll, bling, cool, ride, hip; dude*, are just a few of the dozens of terms which were originally AAVE but have made their way into general slang, especially that of young people.

⁵ For example, see David Crystal’s influential *English as a Global Language* (2003, pp. 179-80) where AAVE is only discussed in relation to its alternative name *Ebonics*, which gives the impression that it is not a variety of English but a separate language.

Few national censuses show much interest in language and those that do all too often are interfered with for political reasons. Governments have been known to massage figures until they are “right”. Unpopular minorities and languages are made to disappear or shrink into insignificance while the figures of ruling groups are inflated. Sometimes even rock-solid linguistic classifications are brushed away as in Turkey where Kurdish (which is not even remotely related to Turkish) was, for a while, officially reclassified as Mountain Turkish. Census work in many technologically backward and ethnologically diverse countries (which description covers a substantial slice of the world) can be downright dangerous. For many people government traditionally is not the benevolent institution of UN mythology but The Enemy. (Weber 1997, p. 23)⁶

For this reason, figures cited for the numbers of speakers of any given language are largely estimates and often rely on simple headcounts of people living in a given area on the assumption that they all use the language traditionally associated with it. This may prove satisfactory where languages can be identified with specific, largely monoethnic, areas (e.g. Polish with Poland⁷) – and such places are diminishing rapidly. However, with a language like English that is spoken by diverse populations across the world, often alongside other languages in highly cosmopolitan contexts, it can only give a very rough picture. That said, in Figure 1, we report the figures for the major world languages as L1s (first languages) and L2s (second or foreign languages) as given by the authoritative website *Ethnologue* 2015.

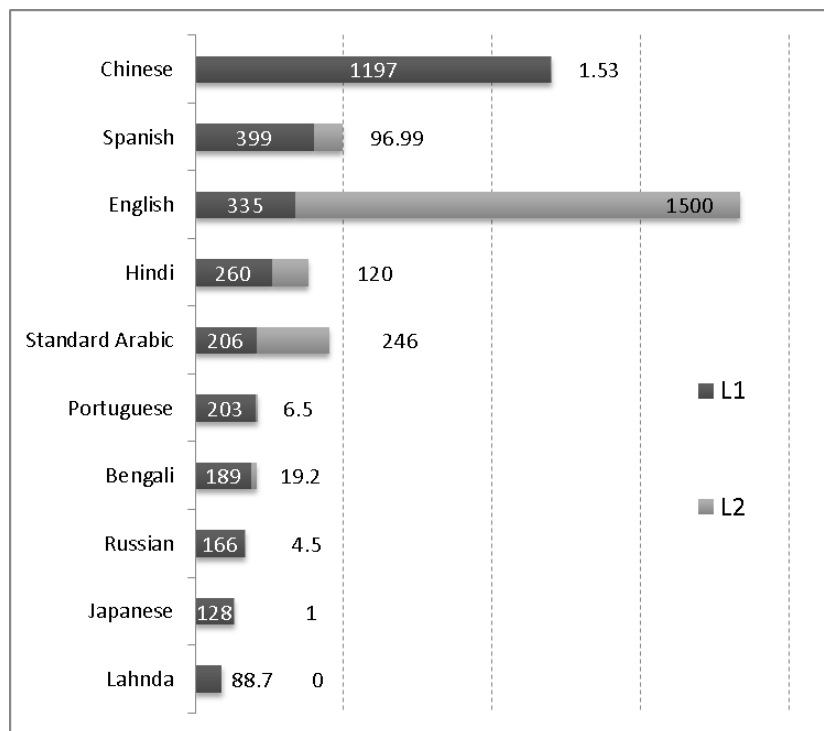


Figure 1
Major languages by number of speakers (millions) in the world.

⁶ Page numbers here and below refer to the 1998 reprint.

⁷ Despite having a long history of multiethnicity (with substantial communities of Jews, Germans, Czechs, Russians, Armenians, Tartars, even Scots), in the official 2011 census, 93.8% of respondents declared Polish ethnicity.

As can be seen, English is only the third largest language in terms of L1 speakers, but is by far the biggest when L2 speakers are taken into account. The figures for L2 speakers, we have partially gathered ourselves.⁸ It is a category that presents its own, additional, problems for people wishing to estimate numbers, principally because it is difficult to decide at which precise level of proficiency a person can be said to speak or know a language;⁹ individual respondents in surveys may have widely varying ideas about what may constitute sufficient proficiency, as Weber notes (1997, p. 23)

Even the best censuses of the best-organised countries can only ask a few simple questions about languages and must depend on the self-assessment and honesty of the interviewed citizenry. Just what does “knowing” a language mean exactly? The spectrum ranges from a Chulalongkorn University professor of English to a street seller in a Bangkok tourist area who has a few dozen English words and no grammar to rub together. Both the professor and the seller make their living from their knowledge of the English language. If asked in a census, both could honestly claim to “know” English.

In fact, the figure for English is reported at widely different levels by different scholars; Crystal (2008) puts the number of ESL speakers at 400 million and EFL speakers at 600-700 million (giving a lower total of 1,000m to 1,100m: about 400m, or a third, less than the number given on Figure 1). Figures for Chinese as a L2 are very hard to estimate, complicated by the fact that Chinese is in reality not a single language but a set of more or less related languages: Mandarin, Yue, Wu, Jinyu, Hakka and Gan (to name but six out of the 15 institutional languages in use in China).¹⁰ Also for French, its situation as a L2 is unclear. Some estimates put the number of second language speakers at 274m (*Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* 2014), *Ethnologue* only at 87m (based on the OIF figure for 2007); a change in the way that data is collected in Africa may account for this discrepancy.¹¹

These considerations aside, despite the data being only partially reliable, the general dominance of English emerges from the fact that it has by far the largest number of L2 speakers by any count. Chinese and Spanish are clearly more concentrated in certain populous areas but have no comparable reach to English.

⁸ Because *Ethnologue* does not deal with figures for L2 speakers consistently. For some languages, it gives estimates but for others it does not. The figures for Chinese and Spanish are our estimate from those given for various varieties of both. The figures for English are those reported by the British Council in 2014; the figures for Portuguese, Russian and Japanese are those given by *Ethnologue* 2014 but absent from *Ethnologue* 2015.

⁹ The Common European Framework (Council of Europe 2001) approaches this problem by dividing levels of proficiency into three main categories: A (basic user); B (independent user) and C (mastery). Van Ek and Trim (1990) regard *threshold* (B1) as the key level for labour mobility between nations. At this level, a person can travel to or live in a place where a given language is spoken and not only be able to conduct daily business in that language but also improve their own linguistic ability without need for further instruction. B1 therefore might be considered a good point to set the bar for effectively knowing a language, but such concerns are too technical for most surveys and questionnaires.

¹⁰ In 2005 the National Language Commission of the People's Republic of China reported that only 53% of Chinese citizens could speak Mandarin (“Half of all Chinese people can't speak Mandarin: Report”, *Taipei Times*, May 23, 2005).

¹¹ A 2013 study by *World Population Prospects* and *l'Observatoire démographique et statistique de l'espace francophone* (ODSEF) advances various scenarios for the growth of French by 2050-2060. The most pessimistic puts the figure around the current 368.304 million, the most optimistic at 1.222 billion French speakers, the latter dependent on population growth and continued support for education in French in Africa: *Le Figaro*, “Un milliard de francophones en 2060”, March 20, 2013. The article notes that the rising influence of China in Africa makes the higher figure less likely.

Extension by itself is only a vague concept and does not necessarily equate with influence or importance (in the sense of power). Comparing the figures for L2 speakers for Spanish, Standard Arabic and Hindi, it is difficult to discern which has greater influence outside its L1 community. Weber (1997, p. 22) addressed this problem by drawing up a formula (of whose precise workings he only gave sketchy details) based on a consideration of six criteria, in order:

1. number of primary speakers (native or home speakers)
2. number of secondary speakers
3. number and population of countries using the language
4. number of major fields (science, diplomacy etc.)
5. economic power of countries using the language
6. social literary prestige

Figure 2
Weber's (1997, p. 22) six categories affecting influence of a language.

Taken as a group, these categories seem to provide a reasonable picture of a language's importance outside its L1 community. However, taken individually, they do contain an element of subjectivity especially as one goes down the list. How, for example, social literary prestige can be measured, let alone quantified, is unfortunately something that Weber does not reveal (he mentions that publications, translations and literary conferences have all been taken into account). It can be seen how, using these criteria, English would score top marks in possibly all six categories (at least in 1997).

In Figure 3, we show the top ten most influential languages according to Weber's calculations based on the criteria listed in Figure 2:

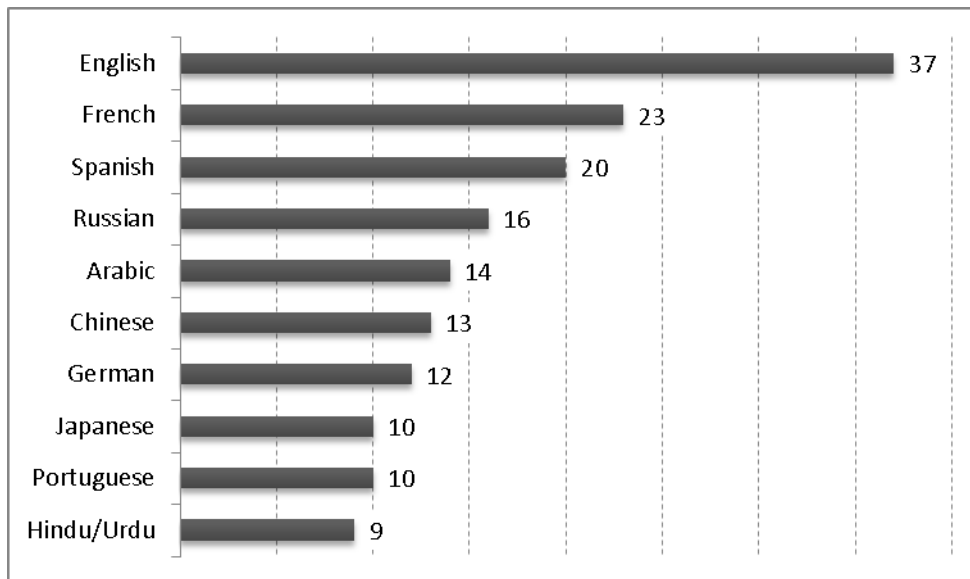


Figure 3
Top ten most influential languages according to Weber (1997) using calculations based on his six criteria.

The real surprise here is perhaps the continued and disproportionate influence of French considering the fact that on Figure 1 it is not even listed. Chinese in contrast would seem to be much less influential than the number of its L1 speakers would seem to guarantee.

However, this discrepancy may be explained by the fact that in 1997 China was only just starting its momentous adoption of more capitalist policies and thus increasing its global presence.

The specific case of China shows indeed how out of date Weber's 1997 study may now be. To gain some idea of the situation today, we have to go to other sources. This will also allow us to compare figures today with those given by Weber and thus to tentatively identify some trends.

To our knowledge, neither Weber nor anyone else has applied his formula since the original study to attempt to compare the influence of different languages. However, there exist studies measuring the comparative power of nation states. An example of one of these is the *Elcano Global Presence Index (Informe Elcano de Presencia Global 2015 – Olivé et al. 2015)* which measures effective positioning of countries outside their own borders taking into account a broad array of economic, military and soft dimensions, to cite the official *Elcano* website:¹²

The index measures global presence. By global presence we understand the effective positioning, in absolute terms, of the different countries, outside their boundaries, in economic, social and political fields (exports, tourists welcomed, victories in international sports competitions...).

The scale which Olivé et al. (2015) draw up for 2014 is given below in Figure 4:

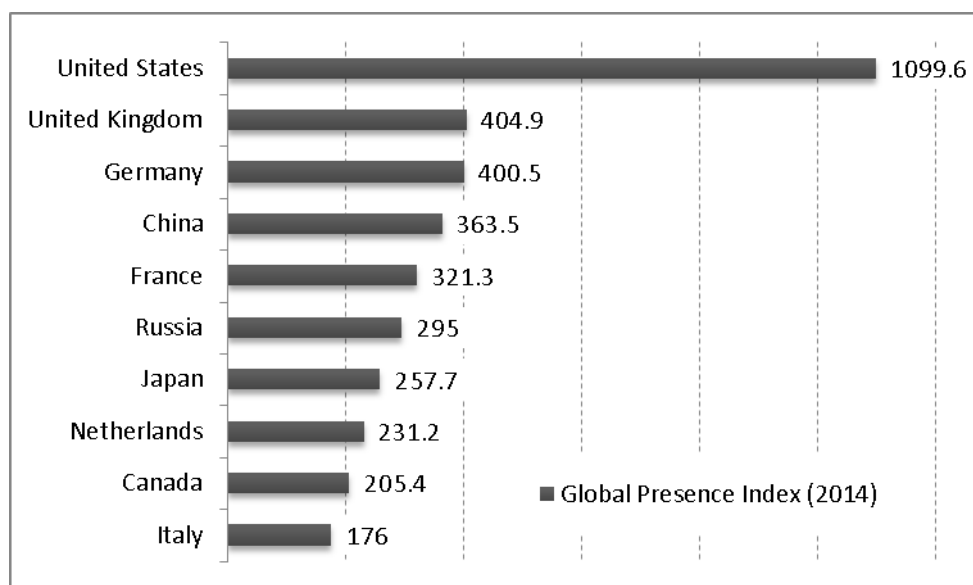


Figure 4
Global Presence Index 2014 (Olivé et al. 2015): countries ranked by influence (top ten).

Working on the simple assumption that if a country has global presence then its language does too, we can attempt to measure the influence of various languages by taking a total of the various GPI scores of the countries which use it. One problem with this approach is that a country may be influential without its language enjoying the same success. Histori-

¹² <http://www.globalpresence.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/faq>. Regarding the subtle relationship between presence and power, the same site states: "A country may have strong international projection and weak regional or global influence (or vice-versa). The relationship between presence and power depends on the foreign policy of each country (including its willingness to use power) or on factors limiting the exercise of influence, depending, for instance, on the presence of another regional leader."

cally, there have been many examples of influential countries or groups of people who have kept their language largely to themselves – e.g. the Phoenicians in antiquity (see Ostler 2010, p. 117). Out of the countries listed on Figure 4, the Netherlands stands out as an important nation whose language does not enjoy any notable degree of international status. Initially, the Netherlands' influence was largely due to trade and commerce. It was eventually overtaken by nearby Britain, its colonial, trading and maritime rival, and then by neighbouring Germany as regards industrial and therefore military might. The Netherlands has not thought to impose Dutch in its dealings with other countries around the world but has been content to use other languages (e.g. English, German and French) as and when expedient (the Phoenicians had a similar attitude to their language according to Ostler 2010). To some extent, the same thing is true of Japan and, at least until now, China. Both these countries are more reluctant to share their languages with outsiders according to Weber (1997, p. 22), who, comparing them with French, states:

No people are more acutely conscious of the long-term influence that knowledge of another language can have on its learners than the French. No other language is promoted so aggressively all over the world. The French clearly understand that their language is the main carrier of *la civilisation française*. Speakers of most other major languages think along similar lines. However, two major civilisations, the Chinese and to a lesser extent the Japanese, actually take the opposite attitude. They consider their civilisations so manifestly superior that pressing their language on foreigners was really doing them too much honour. They also tend to think their languages far too complex to be mastered by clumsy strangers, although they are far too polite to say so openly.

Even though, since 1972, Japan has promoted its language and culture throughout the world through the *Japan Foundation*, something China has also done with Chinese, since 2004, with its so-called *Confucius Institutes*, both seem resigned to using English as their main means of communicating with the outside world – and, tellingly, with each other.

That said, in most cases, the global presence of a country, or group of countries, does often increase the influence of their languages, as shown by Spanish. During the long decline of the Spanish Empire and its aftermath, it became very much a poor cousin to French, but in recent years has seen a gain in prestige as Spanish-speaking countries collectively and individually have grown in importance.¹³ Indeed, even if governments and institutions in countries like China and Japan are indifferent to how well known their languages are outside their territory, this does not stop people elsewhere in the world being increasingly curious about them and wanting to learn them as they perceive an advantage in doing so. With or without active promotion by Chinese or Japanese authorities, the number and prestige of Chinese and Japanese language courses and exams in schools and universities around the world has increased as these two countries' global presences have risen. Interest in Dutch has not however increased outside the Netherlands, which can be explained by the fact that the people of the Netherlands are renowned for being able to speak other languages well, especially English and German. The Netherlands indeed has been increasingly successful in recent years at attracting international students, including from the UK, to study at Dutch universities with English as the medium of instruction.

¹³ In an article published in the authoritative magazine *The Economist* it was argued that Spanish should replace French as an official language at the UN: "Languages of diplomacy. Toward A Fairer Distribution" (April 2, 2013).

Converting the figure for GPI for individual countries to those for languages is a simple matter of grouping countries according to language and combining their scores. Some countries are of course multilingual. Canada, in Figure 4, is an example of this. It is bilingual at a national level and English and French have equal legal status, meaning that one has to transfer the GPI score of Canada to English and French equally (50%). In other cases, for example India or Pakistan, the proportions between languages (English and Hindu / Urdu) were not equal and we had to estimate relative sizes as best as we could (Hindu / Urdu 75%, English 25%).¹⁴ Again, data on specific use of language within countries is often unreliable and we do not pretend that the figures we report are any more than approximate. On the whole, the statistics that we give below in Figure 5, give useful, if imprecise, indication of the status of various languages relative to each other, in particular their respective rankings, which is our priority here:

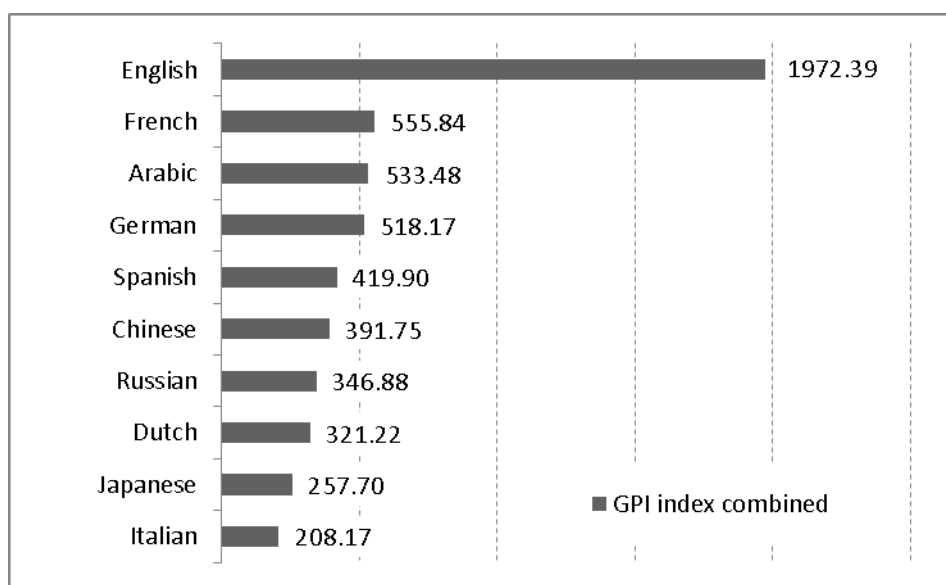


Figure 5

Global Presence Index 2014 re-calculated by combining scores for countries sharing a given language.

In Figure 5, the influence of English is clearly seen, as its GPI is just under the next four most influential languages *combined* (i.e. 2027.39), albeit with the caveat that the figures we give contain some estimates. Comparing the data with that on Figure 3 detailing Weber's study of most influential languages 17 years ago in 1997, three main areas of similar-

¹⁴ The numbers of English speakers in South Asia are difficult to estimate. Under the British Raj (from 1858-1947) English was the primary language for public administration and education. On independence (1947), Hindi took over as national language in India and as did Urdu (mutually intelligible with Hindi) in Pakistan (which then included what is now Bangladesh), and Sri Lanka (independent in 1948) by Sinhalese and Tamil, the latter at least initially. English continued to be used in all areas by the educated elite and in many levels of local government administration which were slow to make the switch to the new national idioms. Ironically, in some states of southern India in particular, there was opposition to Hindi (partly because of its associations with Hinduism) and English retained official status regionally as a neutral language of government and learning. Kachru (2005) argues that South Asian English should be recognised as a separate variety of English, the one indeed with most speakers (according to his estimates around 333 million or one in three Indians). Such a high figure is disputed; for example according to the India Human Development Survey 2005 (see Desai *et al.* 2010) somewhere in the region of 20-30% of the population of India can speak English to a varying degree of proficiency, including a wealthy well-travelled elite at one end of the spectrum, to impoverished barely literate users with limited ability at the other (see Aula: "The Problem With English in India" *Forbes Magazine*, June 11, 2014).

ity can be identified. Firstly, the dominant position of English is clearly marked on both rankings: over one third greater score than the next item for Weber, more than three-and-a-half times the next item for GPI, and would thus seem indeed to be growing. Secondly, the first two languages on both lists are English then French. Thirdly, eight out of ten languages feature on both lists: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish.

The position of languages relative to each other reflects geopolitical changes in the 17 years separating the two scales. For example Russian is fourth for Weber (1997) and eighth for *Elcano* GPI (2014), indicating that the Russian language has been decreasing in importance while others (e.g. Arabic, German) have been increasing. All in all however, there have been no dramatic rises or falls and the two lists, compiled in different ways, give very similar results.¹⁵ English is in a strong dominant position at the top of both lists and, below it, half a dozen or so other languages jockey for position. The picture then is one not of total supremacy of one world language but of a major world lingua franca with different layers of lingua francas¹⁶ below it. This is a situation described also by Weber (1997, p. 26). He speaks about a hierarchy of lingua francas with English as a global lingua franca and French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic as so-called inter-continental lingua francas, and Portuguese and German as continental ones.

In the next section, we will discuss the spread and importance of languages in non-territorial contexts which would include various discourse contexts and the internet. The latter provides an exciting forum in which to observe language use in almost real time and is potentially itself a major catalyst for the way that languages' relative positions in lingua franca hierarchies may change in the future.

3. Languages in non-territorial contexts

In this section, we will look at languages used in contexts that are not identifiable on a territorial or geographic basis. However, partly given the fluid nature of such contexts, hard data is often difficult to extract. In the subsections below, we look first (3.1) at data which is largely anecdotal and inductive in nature (i.e. making generalisations based on observation of a relatively few examples). In Section 3.2, we turn to so-called big data, where collection of a massive amount of information through observation of large internet platforms and social media allows one to identify and speculate about broad trends and to draw inferences about particular states of affairs.

¹⁵ The GPI is designed to reflect long term structural changes so differences between individual years are minor especially at the top end of the scale. The figures for 2014 are however anomalous because the UK leaps into second from third place, displacing Germany. According to the authors (Olivié *et al.* 2015, p. 10), this is because of a one-off massive payment of gold to Switzerland in 2013 which has created a distortion in the figures for 2014. In future reports, they expect the respective positions of the UK and Germany to revert to that of previous years.

¹⁶ The plural of *lingua franca* is problematic, because the expression's origins are unclear, as Ostler notes (2010, p. 7). It could come from either Latin (as a learned universal) or Italian (as a commercial vernacular used in the Mediterranean). In the former case, the plural would be *linguae francae*, in the second *lingue franche*. However, despite Ostler's objections (he advocates hyphenation: *lingua-francas*), the Anglicisation *lingua francas* is now widespread.

3.1 Anecdotal observation of language use around the world

Besides being associated with specific geographical territories, specific languages or varieties of them can be identified with specific contexts of language use, i.e. text types, genres and even registers.¹⁷ Indeed, in most, if not all cultures, specific accents or ways of speaking are associated with certain personality traits: for example, the upper class English accent of many Hollywood erudite but unscrupulous villains; or the use in Ancient Greece of different dialects for different literary genres: e.g. history in Ionic, tragedy in Attic, comedy in Attic or Doric.¹⁸

Around the world, English, despite its supremacy generally, does not dominate in every context of use. We have a situation then like that described by Ostler (see note above) with some languages sounding more natural than others in certain contexts, regardless of their influence elsewhere, and thus having an importance or even dominance in that particular discourse context. One example is Latin, a largely unknown language among the general populace today, which retains its associations (in its Ecclesiastical form) with the Church (particularly the Roman Catholic) and Christian religious ceremony and rituals in general. It is then no coincidence that, in her Harry Potter books, J.K. Rowling has characters use Latin when casting spells or reciting other magic formulae; the impression thus created is that such incantations are both ancient (dating back to classical times) and appropriately occult, as Latin itself has virtually become, in the sense of elite and mysterious (i.e. assessable only to a few initiates).

Other examples are of course other holy or sacred languages such as Biblical Hebrew, Church Slavonic, Quranic Arabic, Koine Greek, Pali, Sanskrit, or Tamil. One can also find specific languages (especially particular lexis drawn from them) used at more mundane levels in specific contexts across the world: Chinese and Japanese for martial arts; Sanskrit for yoga; French for formal diplomacy, gastronomy,¹⁹ ballet and some traditionally aristocratic pass-times such as fencing and certain card games and roulette; Italian for classical music and opera; Spanish and Portuguese for Latin music and dance.

An interesting example of this phenomenon is provided by Figure 6. A photo taken in Warsaw, Poland, (April, 2015) of the chalkboard price list in one of the many coffee bars (Green Coffee / Café Nero) in the arcade above the *Warszawa Centralna* railway station:

¹⁷ Halliday (1978, pp. 34-35) makes a distinction between *register* and *dialect* (the former being “variety according to the use”, the latter “variety according to the user”). He notes, however, that switching variety can be an aspect of register in diglossic contexts, so register can have a plurilinguistic dimension.

¹⁸ These examples are from Ostler (2010, pp. 55-60), who provides a much longer list of many more examples of varieties of different languages used instead of other varieties of the same language in specific contexts from across the globe and from various historical periods.

¹⁹ Typically, ethnic cuisine will retain at least some of its original lexis from the source language, e.g. from South Asia: *rogan josh*; chicken *biriyani*; lamb *dopiaza*; from Mexico: *chili* (often *chilli* in the UK) *con carne*; chicken *enchilada*, *doritos taco* salad; Russia: *borsch*; beef *stroganoff*; *kasha simenukha*.

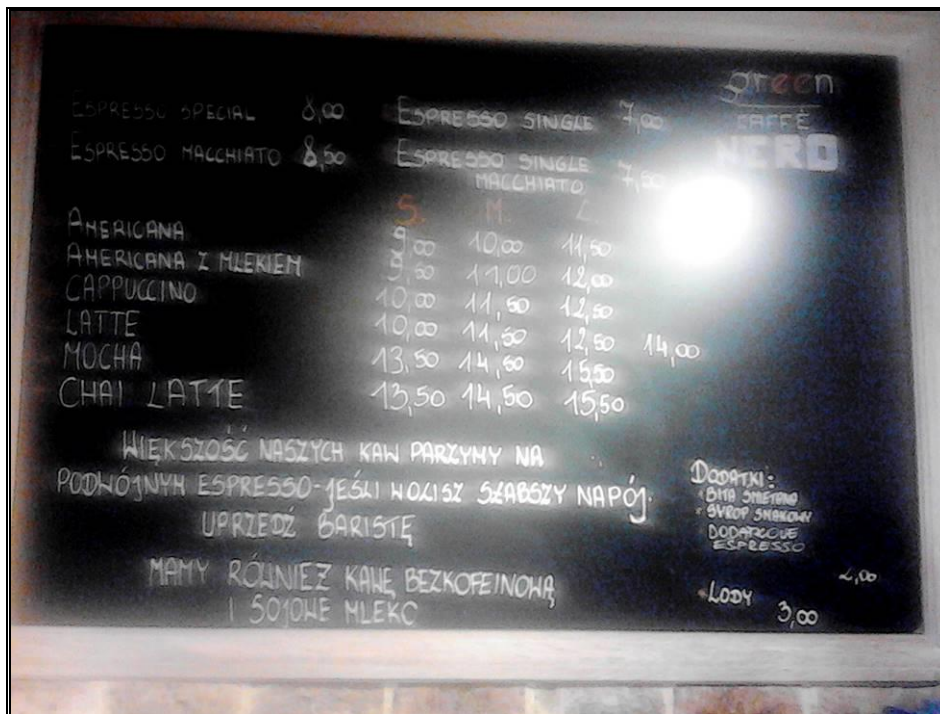


Figure 6
Coffee bar chalkboard price list Warsaw Poland (April, 2015).

What can be seen on this price board is a mixture of three languages: Polish, Italian and English, in that order. English contributes only two general terms, namely: *special* (“ESPRESSO SPECIAL” – top right) and *single* (“ESPRESSO SINGLE” – top centre). Italian by contrast contributes six terms all relating to the specific context of coffee bars (from top to bottom, left to right): *espresso*, *macchiato*, *americana* (which in Italian is usually masculine – *americano* – although the form *caffè all’americana*²⁰ also exists), *cappuccino*, *latte* and *baristę* (this latter conjugated to conform with Polish syntax).²¹ These same terms, we would venture, can be found on menu boards across the world in such establishments, especially franchises (as the one in our photo). Consequently, in this specific, non-territorial, context of language use (that of coffee bar menus), Italian, effectively serves as the lingua franca, not English.

Such uses of different languages in different contexts of use are very difficult to measure and quantify, but indirect evidence can be seen in the number of loan words introduced into English and *espresso* (or often the misspelled *expresso*), *macchiato*, *latte*,

²⁰ Which is presumably a shortened version of the expression *caffè alla maniera americana* (coffee, the American way).

²¹ There is also a term of indistinct international compound word: *chai latte*, a combination of Hindi / Persian / Turkish (*chai* – tea) and Italian (*latte* – milk). Indeed, it is arguable how Italian, *latte*, used in sense is. In Italy, the word means simply milk; in an international coffee bar context like that in the photo, it refers to a kind of extra milky cappuccino, not traditionally served in Italy. *Chai latte* is a variation of this but with *chai* (*Masala*) instead of coffee, and likewise is an innovation, attributed to Starbucks in the USA. In both cases, the use of lexis from languages more closely associated than English with such beverages, gives the drinks, like Harry Potter’s spells, an aura of both tradition and exoticism (the latter in an English speaking context, at least).

Americano (usually capitalised as adjectives derived from proper nouns are in English), and *barista* are all found in English. As the global lingua franca, English is often the means by which such terms from other languages are spread around the world. English could thus be seen as a carrier for such terms; if a local *barista* in a fashionable coffee bar in Thailand, Peru, Belarus or Senegal is able to understand what a client wants when they order a *macchiato*, they do so not through Italian *per se*, but through English as the vehicle for the spreading of such consumer trends worldwide.

3.2 Big data on internet language use

Another area where one can gain some idea of language use around the world on a non-territorial basis is on the internet. This also has the advantage that it can be gathered direct, almost in real time, without the need for questionnaires or surveys and all the problems which they entail. Furthermore, one is able to extract concrete figures, which contrast with the rather more anecdotal data from 3.1.

In Figure 7, we contrast the figures for the languages used on the internet in 2000 with those for 2013, according to figures published by the website *Internet World Stats*:²²

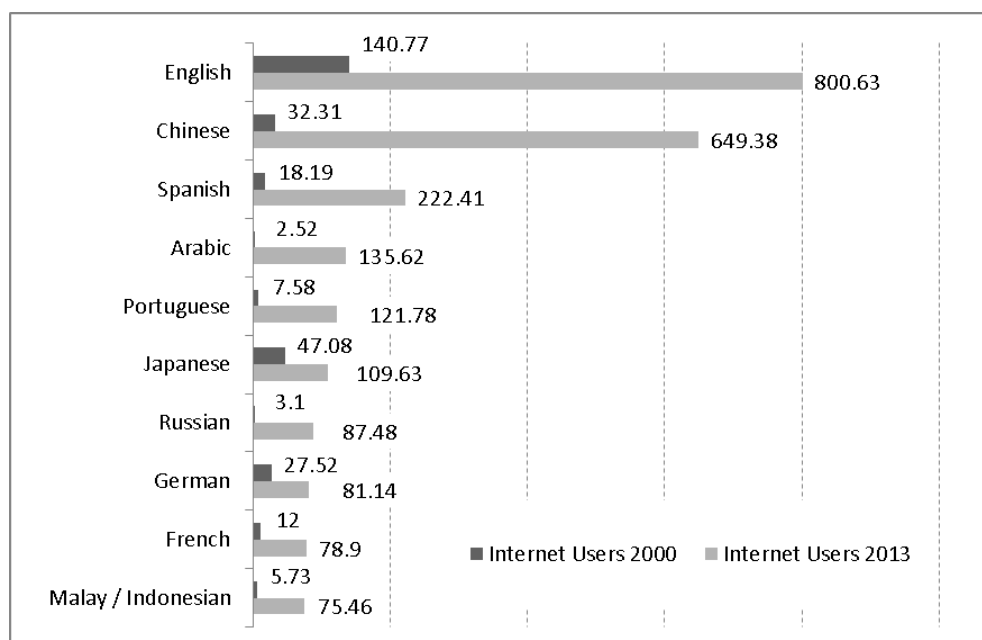


Figure 7

Internet users according to language (in millions) 2000-2013 according to *Internet World Stats*.

It can be seen that in 2013, English remains the most common language but other languages are increasing too. These figures have not been collected by direct analysis of internet or communications on it but rather by the indirect means of taking data for use of internet in each country and then estimating languages used on the basis of that – rather like we do above in Section 2.1, where we estimate the influence of languages on the basis of individual country's GPIs.

Looking at languages used in website content gives a clearer picture of what languages are actually used on the internet. This we do in Figure 8 using data from the w3techs.com website which updates its information daily:²³

²² <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

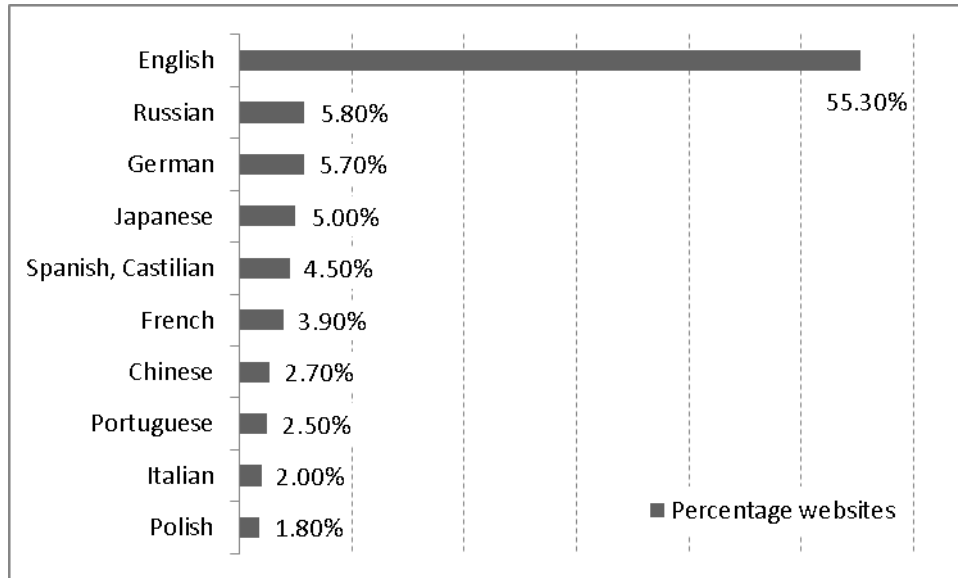


Figure 8

Percentages of websites using top ten content languages according to w3techs.com (June 26, 2015).

English is clearly the language most commonly used on internet sites followed by Russian, German, Japanese, Spanish and French. Chinese only comes in seventh place. The high figure for English (and perhaps for French, German and Spanish too) may be explained by the fact that most websites will have multilingual versions and one can imagine that it is the norm for a commercial website to also offer a version in English at least alongside the first language.

As regards languages other than English, the situation is very varied as shown when one looks at the policies of different railway companies in the same geographical area regarding which languages they make their websites available in. Comparing national railway websites in the area of Switzerland: the Swiss *SBB / CFF / FFS* site has versions in German, French, Italian and English; the Italian *Trenitalia*'s website has Italian, Chinese and English versions;²⁴ that for the French *SNCF*, French, English, and German; German *Die Bahn*: German, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Flemish, French, Italian, Polish, and Spanish; and Austrian *OBB* has German and English versions. It is interesting that there is a split between providing as many languages as possible for neighbouring or nearby countries, with the addition of English and Spanish²⁵ for those from elsewhere (*Die Bahn*) to providing only one general international language, namely English (*SBB / CFF / FFS*,²⁶ and *OBB*). *Trenitalia* and *SNCF* both offer a choice of international languages but, while the former is the only site in the sample to offer a non-European language (Chinese, with an eye no doubt to attracting as big a share as possible of the growing flow of tourists

²³ http://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language/all

²⁴ Since the time of writing, French and German versions have been added.

²⁵ Sweden, of course, does not border Germany (although it lies to the North off eastern Germany's Baltic coast) either but it would be stretching credulity to argue that Swedish was being used here as an International language comparable to English or Spanish.

²⁶ In Switzerland, German, French and Italian all count as local languages, of course.

from China), the latter offers German, presumably as a local regional lingua franca, together with English.²⁷

The inclusion of Polish (with only a total of just 39m speakers worldwide according to *Ethnologue*) in the top ten list in Figure 8 would no doubt surprise many as indeed would the absence of more important world languages such as Hindi / Urdu (in fact, each listed separately among the languages which account for less than 0.1% of web content). Firstly, it should be borne in mind that the occurrence of so many European languages may be a hangover from an early linguistic advantage on the internet enjoyed by those languages using the Roman script. Indeed, in the early years of the internet only Roman script was possible in domain names and in key parts of the URL (e.g. *.com*, *.org* etc.). This used to mean that even if site content was in another kind of script (e.g. Arabic, Cyrillic, Chinese, Hindi), the user still had to input some Roman characters to access the site. Such a situation would have favoured internet users who were familiar with the Roman alphabet and discouraged those who used other systems. Since 2007, this barrier has been removed making navigation much easier for those unfamiliar with the Roman script.

Another factor to be taken into account is not just number of speakers of a given language but how many people using that language also know and are prepared to use other languages when using the internet. In the case of Polish, the large amount of website content in that language may reflect the fact that internet use in Poland is particularly high and that Polish users prefer to use Polish.²⁸ One suspects that in the case of South Asian, where languages like Hindi / Urdu, Bengali or Lahnda (Punjabi) are spoken, the wide knowledge of English within these areas may mean that people may use it when on the internet and Kachru's (2005) analysis of South Asian English as an influential, "non-canonic" variety of English belonging not to the traditional Anglo-Saxon world but to the Indian subcontinent would support this view. In Figure 9, we show the data for website content for each of the ten languages with most speakers as listed on Figure 1:

²⁷ It is also interesting to note that no allowance is made for migrant languages or those of established ethnic minorities in Europe, among which Arabic would seem an obvious candidate given the number of people in Europe that follow Islam and thus who use Arabic as a religious lingua franca. The Pew Research Center in Washington (<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/muslims/>) estimated the Muslim population of Europe in 2010 to be 5.9% (or 43.5 million) of the total population of the region (743.5 million). While it is by no means certain that all those identified as Muslims are practicing or have more than a passing knowledge of Arabic, the potential number may be about as high as the number of L1 Polish speakers in Europe for example, and considerably larger than many national languages in the area (e.g. Greek, Finnish, Hungarian, Portuguese, or Swedish).

²⁸ Indeed, in Poland home-grown sites like *Nasza-Klasa* (established 2006) have consistently proved highly successful competitors to similar international services like *Facebook* (2004). Even today, *Nasza-Klasa* attracts 50% of Polish internet users.

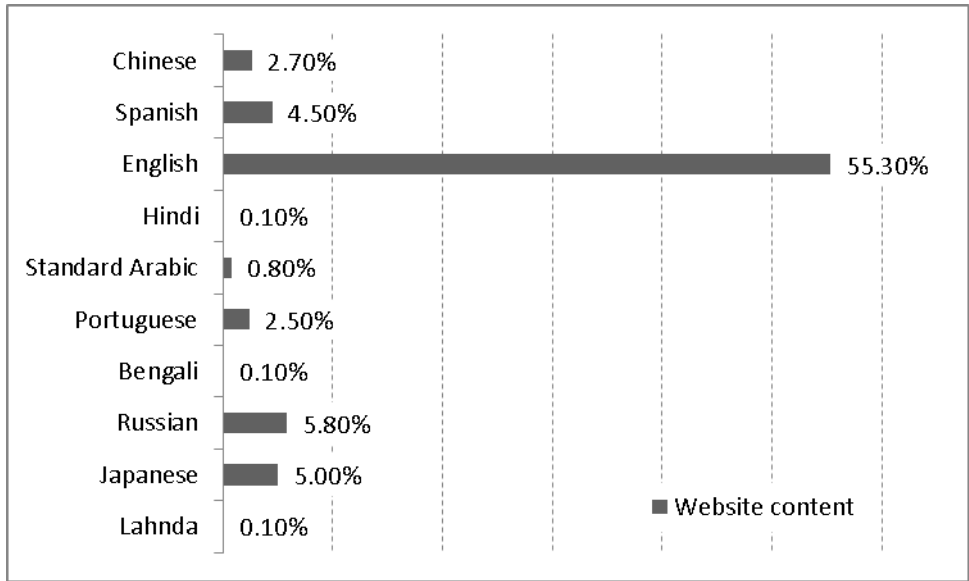


Figure 9

Percentages of websites using major spoken languages according to number of speakers according to w3techs.com (June 26, 2015).

This confirms that the languages used for website content are not necessarily the major languages according to number of speakers. Hindi and Arabic spoken by hundreds of millions of people have a very low presence on the internet, even though it would appear that the latter is increasing rapidly as we shall see below. The figures for Spanish and Chinese also seem low, especially in respect to Russian. One explanation may be that the volume of sites in a particular language does not give a direct indication of the number of people using that language on the internet. Perhaps, for example, in Chinese there are fewer sites, each used by many more people than for those in Russian (i.e. on average, a site in Chinese may conceivably attract many more visitors a day than one in Russian).

Figures 7 – 9 underline the fact that although many languages are present on the internet, English continues to dominate. It is often assumed that the internet promotes the use of English, which may have been true when the World Wide Web was first set up (1990) because it emerged out of the needs of academics and researchers in mainly English-speaking countries and institutions to communicate rapidly and share files and other data. As the internet became commercialised, it spread to the wider global community and the proportion of websites in English declined. Graddol (2006, p. 44) reports that:

In 1998, Geoff Nunberg and Schulze found that around 85% of web pages were in English. A study by ExciteHome found that had dropped to 72% in 1999; and a survey by the Catalan ISP VilaWeb in 2000 estimated a further drop to 68%. It seems that the proportion of English material on the internet is declining, but that there remains more English than is proportionate to the first languages of users. Estimates from the Latin American NGO Funredes suggest that only 8–15% of web content in English represents lingua franca usage. Although it is difficult to estimate how much content is in each of the major languages, these figures seem to be roughly correct.

Figures 8 and 9 confirm this trend with English only accounting for 55.3% of websites as compared to 68% fifteen years before. The general trend putting the figures quoted by Graddol together with the most recent ones from w3techs.com for 2014 and 2015²⁹ can be seen by putting the four onto a graph and calculating a trend line between them (Figure 10):

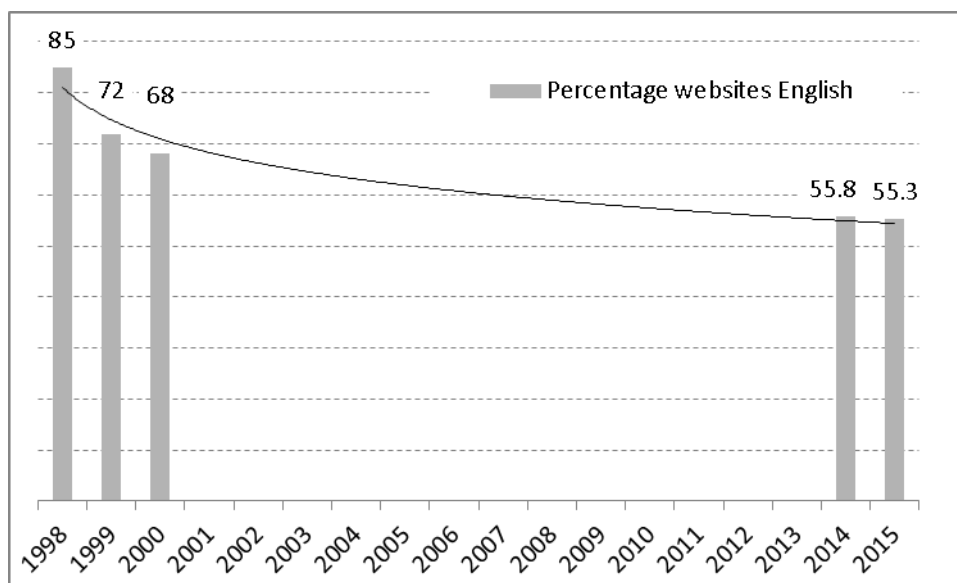


Figure 10

General trend for decline in use for English as percentage of websites using estimates of Nunberg and Schulze (1998), ExiteHome (1999), VilaWeb (2000) and w3techs.com (2014/15).

As can be seen, using a logarithmic trend line,³⁰ there is an obvious downward trend, which is however slowing.³¹ At the present rate, English will account for over 50% of the world's website content for another ten years at least. The reason for this may be that, even as websites are created in more and more languages catering for the growing community of internet users, English remains the default language for people who do not understand the site's original language (see our brief survey of European railway websites above). Therefore, as content in diverse languages increases, so, in the majority of cases does English, as a spin off so-to-speak.

It is however clear that the use of English for content on websites is in decline. The reason for this is not necessarily the advent of competitors as regional or global lingua francas on the internet (see for example the selection of languages other than English on the railway websites). Rather, it may be due to changes in the way that people typically use the internet. Although the name World Wide Web emphasises the potentialities for global communication of the kind that Berners-Lee and his colleagues envisaged in the

²⁹ Unfortunately w3techs.com only provides data from 2014 onwards.

³⁰ As opposed to a straight trend line, which would present a uniform rate of decline evened out over time, thus exaggerating the general downward tendency.

³¹ Indeed, the trend is not limited to English at least in the past year. Of the ten languages listed on Figure 8, all but three showed a decrease between June 2014 and June 2015 (w3techs.com). English and German were -0.004%, Chinese -0.003% Japanese, Spanish, French and Russian -0.001%, Polish stayed the same, and Italian and Portuguese were +0.002%. That individual languages are losing their share like this may be indicative of the fact that specific languages are on the rise (however none of the languages outside the top ten which account for more than 0.1% of website content increased more than 0.002% in the same period) and that more languages are being represented on the internet all the time.

late 1980s, actual use by ever increasing numbers of “ordinary people”³² using the net may be distinctly parochial; computerised devices have become cheaper, more powerful and more user-friendly and people of all kinds now use the internet habitually, increasingly through small portable devices such as tablets and smartphones, to conduct their daily business such as checking timetables, booking appointments or online banking. Naturally, such activities are done in the local language,³³ bearing in mind however that many languages and varieties may have no written form,³⁴ thus forcing the user to use some local or national standard or a lingua franca.

It is not so much that the internet is becoming less global – as long as globalisation continues, that aspect will always exist – but that, such is its power as a means of communication, that it is now the dominant medium at all levels: local, regional, national and international. Consequently, the global level accounts for a smaller share of activity on it. In a sense, the internet has always been used for different territorial levels of communication, but because the countries that were pioneers of the internet were mainly English speaking, with the USA dwarfing the others in terms of numbers of users, this distinction was hidden by the fact that at all levels – local, regional, national, etc. – English predominated.

Returning to the data from *Internet World Stats*, they provide figures on the growth of internet users according to language (calculated as we explain above by measuring increase in individual territories and extrapolating from this data the increase in corresponding languages). In Figure 11, we show how much use in different world regions has increased between 2000 and 2013:

³²According to *Internet World Stats* for internet usage December 31, 2014, Mid-Year Update (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>), an estimated 42% of the world’s population currently have access to the internet. By world region this figure breaks down as: Africa 27.5%; Asia 34.8%; Europe 70.4%; Middle East 48.1%, North America 86.9%; Latin America / Caribbean 52.4%; and Oceania / Australia 72.1%. Between 2000 and 2015 the number of internet users worldwide has increased by 75.3%, much more in any of the individual regions (see note below).

³³ People are also using so-called social media and instant messaging services almost continuously but the people they are communicating with via the World Wide Web tend to be friends and relations in the same geographical area. To our knowledge, no hard data yet exists for these kinds of uses.

³⁴ *Ethnologue* notes that of the 7,105 living languages only 3,570 have a writing system. Even among those that do, the system may have fallen into disuse. *Ethnologue* concludes (<http://www.Ethnologue.com/enterprise-faq/how-many-languages-world-are-unwritten>): “We have data to indicate that 696 languages are unwritten. And for the remaining 2,839 languages we have no data.”

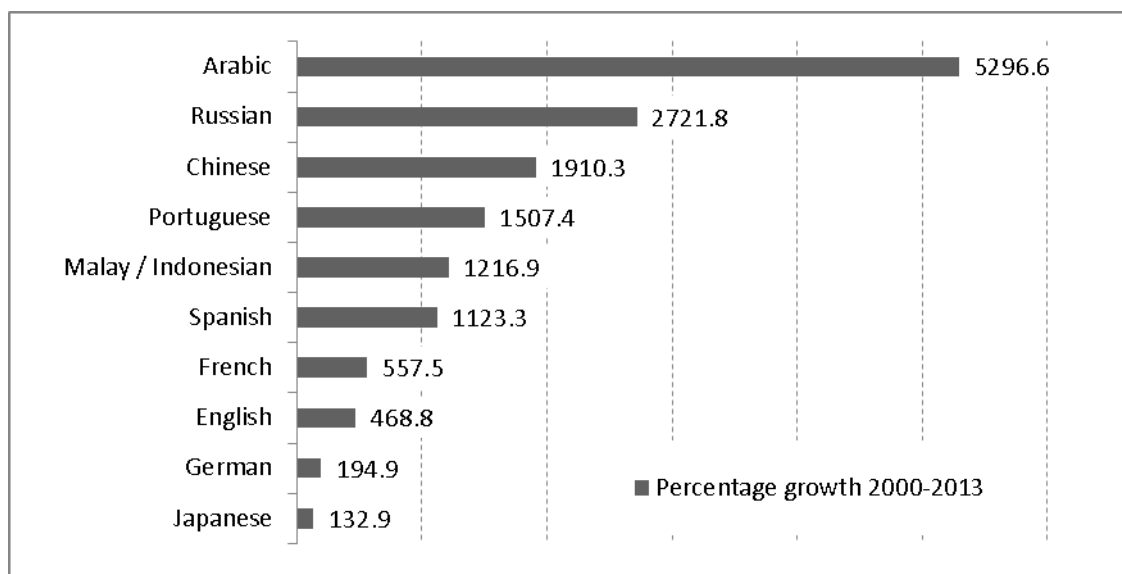


Figure 11

Increase in internet users according to language (in millions) 2000-2013 according to *Internet World Stats*.

From 2000-2013 the amount of English used on the internet rose but its growth was relatively modest (but the initial figure was already high): less than seven other languages, including French and Portuguese. The rise in the use of Arabic, Russian, Chinese and Portuguese was dramatic, but the fact that, until 2007, languages that do not use Roman scripts were disadvantaged to a degree (see above) may account partly for the low starting figure. Of the regions of the world, in the same period, it is revealing to look at the rise in internet use (from 2000 to 2015) by world regions (Figure 12).

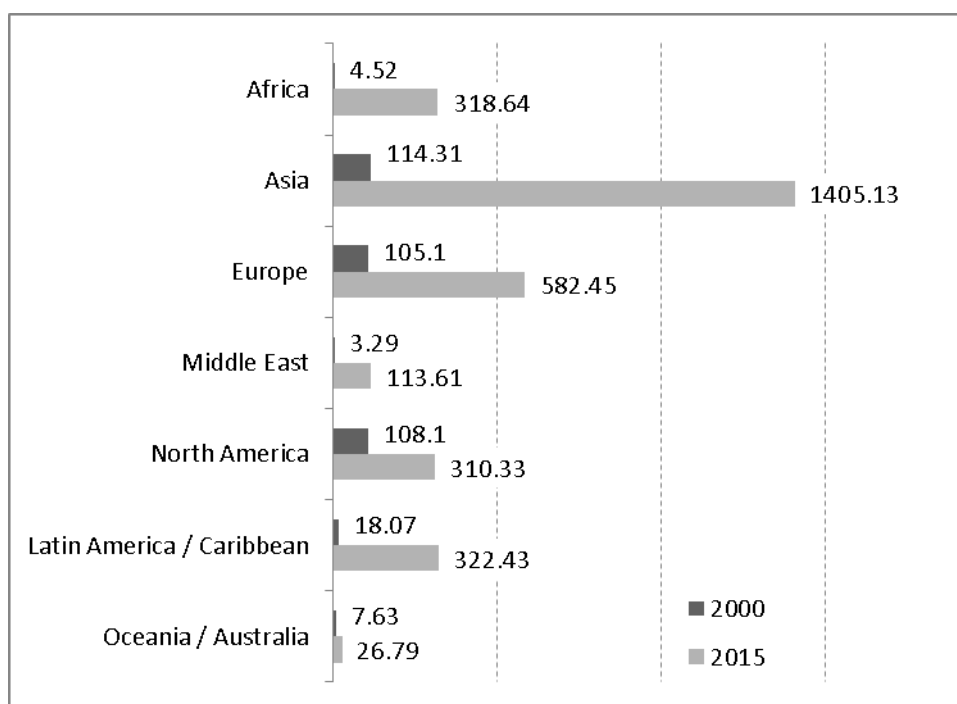


Figure 12

Increase in number of users of internet in millions (rounded to nearest 10,000) by world region 2000-2015 according to *Internet World Stats*.

At present, the parts of the world with the most internet users are, in order, Asia, Europe, Latin America / Caribbean, Africa, North America, the Middle East, and Oceania / Australia. This contrasts sharply with the situation 15 years ago when the regions with most users were Asia, then North America, Europe, followed by a wide margin by Latin America / Caribbean, Oceania / Australia, the Middle East then Africa.³⁵ This accounts for the rise in languages such as Arabic (the Middle East), French (Africa), Portuguese (Latin America / Caribbean) Chinese and Malay /Indonesian (Asia). English has no doubt benefited from growth in some of these areas too, notably Africa and Asia (and it is interesting to see that languages from South Asia present on Figure 1 – Hindi, Bengali, Lahnda – are absent from Figure 11, suggesting once again that in these areas English is widely used on the internet instead of traditional languages).

Overall, the data that we have discussed in Figures 7 – 12 show that, for the foreseeable future, English's position as the most influential language is secure and that, while a number of languages are increasing in importance, no single one of them seems set to break away from the pack and emerge as a direct rival to English.

4. Global language networks

The picture that emerges in the previous section is of a hierarchy of lingua francas with English at the top occupying the position of what Weber (1997) calls the global lingua franca. This poses two questions: firstly, what is the relationship between the languages used at lower levels? And, secondly, are any of them more prominent as L2s? If the latter were true, it may indicate that they may increase in importance internationally, that is, gain influence outside of their L1 speech communities, or indeed outside the territorial regions or non-territorial contexts with which they are traditionally associated.

As the above sections make clear, gathering data to investigate such a matter is difficult, but here too examination of so-called big data can be illuminating. In a recent study into how the languages that a person uses influence their chances of achieving global fame entitled *Links that speak: The global language network and its association with global fame*, Ronen *et al.* (2014) look at languages, not in isolation but collectively, that is to say, at how they are connected to one another through bilingualism or translation.

Questions of fame apart, this is interesting for our discussion here because the authors of this paper are able to draw up detailed charts of connections between languages and thus indicate which are more isolated or peripheral and which are more central. The latter are better positioned within so-called Global Language Networks (GLN), and serve in effect as *hubs* (to use an analogy with air travel and in particular airports).

Ronen *et al.* do this in three ways: firstly, they consider book translations (using the UNESCO database of translated books 1979-2011, which contains over 2.2m works); secondly, they look at the different languages used by individual *Wikipedia* editors, their argument being that a bilingual who edits articles in two languages strengthens the bond between those two languages; finally, they analyse use of different languages by individu-

³⁵ Expressed as percentages the growth between 2000 and 2015 is, for Africa, 6,958.2%; for Asia 1,129.3%; Europe 454.2%, Middle East 3,358.6%, North America 187.1%; Latin America / Caribbean 1,684.4%; Oceania / Australia 251.6%.

al users on *Twitter*. Here, they reasoned that users who tweeted at least six full sentences in an L2 strengthened the bond between their L1 and that language.

The authors admit that their approach limits itself to an educated elite, as in many countries only a small proportion of the population use the media that they observe. The main finding of the paper is that people are most likely to become truly world famous only if they speak at least one of the most networked or hub languages.

As regards translations, the data presented by Ronen *et al.* (2014, p. 2, Figure 1) show that, in the period examined (1979-2011), the two most central languages are English and Russian, each forming its own hub. Russian is linked mainly to central and eastern European and central Asian and Siberian languages (the ex-Soviet Union and the ex-Communist block) and English to the rest of the world with French, Spanish and German forming sub-hubs (so-to-speak). Other languages that have strong links to English, but which are not themselves hubs, are languages like Japanese and many central European ones such as Polish, Czech (also linked to Russian) and the Scandinavian languages (which are also linked to each other). Chinese also forms a separate hub in the manner of Russian but with a more restricted range of links mainly to other languages from China and also to Vietnamese and Romanian.

It is striking that the data reflects very much the geopolitics of the Cold War era (a period in which China in particular still followed a policy of isolation) and leads one to question why the changes of recent years (e.g. the fall of the Berlin Wall, the opening up of China, the enlargement of the EU, the rise of the so-called BRICS) are not reflected. One explanation may be that, with the rise of English especially in academic and scientific discourse, and the greater prestige in many systems given to works published abroad or in English, fewer and fewer academic books are being translated because they are being produced directly in English even when the author is a non-native speaker writing for a non-native audience.

Turning to their examination of *Wikipedia* editors (Ronen *et al.* 2014, p. 2, Figure 1), the centrality of English is much starker. It forms the hub for virtually every language with only a few (such as Russian, Italian, French and Spanish) constituting sub-hubs. When they do, they are often connected to lesser spoken regional varieties and languages, such as Italian to Venetian, Friulian, Sardinian or Ligurian. In by far the majority of cases, when an editor works with two languages, one of them will be English. In this analysis, English is even more central than in the book translations, and it is interesting that there are also some direct links between English and even some regional varieties of other languages (e.g. Sicilian, Lombard, Reggio Emilian – meaning that some editors working in these dialects work also in English, and not, or considerably less so, in Standard Italian).

The analysis of *Wikipedia* also produces a more exotic range of languages than does that of book translations – but the former reflects the diverse backgrounds and intellectual interests of the individual *Wikipedia* editor and the latter the demands of the publishing industry and its tastes in translation.³⁶ Generally, European languages (and even regional varieties of said) seem to dominate over Asian ones like Hindi or Chinese. The low figure for the latter is no doubt due to the existence of a home-grown Chinese collaborative encyclopaedia: *Baidu Baike*.

Finally, regarding the data taken from the languages used by *Twitter* users (Ronen *et al.* 2014, p. 2, Figure 1), a similar picture to the data from *Wikipedia* emerges but with a more restricted selection of languages, among which there are also fewer lesser spoken ones or regional varieties. Again, English sits as the hub in the centre of the network, and

³⁶ For a well-known critique of its workings in English-speaking countries see Venuti (1995).

around it, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese and Malay appear to be sub-hubs. The most closely connected languages to English are Spanish and Portuguese (which may reflect the popularity of the medium in the Americas). Asian languages, like Japanese, Korean, Thai, Filipino, Malay and Vietnamese would seem to play a more prominent part in this network, but again, Hindi's and Chinese's roles appear only minimal considering their status as the languages with respectively the largest and fourth largest numbers of speakers in the world (see Figure 1). The peripheral nature of Chinese, with links only to English, Korean and Japanese would seem to be due to the fact that, as with *Wikipedia*, there exists a Chinese alternative to *Twitter*: *Sina Weibo*.

5. Conclusions

In answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article, it is clear that English is the most influential world language, with no clear rivals, and has enjoyed in the last twenty years – the period since the end of the cold war, the advent of globalisation, and the internet – sustained dominance. There remain however some specific discourse contexts where other languages may find a niche. Sometimes these are historical, e.g. the role of Latin in Christian religious discourse; sometimes they are more recent: the use of Italian internationally in coffee bars. This shows that globalisation has brought not only a taste for the English but also for other comparatively exotic languages. Undoubtedly, English has become a familiar and convenient lingua franca, whose continued use owes more to habit than to the economic dominance of Anglo-Saxon countries – the reason cited by Chevillet in the quotation in Section 1.0.

One contributing factor is the fact that, as evidenced repeatedly by the data discussed here, important nations like those in South Asia, particularly India (a giant in so many respects) seem to have adopted English enthusiastically not just as an international lingua franca but also as a local regional one too (see Kachru 2005). Another factor is that China, the one nation that seems capable of challenging US dominance as an economic power, also seems content to respect the linguistic *status quo* and adopt English in its dealings with the wider world and its close neighbours (e.g. Japan).

While it is reckless to make specific predictions about the direction of the world economy or its geopolitical shape in the next fifty years or more, one identifiable trend seems to be that the most influential global powers will either be formal blocs of countries like the EU, NAFTA, ASEAN, Mercasur, COMESA, or more informal groupings such as BRICS, or what some people are now calling *Chermany*,³⁷ not single nations like the USA or the Soviet Union. Such entities will for the most part be multilingual entities in themselves and have to adopt lingua francas for their own functioning.³⁸ Among the BRICs (i.e. Brazil, Russia, India, and China) for example, English would seem to be the least controversial choice as a lingua franca, as indeed it has proved to be in post-colonial South Asia.

³⁷ China and Germany, the power houses respectively of Asia and Europe, which depend economically on each other to a large degree and together may challenge US dominance – see Olivié *et al.* 2015.

³⁸ While the EU has 24 official languages, the European Commission (its executive branch) uses only English, French and German as day-to-day working languages; by contrast, APEC has adopted English as its sole official language.

Ostler, however, rejects this analysis and argues that technology will make English “The Last Lingua Franca” and that, in the future, phenomena like machine or computer-assisted translation will mean that people will be able to communicate using their own L1s with anyone they like from any other part of the world. He says (2010, p. 261):

It is possible to look ahead into the dynamically improving, and enriching, world of interlingual electronic media. Just as the print revolution — and various other social revolutions associated with urbanization — changed the ground rules of communication among Europeans in the sixteenth century, so modern electronic. Technology, if it follows its current path, is set to change the ancient need for a single lingua-franca for all who wish to participate directly in the main international conversation. In brief, if electronics can remove the requirement for a human intermediary to interpret or translate, the frustrations of the language barrier may be overcome without any universal shared medium beyond compatible software. Recorded speeches and printed texts will become virtual media, accessible through whatever language the listener or speaker prefers.

Ultimately, and perhaps before too long — say by the middle of the twenty-first century — everyone will be able to express an opinion in his or her own language, whether in speech or in writing, and the world will understand.

Even if such a thing becomes technologically possible – and so far developments in computer-assisted translation and artificial speech have been full of false dawns – it is nonetheless doubtful that human beings will want to delegate communication with people of other languages to digital devices as enthusiastically as they gave up mental arithmetic for electronic calculators.

Language is a fundamental attribute of human beings and of human society, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) puts it: “Qui dit homme dit langage, et qui dit langage dit société”. Consequently, a lot of prestige is accorded to it in all cultures, even monolingual ones. Good speakers, or writers, traditionally attain important positions and high status; inarticulate people are often dismissed on that basis alone as dim-witted. People able to speak two or more languages naturally enjoy an advantage over other people who speak fewer because they have the opportunity to acquire more information from diverse sources, more quickly. They can also make personal and business contacts outside their own restricted linguistic group (which is why totalitarian regimes have typically been suspicious of anyone with a wider than usual linguistic repertoire). Indeed, when such contacts include procreation, there is a distinct evolutionary advantage too.

The fact that being plurilingual and being able to use different languages from one’s repertoire to *translanguage* (García and Wei 2014) has distinct advantages is shown by the amount of money that people are prepared to invest in learning other languages, English as well as other diverse ones,³⁹ even more so ironically now that being able to speak English is so common that it is increasingly no longer a mark of distinction.⁴⁰ Furthermore, on the commercial side, if people were only interested in being able to communicate, then perhaps there would be more, and better paid, work for interpreters and indeed greater demand for the still nascent technology.

³⁹ To quote Weber (1997, p. 27): “In Hong Kong I once talked to a taxi driver and congratulated him on his excellent English. He said that he could not do without English on his job but that he now wanted to learn French even if he had little practical use for it. He wanted to learn it for its social prestige.”

⁴⁰ Graddol (2006, p. 122): “Early adopters expect to gain competitive advantage from learning English. This applies whether a decision is made at an individual, organisational or national level. English skills, in a context where they are in short supply, give competitive advantage. However, as English becomes more generally available, little or no competitive advantage is gained by adopting it. Rather, it has become a new baseline: without English you are not even in the race.”

It goes without saying that there is much more to language than the simple transmission of data in the form of ideas, notions and concepts. Halliday (1985) famously, ascribed four metafunctions to language – the ideational (the content); the textual (the form); and the interpersonal (the participants and their relationship) – and it is difficult to see how technology can ever fulfil the last of these, precisely because it constitutes a barrier or at best a filter between the participants. To an extent, this is true even of conventional translation or interpreting, but a translator may choose to strive for invisibility (as Venuti 1995 calls it), that is, fooling the readers into believing that the translation is in fact the “original”, and interpreters generally try to remain as unobtrusive as possible, being either hidden away in booths, or sitting discretely behind the interlocutors.

The interpersonal aspect is so important because the languages that we speak and the way that we speak them are also closely tied up with our own self-identification and in the way that we are perceived by others. People value being able to communicate with other people directly and in real time, without the need for intermediaries such as interpreters or technology, because the very act of communication exists to enable the performance of a whole range of speech acts (see Austin 1962), which often depend on our using our own wits and speaking skills to establish or maintain some kind of relationship with the interlocutor. Even today, when much cheaper alternatives exist, enterprises still spend vast amounts of money flying people around the world to physically attend meetings and meet contacts when much of the factual communication could be done via email or by some form of teleconferencing. Furthermore, although human interpreting is a long established art and interpreting services are widely used, it is used normally only in more formal contexts. On the fringe of meetings, conferences and the like, the ability to “network” directly with people even by means of a less than perfect command of a given language is a much-valued skill in its own right.

Given this state of affairs, which has existed for literally millennia and has become engrained in the human psyche, we consider it unlikely that people would want to stop learning and using other languages, even if the technology made the need redundant. We can well imagine that people will, at times, find technology convenient, but believe that they will mostly prefer to rely on their own resources when they can.

Indeed, we disagree with the idea that English will be “The Last Lingua Franca” not only because it assumes that technology will make lingua francas obsolete (which is how Ostler intends the phrase to be interpreted) but also because we see no reason to suppose that English will remain the dominant global language forever.

At present, as our various studies have shown, it is difficult to identify any individual pretenders to English’s title. By sheer numbers of speakers, Chinese, Spanish and Hindi / Urdu would seem obvious candidates, but examination of these languages’ influence or their positions in global language networks shows that they have a lot of ground to make up before they can be seen as realistic challengers. Furthermore, there is no evidence at the moment that users of these or any other languages have any inclination to unseat English as the world’s lingua franca.

The continued dominance of English will of course have an effect on the nature itself of English: and it is already clear that it has not been able to colonise every corner of the world without undergoing itself profound changes. Such concerns are the subject mainly of studies into ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) which examine the ways that variations of English come about when it is used as a means of communication between

speakers of languages other than English (i.e. between non-native speakers).⁴¹ Such studies have shown not only that numerous versions come about (each very much specific to the context of use and the linguistic repertoires of the participants, their socio-cultural backgrounds) and that increasingly these versions are becoming endo- rather than exo-normative (i.e. they no longer take their norms from standard or native speaker varieties of English but seem to develop their own).⁴²

In particular, it seems clear that, in a rapidly changing world, which in recent years has seen a tilting of economic power towards Asia (away principally from Europe), Asian languages (including South Asian English if Kachru 2005 is to be believed) will gain in influence and the same thing conceivably may happen to languages used in Africa (including not just indigenous ones but also English, French and Arabic) or in Latin America if these areas gain in economic influence. Such a trend is barely visible in the analyses of Ronen *et al.* (2014) but this may be because they happen to be looking in the wrong places (i.e. book translations, *Wikipedia* and *Twitter*). It would certainly be good to look at other studies of this kind conducted in a wider variety of contexts and social media and at regular intervals thus allowing one to spot trends. Kachru's study of South Asian English indicates that, in South Asia at least, a local variety of English is gaining ground, and is being used instead of traditional South Asian languages in such contexts. Ronen *et al.* (2014) do not distinguish between different varieties of English (and indeed it may in any case be more difficult to do so with written language than it would be with the spoken), if such a thing were attempted in future studies, then some light would be shed on this point.

The above scenario supposes, rather simplistically – as if linguistic dominance were a simple competition between different players – that English will be replaced by another language, while in fact the process may rather be one of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) slowly transforming into a different, new language.⁴³ English is already a language that has absorbed many elements from other languages, such as grammatical features and lexis.⁴⁴ It is perfectly conceivable that, as in the past Old English (Anglo Saxon) took elements from Norse and then Norman French (as well as, according to McWhorter (2008), significant parts of its syntax from Welsh and Cornish), ELF will assimilate elements principally from other lingua francas lower down the list of influential languages. Such a thing can be seen in the case of Italian expressions used in the coffee bar setting which are spread around the world largely through English. It is also evident in the way that pronunciation of non-native speakers seems to be increasingly oriented towards the achievement of intelligibility rather than the imitation of a native-speaker accent *per se* (see Jenkins 2000; Christiansen 2011, 2014).

McWhorter (2007) also notes how languages with many speakers, like English, Chinese and Spanish, which have spread beyond their original borders, and have been learnt historically by many adult non-native speakers (as happens when languages expand

⁴¹ On the different fundamental nature of ELF compared to native speaker English see Christiansen (forthcoming).

⁴² See Kachru (2005), Seidlhofer (2011).

⁴³ Another scenario, discussed by McArthur (1998) and Crystal (2003), will be that English will split up into separate languages, as Latin eventually did into the Romance languages of today. Given the interconnected nature of the world in this period of globalisation, and the fact that non-territorial uses of language are becoming more important, we believe that although different varieties and variations may continue to exist and new ones emerge, except in a few extreme cases, a level of mutual intelligibility will always exist allowing one to treat them all as part of the same language.

⁴⁴ McWhorter (2008) goes so far to entitle his book on the history of English *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*.

through conquest or trade) tend to undergo simplification.⁴⁵ On the basis of this, one may predict that a future global lingua franca, apart from being less “English” than ELF is now, will also be simpler in terms of morphology and syntax.⁴⁶

In this process, ELF will be less closely associated with traditional English speaking countries (as Kachru 2005 describes in his study of Asia) and will reflect a multipolar world where languages in general, like populations, have become less associated with specific territories.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the relationships between languages, as illustrated in Ronen *et al.*'s (2014) Global Language Networks, will become more interconnected, and more elastic, and in some ways technology may play a part in this with things like instant translation for unfamiliar words or expressions. In this way, the dominance of English, increasingly in the form of ELF, does not constitute an unstoppable advance towards monolingualism, but rather a general trend towards greater plurilingualism⁴⁸ on the part of individual speakers and of linguistic mixing and interdependence of languages within one global system.

⁴⁵ Arabic is an apparent exception to this, but it must be remembered that, for many Muslim scholars, the Quran (Koran) should be treated as a divine revelation, in which form is just as important as content. Because of this, it is usually studied and read in its original form, even though transliterations or translations may be consulted to assist interpretation. For this reason, written Arabic based on classical Quranic Arabic remained largely resilient to simplification as the language spread.

⁴⁶ Such a process does not have to involve pidginisation, where the language's structure and lexis is stripped down to its core and used as a means for non-native speakers (by definition a pidgin has no native speakers) to improvise communication of basic ideas between each other. Rather it will be more like creolisation where the language loses some redundant elements (very possibly the third person singular *s* or the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds in English) and absorbs elements from other languages, also the L1s of the participants, in a more rationalised and creative (and generative) manner. Such a language may indeed be the L1 of some speakers (and thus not a pidgin), especially because, as it becomes established, more and more children will grow up bilingual in it and learn to use it in a sophisticated manner.

⁴⁷ Undoubtedly many lesser spoken languages will find no place in this new linguistic order and will become extinct, which to the chagrin of linguists is already a frequent occurrence. Language death indeed is an almost inevitable consequence of globalisation and even subtle changes in the social structure, to say nothing of wars or natural disasters can spell the end of a language (see Crystal 2002 / 2003, Abley 2003). Language death is due not to the rise of any one particular language but rather to the fact that all communities are becoming less isolated, more urbanised and social mobility is increasing.

⁴⁸ Which is an aspect highlighted in a recent, very interesting paper by Jenkins (2015) where she argues that ELF should be retheorised as a Multilingua Franca.

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