
Two thousand million?

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Updates on the statistics of English

Excerpt from David Crystal, *How many millions use English?* (ET1, 1985)

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth – the first, that is, from 1558 to 1603 – the number of English speakers in the world is thought to have been between 5 and 7 million. At the beginning of the reign of the second Queen Elizabeth in 1552, the figure had increased almost fiftyfold. In 1962, Randolph Quirk estimated in *The Use of English* that 250 million had English as a mother tongue, with a further 100 million using it as a second or foreign language.

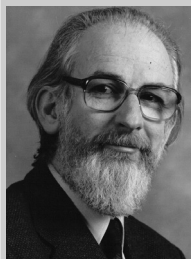
Fifteen years later, and we find Joshua Fishman and his colleagues, in *The Spread of English*, citing 300 million for the mother tongue category. A further 300 million is said to use it as an additional language. These figures are the ones which are repeatedly quoted throughout the statistically-conscious 1970s. They are adopted by Bailey and Görlach as recently as 1982, in their *English as a World Language*. But they are now very much out of date. In 1984, several sources collected by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching in London indicated that the figure would have to be raised by 100 million. One analysis, quite often referred to, gives mother-tongue use as 300 million, second language use also as 300 million, and foreign language use as 100 million. This was the total used by Quirk in his address to the British Council's anniversary conference on 'Progress in English Studies' in September 1984. So, there we are. 700 million.

But actually, there we aren't. For in Erik Gunnemark and Donald Kenrick's geolinguistic handbook, *What Language Do They Speak?*, published privately in 1983, we are given a detailed list of English speaker totals. The home language total is unremarkable – they cite 'over 300 million'. It is the figure for English as an 'official language' which grabs the eye: over

1,400 million! Allowing a further 100 million for speakers as a foreign language, we here reach a total not far off a third of the current world population. Has this enormous jump in the estimates, from 700 to 1400 million, any justification?

Guinnemark and Kenrick do provide one clue that their total may be less dramatic than it seems. Their figure, they say, 'includes some 800 million inhabitants in countries where English is an associated official language (above all India)'. Ah, India. A country whose population increased by a quarter between 1971 and 1981. The 1983 population estimate for India was 698 million – a convenient figure for me to use in the present discussion, as it relates very nicely to the 700 million difference cited above. Indeed, it is already an underestimate, when we recall the world growth rate of 1.8 per cent. Or, to put this another way, *if this article takes you a quarter of an hour to read, you must revise your estimate of India's population upwards by 4,000.*

The significance of India is obvious, when



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you look at the table of countries where English has some kind of official standing. No other population estimate in the list gets anywhere near that country's total. Apart from one uncertain exception which I'll refer to shortly, whatever is happening to English in India will lie the factor which decides whether our total is nearer 700 or 1400 million. Or perhaps this statement should be broadened to include the whole of the Indian subcontinent – that is, to include Bangladesh (92.6m.), Pakistan (87.1m.), Sri Lanka (15.2m.), Nepal (15.8m.), and Bhutan (1.2m.) – all 1983 population estimates. Braj Kachru adopts this broader perspective in his article on South Asian English in the Bailey and Görlach collection. He points out that figures for all the functions of English in all the regions are not available, but he cites a widely used total of 3 per cent of the population as 'English knowing bilinguals' – that is, those 'who can use English (more or less) effectively in a situation' (p. 378). Three per cent of around 900 million is an easy sum: 27 million people.

Of course, it all depends what 'more or less' means. Kachru's examples show that he is taking a fairly conservative line here, considering only those who have an educated awareness of the language. He refers, for instance, to the 24.4 million students who are enrolled in English classes, to the 23 per cent of the reading public who take an English newspaper, to the 74 per cent of scientific journals published in India in 1971. He points out that English is the language of the legal system, a major language in Parliament, and a preferred language in the universities and all-India competitive examinations for senior administrative, engineering and foreign service positions. In terms of some such notion as 'educated awareness' or 'fluent command', we must accept his figure of 3 per cent, at least until a better survey is carried out. But is this the most relevant criterion?

I am struck by the remarkable amount of semi-fluent or 'broken' English which is encountered in the Indian sub-continent, used by people with a limited educational background. Doubtless there are people in all parts of the world who have developed a smattering of English for trade and other purposes. After all, this is how the pidgin Englishes of the world emerged in the first place. An important constraint on the criterion is that the language must be a culturally significant element. There

must be an element of genuine 'nativeness' in the learning context. There also has to be a learning continuum available for people to follow – at least in principle, should opportunity permit.

On this basis, we could perhaps accept Gunnemark and Kenrick's figure. But could we ever go beyond it? The field of teaching English as a foreign language is ripe for serious study. What is amazing is that there are no reliable figures available for the number of learners under this heading – even for Europe. While preparing this article, I thought that at least the member states of the European Economic Community would have some data available. None of them has. Against this must be set such quasi-facts as the following. English radio programmes are received by 150 million people in over 120 countries. 100 million receive programmes from the BBC External Service. The tip of how large an iceberg?

And all of this is but the beginning, for we have to take into account the uncertain exception which I referred to earlier, and which I have so far conspicuously ignored – China. In 1983, around 100 million Chinese watched the BBC television series on the English language, *Follow Me*. As far as I know, the Chinese were not watching similar programmes in French, German or Arabic. China has always been excluded from the statistical reviews, because of the shortage of information from inside the country. But these days, because of the numbers involved, special efforts should be made to obtain accurate information from there. The total number of English learners as a foreign language doubles when the Chinese are taken into account. Or quadruples, if we do not insist on the passing of an English language examination as a standard of entry.

So, if you are highly conscious of international standards, or wish to keep the figures for world English down, you will opt for a total of around 700 million, in the mid-1980s. If you go to the opposite extreme, and allow in any systematic awareness, whether in speaking, listening, reading or writing, you could easily persuade yourself of the reasonableness of 2 billion. I am happy to settle for a billion, myself, but would welcome comment as to whether I am being too conservative or too radical. If the criticisms balance, I shall stay with this figure for a while. □

READING this article again, almost a quarter of a century on, the most noticeable change, it seems to me, has been in the amount and colour of the author's hair! That aside, I am struck by my final comment: 'I shall stay with this figure for a while' – a billion. It appears I stayed with it for a decade. In the first edition of my *English as a Global Language* (1997: 61) I raised my estimate, suggesting a middle-of-the-road figure of 1,350 million. In the second edition (2003: 69), a 'cautious temperament', I said, would suggest 1,500 million. And these days, having read the more sophisticated assessments by David Graddol and others, I am prepared to revise upwards again in the direction of 2 billion. In short, we have moved in 25 years from a fifth to a quarter to a third of the world's population being speakers of English.

India – and South Asia generally – was a pre-occupation of the 1985 article, and that would not change if the article were being written today. On my last visit to India, in 2005, I bored every linguistic professional I met by asking for their estimate of the number of English speakers in their country today. Kachru's figure of 3 per cent, referred to in the 1985 article, was evidently history. Although answers varied greatly, depending on the levels of English assumed, most people thought

that around a third of the population were these days capable of carrying on a domestic conversation in English. An *India Today* survey in 1997 had reached the same conclusion (Kachru 2001: 411). Given that India's population is now well over a billion, this meant a total of around 350 million people – more than the combined English-speaking populations of the leading first-language countries.

China also receives a special mention in the 1985 article. If India is the significant factor in relation to second-language speakers (in the sense of countries where English has some sort of special status), then China is surely the corresponding factor in relation to foreign-language speakers (in the sense of countries where the language has no official status). Estimates coming out of China in the late 1990s suggested that the number of speakers there was around 220 million; but the motivation provided by the Olympics has caused that figure to double. As with India, the estimates cited vary depending on the level of English the estimators have in mind. But commentators I have talked to assert that China will have nearly half its population capable of at least a basic level of conversational competence in English by the end of 2008. I would not be at all surprised if this came to pass.

Taken together, the estimates for second-

The author ponders an Indian English spelling outside the University of Mumbai in 2004.



and foreign-language competence reinforce the point that has been made with increasing emphasis over the past ten years – that the centre of gravity of the English language has moved from the native speaker to the non-native speaker. For every one native speaker, there are now three or four non-native speakers, a ratio that will increase as time goes by (Graddol, 1999). And as the non-native group is the primary force fostering the emergence of ‘new Englishes’, there are going to be implications for the future character of the language.

Can I be specific? It is always dangerous making predictions about languages. Who would have dared suggest, a thousand years ago, that Latin would today be of such little consequence? And the same tentativeness must apply to predictions about the future formal character of English. But let me make a couple of guesses. For example, given the difficulty that many foreign learners have in pronouncing interdental fricatives (as in *thin*, *this*) I would not be surprised to see them disappear completely within the next fifty years

(they are already gone in some accents, such as Cockney and Irish). And in grammar, I can see several uncountable nouns developing a countable use – usages such as *informations*, for example, which are widespread in second/foreign language situations. Some people might think these ‘un-English’, but in fact *informations* was in English once: *an information* and *informations* can be traced back to Middle English, and are found in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift, and many other authors. It may only be a matter of time before they are back. ■

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