

English as an Asian Language

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Three Options to Asia's Lingua Franca

In *The Future of English?* (The British Council, 1997), David Graddol suggests three options for English as the lingua franca* of Asia. First, it might keep this role indefinitely. Second, it might be supplanted by Mandarin. Third, there might not be any Asian lingua franca.

Which option is most likely? But before trying to answer that question it might be good to check what Graddol and other commentators mean by 'Asia' and also consider the uses to which Asians put such languages as English and Chinese. After all, 'Asia' isn't a simple concept. Some commentators on Asia focus on the East, others on the South. For Americans, 'Asians' tend to be Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans; for the British, they tend to be Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis. West Asia is a large region, but it is seldom so called, being more commonly known, notably in English in an old Eurocentric way, as the 'Near' and 'Middle' East. Central and North Asia tend to be left out of most discussions about English in the continent, yet these vast regions include much of Russia and all the '-stans' (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, etc.).

I would argue that the situation of English and of other languages is different in each of these regions.

To demonstrate this it may be useful to look at Chinese first, because it *is* the largest language in the world and might well be competing with English in Asia. Yet, if so, the evidence is hard to find, and it is also difficult to find a need for Chinese as a lingua franca, despite its size and significance, beyond East Asia. Chinese has little impact on Russia and the -stans, and no role at all in South and West Asia. In addition, there are two other comparable large Asian language complexes: Hindi-Urdu in India and Pakistan, and Arabic in West Asia. Both have worldwide diasporas, but even so both are largely centred on their region, in much the same way as Mandarin. Arabic, Hindi-Urdu, and Mandarin Chinese are large and will keep growing regionally, but none is likely to serve as a pan-Asian lingua franca, and speakers of these languages often also learn and use English.

With the decline of Communism, Russian has lost ground in Asia in recent decades, most notably in China, and English appears to be filling the vacuum it has left, in both China and the -stans. The shrinkage of Russian has in fact served to extend the use of English, which formerly had little significance in North and Central Asia. In addition, ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations) has since its creation in 1967 used English as its working language, and currently also uses it in its increasingly important discussions with China, Japan, and other Asian territories.

Evolution of English as Lingua Franca

A key reason, of course, for the use of English as an Asian lingua franca is its use as the world's lingua franca. Both roles are likely to continue expanding: in the air, by sea, in the media, in telecommunications, and so forth. Asia does, however, differ from other continents in having no large native English-speaking population base, but at the same time it has had a long acquaintance with English as the key medium of first the British Empire then the United States (itself an offspring of that empire). Indeed, since the Second World

War, instead of contracting as the Empire contracted, English has expanded beyond both its native and settler communities into non-native areas everywhere: beyond the UK into mainland Europe, beyond North America into Latin America, and beyond both the UK and the US in Asia. Such momentum has been strengthened by at least two social factors: first, the efforts of ministries of education worldwide to provide English-as-a-second-language programmes for their school populations; second, the determination of millions of non-native-speaking parents to get English for their children from the earliest possible age, with or without state help.

There are few indigenous mother-tongue English communities in Asia, and those that exist are small. Yet, paradoxically, they have been significant in extending the use of the language. Such communities have in the main been Christian, and have tended to create denominational school systems in which English has been the medium of instruction. Because of a widespread parental pressure for English-medium education, and the readiness of such schools to accept students from other social groups (usually without proselytizing, but also without compromising, and often needing the numbers to survive), these communities have had an influence far beyond their size, first within the Empire, then because of a disproportionate influence on education, social life, and careers in post-imperial nation-states.

The largest community has been Anglo-Indian, whose mainly Protestant school networks have served as a homogenizing factor in India from north to south, contributing to a more or less national style of speech (and to English-language media), and often being identified as the medium of an envied elite. A similar community, referred to in the subcontinent as 'Goan' and 'East Indian', consists of descendants of converts to Roman Catholicism in Portuguese colonies such as Goa and (in origin) Bombay/Mumbai. This community has been the base for what have come to be known as 'convent schools', notably for well-to-do girls of all backgrounds, who are often described in marriage ads (with an upmarket effect) as 'convent-educated'.

Current Situations

South Asians with this inheritance, whatever their religious backgrounds, have had a further influence on English teaching, learning, and usage not only in the subcontinent but also in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Hong Kong, and Fiji, localities in all of which expatriate South Asians can be found in significant numbers. Whereas the original impulse behind these Anglo-Indian/East Indian schools was British English, a parallel community of converts to Roman Catholicism has grown up in the Philippines, which was first a Spanish then an American colony.

* lingua franca: a language, usually in a simplified, adapted, or specialized form, used as a means of communication among groups of people who do not have a common language

Because American teachers of English only began to arrive in the Philippines around 1900, Filipinos have had a shorter experience of the language than the peoples of the Asian successor states to the British Empire, but even so their experience has been profound. As a result, Indians, Filipinos, and other national groups have become part of a range of users of 'Englishes' as in effect a 'second first language'. Notably, Filipino maids in various parts of West and East Asia often serve as English-language teaching auxiliaries to the children of middle-class families. And the English they use with their charges is very much an Asian English.

In at least eleven territories (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Hong Kong), English may not be a mother tongue for more than a tiny minority, but it has long been a key 'other tongue' of millions (cf. Braj B. Kachru, ed., *The Other Tongue*, 1982). There are no hard statistics for the numbers of people in this often near-native continuum, just as there are no firm figures for the number of people who use English every day in India. My guesstimate, however, is about a quarter of the Indian population (currently reckoned at a billion) uses English: that is, c. 250 million.

There are also no figures for users of English in West Asia, where it is widely present as the language of both a globalized professional life-style and often also of higher education, notably in Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, the Palestinian community, Saudi Arabia, the Arab Gulf States, Yemen, and in Egypt nearby, while English has long been a key language in Israel. It is also worth noting that teachers of English in many Arab countries are recruited from South Asia.

Information is also hard to come by for Indo-China (Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), where an English of trade and tourism thrives alongside an 'elite' usage which has largely taken the place of French. To the south of Indo-China, however, matters are different.

In Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and Indonesia, English is significant as a lingua franca at all social levels, and in Malaysia and Indonesia the vocabulary of English formally serves as a source for government-created technical and other terms to be used in Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia, the standard varieties of Malay in each country.

However, probably the most remarkable development is in Singapore. English is co-official with Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil, but is the only language known to all younger Singaporeans. An explicit state educational policy has made them fluent in an English with both a prestigious standard variety based on UK usage and a vibrant vernacular known as 'Singlish', which serves them well informally but troubles some of their elders. However, the entire spectrum of English in Singapore is now so safe that the island nation may soon be treated worldwide as a native English-speaking country.

In Japan, Korea, and China, English is the foreign language of choice (including North Korea). The Japanese and the South Koreans have for many years invested strongly in it within their school systems, and their focus is primarily on US usage. Indeed, English has been assimilated into national life in various visual and cultural ways, most notably in Japan. The Japanese in particular, while working meticulously, and on the whole successfully, with the written language, have had great difficulty with speaking and listening to English. One reason for this is a tendency not only to pro-

nounce English in terms of Japanese syllable structure but also to adapt English words syllabically into Japanese, so that, for example, 'plutonium' is likely to be pronounced as *purutoniumu*.

In China, including both the mainland and Taiwan, English has also become the foreign language of choice. A professor at Beijing Normal University informed me not long ago that there are a million teachers of English in the People's Republic. As with India, the figures for the total population of Chinese users and learners are uncertain, but 200–300 million is probably a fair estimate. This means that, between them, India and China apparently account for over half a billion users and learners of English, a total that (before bringing in any of the millions elsewhere in Asia) makes the continent demographically the heaviest user of English in the world.

Conclusion

Graddol's first option for the future appears therefore to be right: English is the lingua franca that Asians now share with one another and the rest of the world. One should also add however that is now also manifestly an Asian language in its own right.

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