

Tova Persoff

Tower of Babel Redux: Voluntary Pursuit of a Global Lingua Franca

ABSTRACT:

Throughout history, lingua francas (universally spoken languages) have been imposed by external conquerors onto vanquished indigenous peoples. In the 70 years since the end of World War Two, however, the English language has become the global lingua franca despite the lack of corresponding territorial conquest by an English-speaking country. How then has English become the global lingua franca? This article surveys the progression of language over the centuries, contrasting the historic compulsory adoption of lingua francas to the current phenomenon of voluntary acceptance of English as the lingua franca for communication around the world and the political mission now taking shape in many countries focused on helping their citizens learn English for the advancement of their people and their economies. The ramifications of this trend may mean fewer global conflicts and greater global cooperation as the use of one universal language increases the potential for parties to avoid misunderstandings. Moreover, international negotiations have one fewer potential source of conflict and resentment as neither party's local language will be imposed or conceded and thus no cultural superiority implied. The implications of this survey indicate that governments and education departments must take action to encourage and aid their citizens and students in mastering English communication skills to take part in the global conversation and avoid falling behind economically.

KEY WORDS: lingua franca, English, globalization, colonization, economic advancement

English is the globally spoken language of the 21st century. Because of the strategic importance and dominance of English in all aspects of world commerce, politics, and culture, English communication skills are considered an essential skill for all. As a result, many around the world have chosen to invest a great deal of time, energy and money in trying to master English. The more people around the world communicate in English, the more its value and importance grow and are maintained: “for every speaker of the language, the number and variety of possible

conversation partners or correspondents increases"¹. This status for English has not always been the case.

Economic Development Spurs the Need for a Global Lingua Franca

In no era of the past have global economies been as interconnected at the grass roots as they are today. Pre-industrialized societies were agrarian; many people during this era never ventured from the village where they were born and most subsisted on whatever produce was grown in their area using hand tools or cottage industry. Those who ventured outside of their local region were considered brave, reckless, or both. However, with the advent of the industrial revolution in the 18th century and the creation of machines and factory production, the world transformed. In this era, many people moved from rural environments to cities in search of improved standards of living and diverse vocations. Ever advancing technology has exponentially increased international communication, from the telegraph to the telephone and now the internet and cellular phones: global interaction is instantaneous and available to even the poorest of global citizens. Technological advances set the global stage for the appearance of an international lingua franca. The fact that English became that lingua franca is the result of centuries of geo-political evolution.

Geo-Political Evolution of Global Lingua Francas

Military and cultural expansion by various powers and explorers over the centuries resulted in the subsequent occupation and subjugation of the people in those regions as well as the application of the conqueror's language in all spheres of life, from daily tasks to the realms of government and business.

When a new language supersedes and transcends all others in the region as the most important language for business transactions and cultural interactions among speakers of other languages, it is called the lingua franca.² The term lingua franca means a common language used beyond the borders of its origin, bringing together people of diverse cultures and backgrounds. For centuries of human existence, lingua francas have emerged around the globe as their native speakers built and expanded their empires.

¹ A. De Swann, A Political Sociology of the World Language System, [in] E. Ben-Refael, Y. Sternberg, (Eds). Identity, Culture and Globalization, Brill, Leiden, 2002, p. 212.

² Webster's Universal College Dictionary, New York 1997, p.473.

There are many examples of empire builders throughout history: countries that subjugated the peoples whose lands they dominated culturally, economically, and sometimes religiously through massive territorial conquest. The most well-known and their connection to the concept of *lingua franca* "as a medium of communication among speakers of multiple languages"³ will be mentioned here.

The Persian conquest of much of the world, known as the Achaemenid Empire, in the 6th century BCE is one of the earliest instances of an empire influencing a region's *lingua franca*. Dissemination of Persia's rich culture in the areas they ruled, from Greece to the borders of India⁴ as well as farther afoot in early settlements of Africa and Europe, spurred the development of Aramaic dialects that reigned in written texts until the 4th century BCE, for instance, "Jewish religious texts, notably the vast collection known as the *Jerusalem Talmud* [as well as] Christian texts like the New Testament and many other Greek religious texts..."⁵ Citizens in territories ruled by the Persian Empire had little alternative but to speak this *lingua franca* if they wanted to be economically competitive and be involved in general society. Dalby explains that Aramaic was so deeply entrenched that even though after the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great "later it was no longer the national language of a major state. [Nonetheless], it remained in very widespread use in the Greek and other kingdoms that supplanted Persia."⁶

When Alexander the Great, the statesman and warrior from Macedonia, conquered vast areas of Asia and Northeast Africa in the 4th century BCE, the Hellenist Greek philosophy, culture, and arts swept these regions, and most of the populace in the Hellenist realm "was unified by the Greek *lingua franca*. At almost every level of society, irrespective of circumstances, this language was used."⁷ This dominance of Greek as the *lingua franca* of the world used by tradesmen and merchants as well as scholars was seen "in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint version of the Old Testament), and in the Christian writings (the New Testament)"⁸. Dalby concurs with Samarin that Greek continued to be a linguistic hegemon for "several centuries

³ A. Dalby, *Dictionary of Languages: The Definitive Reference to More than 400 Languages*. London, 2015, p. 513.

⁴ A. Dalby, *Dictionary of Languages: The Definitive Reference to More than 400 Languages*. London, 2015, p.278.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p.31-32

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.31

⁷ W.J. Samarin, *Lingua Francas of the World*, [in] *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1968, p. 662.

⁸ W.J. Samarin, *op. cit.*, p. 662.

after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC”⁹ and the rise of Rome. Greek as a lingua franca “served to spread the religion with which western civilization ever since has been identified – Christianity”¹⁰ with subsequent ripple effects for generations to come and unto this very day.

As the Greek Empire fell apart and regrouped, Rome became the subsequent world superpower for the next few hundred years and with it Latin developed first as the language of religion and politics before being adopted as the shared language of the populace. There were quite a few noteworthy advances during the Roman Empire, such as the development of the western alphabet, the calendar, and expansion of Christianity. While Greek was still used as the language of the upper classes and many Greek cultural ideas (such as mythology) were adopted and Romanized, the new language to reckon with and in which business was carried out was Latin. “Until the 16th century, deeds and documents worthy of preservation were in Latin.”¹¹

The Roman Empire consisted of two parts: the western and eastern. On the eastern side, Latin usage was less common and “Arabic managed to impose itself as an important language (at the expense of both Greek and Latin) but nothing like this happened in the western part of the Empire”¹² where Latin became the ruling language. In addition, Latin reached remote locations with foreign mercenaries who were employed in Roman legions. Despite the wide usage mostly by clergy, ruling classes and elite members of society, Latin did not initially become lingua franca of the lower classes, who continued to use their local dialects. While Latin was the language of power and wealth, it took more much time for the indigenous populations under Roman rule to see the economic benefits of speaking Latin. Local rulers and administrators helped advance and reinforce the use of Latin by utilizing it in all official purposes in addition to implementing it as the language of schooling.

The Western Roman Empire fell in the 5th century. However, the eastern part, called the Byzantine Empire, continued for nearly 1000 years more, falling only in the 15th century to the Ottoman Turks. At its height, the Byzantine Empire controlled vast territories from the Balkans to Asia Minor and part of the Middle East. Throughout that period, while Latin was the official language mainly because of its ecclesiastical power via the Roman Catholic Church, Greek still played a major role as lingua franca for communication as well as spread of culture and commerce.

⁹ A. Dalby, *op. cit.*, p.230

¹⁰ W.J. Samarin, *op. cit.*, p. 663.

¹¹W.J. Samarin, *op. cit.*, p. 663

¹² S. Mufwene, *Language Birth and Death*, in: *Annual Review of Anthropology*; 2004, no. 33, 207-8.

From the 7th century¹³, a new Empire was on the horizon, with Arab domination beginning in the Arabian Peninsula as its warriors triumphed in many locations. At its apex, the Umayyad Caliphate overtook much of the Middle East, North Africa and most of the Iberian Peninsula. Through their language, Arabic, their influence stretched from India to the Pyrenees mountain range. The spread of this new tongue ensured the dissemination of Islam as well as Muslim ideology and the dominance of other cultural and political elements of the caliphate. Arabic became the *lingua franca* of trade and economic development as well as intellectual life¹⁴.

Throughout these periods there were also dominant *lingua francas* in the East in both China, where “Mandarin first became the *lingua franca* of education and government and then became the standard language,”¹⁵ and Mongolia among others. In India, says Samarin, the use of Hindi spread. “Soon after the Muslim conquest of the 12th century this language [Hindi] began to be used as a *lingua franca* of the courts, army camps and trading centers”¹⁶ and we can conclude, it was used to foster isolationism and the rural orientation of Hindu society on the Indian subcontinent as well as the beyond in place such as Java which wanted nothing more “than to remain as it was, shunning all change”¹⁷ as a result of Islamic expansion. Malaya was a language which both Arabic and Chinese travelers were familiar with and became an essential *lingua franca* of these traders in the Far East region before the European invasion of present-day Malay Archipelago. It later became the language of interaction in both Malaysia and Indonesia, both areas which had been conquered and ruled by both Dutch and British in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁸ Throughout this time, Africa had its own set of *lingua francas*, for example the language of Niger-Congo across a large area of the African continent.¹⁹ Accordingly, we can understand that the progression of *lingua francas* is a world-wide phenomenon also taking place in the East.

The Ottoman Empire bridged a significant expanse of Eastern and Western regions reigning for more than 600 years, from the 13th century to the early 20th century. At its height, it included most

¹³ P.M. Holt, A. Lambton, B. Lewis. (Eds.) *The Cambridge History of Islam: The Central Islamic Lands from Pre-Islamic Times to the First World War. Volume 1A.* Cambridge 2008, p.25.

¹⁴ P.M. Holt, A. Lambton, B. Lewis. (Eds.), *op. cit.* p.91

¹⁵ W.J. Samarin, *op. cit.*, p. 664

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 664

¹⁷ A. Wink, *Perspectives on the Indo-Islamic World*, 2007, p.19. Accessed on 1.3.2107 https://openscholar.huji.ac.il/sites/default/files/levtzion/files/nvskh_ktvb_2006.pdf

¹⁸ A. Dalby, *op. cit.*, p.389-390

¹⁹ W.J. Samarin, *op. cit.*, p. 664

of today's southeastern Europe, including the Balkan region, territories in the Middle East, parts of Northern Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and much of the area around the Black Sea. The Ottoman Turks aimed to remove the influence of Byzantine Christianity by bringing as many people as possible under Islamic influence. "In Seljuk Turkey, the official and literary language was Persian, the language of religion and scholarship was Arabic and the everyday language of the people was Turkish."²⁰ As the Ottoman Empire expanded, the Turkish language became the official language with "a predominant position as a language both of the state and of literature [while] classical Persian and Arabic works were translated into Turkish"²¹ at the command of various rulers. While its usage in all aspects of everyday life as well as military and administrative matters spread as the Ottoman Empire expanded, we can understand that Turkish did not become a true lingua franca as many of the populations – both the educated and the less so – had strong linguistic and cultural affinity for Persian and Arabic, which remained dominant lingua francas throughout Ottoman rule²².

Colonization Types Influence Lingua Franca Acceptance

What is it that prevented the populace from accepting Turkish as the lingua franca during the Ottoman Empire? According to Mufwene, only "settlement colonization"²³ – in which conquerors from the home country permanently inhabit the land and preside over commerce, law, and culture – results in the adoption of the conqueror's language for the local lingua franca as indigenous people's socioeconomic survival and integration rest on their adaptation to the new hegemon's language and customs. Mufwene's notion of conquerors living in a "segregated communities" explains why the Spanish, Portuguese, and French languages became lingua francas in their respective regions of "settlement colonies have generally caused a demographic attrition of languages other than the dominant European language."²⁴ Today, Portuguese is the lingua franca in several countries outside of Portugal, including Brazil, Mozambique and Angola²⁵. Spanish is the

²⁰ P.M. Holt, A. Lambton, B. Lewis. (Eds.), op. cit., p.257

²¹ Ibidem, p.273

²² Ibidem, p.150, 257, 273.

²³ S. Mufwene, Worldwide globalization, international migrations, and the varying faces of multilingualism: Some historical perspectives. Hong Kong 2016, p.24.

²⁴ S. Mufwene, Globalization and the Myth of Killer Languages: What's Really Going on? London, 2008, p.229.

²⁵ "Portuguese: the world's seventh most spoken language" Accessed on 10.5.17 from <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/portuguese-worlds-seventh-most-spoken-language>

third most popular language in the world.²⁶ France, managed to imbue its colonies with French language, and there are today Francophone countries throughout Europe, North America, Africa (Burundi, Benin, Togo, Rwanda, etc.), the Caribbean (Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Martin and other islands). French is the language of a sizeable minority in former French colonies of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. French clearly was, in fact, the language of many, but not all, for culture, trade and diplomacy for parts of the 18th and 19th centuries²⁷ and even after World War Two it still, though less frequently, continues to be used in a variety of areas such as international diplomacy, science and technology as well as arts.²⁸

The Emergence of English as the World's Dominant Language

Of all the European exploring countries, it is Great Britain which managed to conquer and rule a massive world empire, supplanting all other nations to become a world superpower: colonizing the 13 American colonies and controlling parts of Canada, areas in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and areas of the Far East, Australia, and New Zealand. It is no coincidence, then, that while the expression "the empire on which the sun never sets" was first used to describe the vast Spanish Empire of the 16th and 17th centuries from South American to the Philippines, George Macartney, a colonial commissioner and diplomat, in 1773 re-ascribed the moniker to the British Empire: "this vast empire on which the sun never sets, and whose bounds nature has not yet ascertained"²⁹ to express the immensity of the British Empire from the 18th to 20th centuries.³⁰ Because of its maritime dominance, Britain at its zenith controlled nearly one-fourth of *terra firma* in the world and "governed roughly a quarter of the world's population,"³¹ exerting great influence over the populations in every continent on the globe.

In addition, their naval supremacy afforded Britain influence over many of the world's economies: from Europe to the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, the Far East, and Australia and New Zealand. "The legacy of British imperialism has left many countries with [English] thoroughly

²⁶ A. Dalby, op. cit., p.579

²⁷ Ibidem, p.198-202

²⁸ A. de Swann. Words of the World, 2001.

²⁹ K. Kenny, Ireland and the British Empire, Oxford, 2006, p. 72.

³⁰ S. Luscombe. 19th Century Timeline. <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/timeline/19century.htm> > [Accessed 28.7.16]

³¹ N. Ferguson, Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power, New York, 2004, p. ix.

institutionalized in their courts, parliament, civil service, schools, and higher education establishments.”³² Many began to speak English out of necessity: they needed to use this *lingua franca* to participate in the global economy of the emerging modern world.

In contrast to the historical role that colonization played in a country’s ascendance in power and influence, the United States’ global cultural influence has been largely without physical domination in foreign lands as America adhered to a largely isolationist foreign policy from its founding and through the 19th century. Instead, President Woodrow Wilson exhorted that “America’s ‘democracy of business’ had to take the lead in the struggle for the peaceful conquest of the world.”³³ Wilson urged American salesmen: “you are Americans and are meant to carry liberty and justice and the principles of humanity wherever you go, go out and sell goods that will make the world more comfortable and more happy, and convert them to the principles of America.”³⁴ While this policy was displaced with America’s entry into World War I ten months later, consumerism remains America’s dominant cultural influence today.

World War I spurred the demise of imperialist nations and their world empires, including Germany and the Ottomans. While the British and French retained some of their global empires, the treaties, reparations, and territorial concessions in the wake of the war set the stage for new hegemony to emerge, including a much more active American role. Thus, an indirect result of this cataclysmic and catastrophic war was the change in the status of important world languages. “The balance of power is different from a century ago. French is no longer representative of the international community.”³⁵ English “gradually replaced French in diplomacy”³⁶ and international business. A “Language hierarchy in the European Community and in the European Union developed during the last sixty years [and] English gradually replaced French on the top position.”³⁷

The end of World War II provided additional momentum to English. Learning from the mistakes of World War I’s treaties and realizing a gap in the abilities of the individual nations to recover financially and commercially from this second massive global conflict, US Secretary of State,

³² www.thehistoryofenglish.com/issues_global.html [Accessed 28.7.16]

³³ V. de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, 2005, p.1.

³⁴ V. de Grazia, *op. cit.*, p.2.

³⁵ Johnson, “Towards a fairer distribution” *The Economist*, Accessed on 27.5.2017
<https://www.economist.com/johnson/2013/04/02/towards-a-fairer-distribution>

³⁶ F. Krepelka, *Dominance of English in the European Union and in European Law*, in: *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric* 2014, no. 81 (1), p. 139.

³⁷ F. Krepelka, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

Former General George C. Marshall, devised a remarkable plan for sweeping US economic intervention in Europe to help it return to and even surpass its pre-World War II production levels. Marshall felt that American assistance was of the utmost importance to help European countries work together economically as well as militarily to sustain peace and economic growth. This program was a bold shift in American isolationist foreign policy, giving nearly US\$13 billion of aid to the European Continent after the Americans had already shored up the economies of both Greece and Turkey and assisted the UN in its charitable efforts. However, it has been asserted that America's real interests were its own as "the Truman Administration was convinced that American prosperity required buoyant export markets, which hinged on European recovery."³⁸

The Marshall Plan was conceived as a four-year scheme which brought not only US taxpayer monies to help strengthen European economics; it brought American economic ways, methods and customs. It strove to impart American-developed administrative tools and managerial procedures to European nations to restart and refashion their economies and, most importantly, to realize that their strength lies in working together economically and financially as an integrated regional entity while retaining all of their unique cultural features. An interim aid plan launched in December 1947, The Economic Cooperation Act (ECA), had an immediate effect, slowly transforming the European perspective to a more positive one, opening up the flow of goods from farmers who had been hoarding their produce and moderating workers' wage increase demands³⁹. The plan had many requirements, including

"close cooperation by the participating governments among themselves and with the US, cooperation which extended to the disclosure of detailed information about the operation of their economies. American aid also entailed a commitment on the part of the recipients to economic integration and a willingness to accept American input into the formulation of domestic policy."⁴⁰

High level businessmen, some world renowned for their economic success, were called in personally by President Truman to head and administer the program in all countries of Western Europe. These experts were not diplomats, rather well-educated professionals, experienced entrepreneurs and corporation owners who brought their experience with them. They worked with

³⁸ B. Eichengreen, M. Uzan, The Marshall Plan: economic effects and implications for Eastern Europe and the former USSR, in: *Economic Policy* 1992, no.7 (14), p.21.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p.37-41

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p.21

the European representatives of the participating countries “to decide among themselves the international allocation of US aid and to coordinate their national recovery programs.”⁴¹ While documents were translated into several languages, communication between the Americans and the representatives of all 16 participating European nations was done in English, which was another huge post World War II impetus for Europeans to learn and be able to function in the language.

A major objective of Marshall’s plan was increasing collective European productivity, and this was facilitated by “a variety of technical assistance projects, engineering schemes, and productivity surveys launched in Europe with the aid of American experts and a host of teams of European workers and managers who came to the United States to study agricultural and industrial production methods.”⁴² By mid-1951, “hundreds of European productivity teams had toured the United States and scores of American experts had travelled to the participating countries and their overseas territories.”⁴³

“In addition, the ECA used technical funds to conduct seminars for Europeans managers, to sponsor training programs for European engineers, and to distribute technical and scientific information through films, literature and exhibits.”⁴⁴ The exchanges were not limited to one field or even to government officials; rather they “went hand in hand with a private, trans-European and transatlantic pattern of collaboration that involved leaders from business, labor, agriculture, and academia.”⁴⁵ We can see on the OECD site that “over 3000 specialists and hundreds of farmers, organised into more than 500 teams from 15 different countries, visited American factories and farms.”⁴⁶ This learning and dissemination of American business skill and know-how was all carried out in English. In Post-World War II Europe, this became a compelling motivating force for Europeans to learn and master the skill of spoken English in order to acquire the business and occupational acumen they needed to continue to revitalize their economies and financial markets and collaborate internationally.

American involvement in global affairs at this time was not limited to the European theatre. As a result of the Japanese defeat in World War II, the United States had no choice but to temporarily

⁴¹ Ibidem, p.45

⁴² M.J. Hogan, *Blueprint for Recovery* in: *American Studies Journal*, 1998, no.41, p. 21.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 21

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 21

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 24

⁴⁶ Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, 2017 Accessed on 9.6.17 from <http://www.oecd.org/general/organisationforeuropeaneconomicco-operation.htm>

occupy Japan and help to rehabilitate the country. It guided the formation of Japan's democratic government and orderly handover of power as well as its social and economic transformation to a free-market, capitalist system. Japanese citizens had, as a result, a great economic incentive to learn English in order to facilitate their reentrance into the nations of the world.

A second stimulus to the rise of the English language was "the demand for American products" [and] "the European conversion to a mass consumer society"⁴⁷ as much of what was being consumed globally was American goods and culture. For example, by 1951, Hollywood films comprised "more than 60 percent of the films showing in Western Europe."⁴⁸ A generation of disaffected European youngsters welcomed the cultural imposition and worked to learn English to immerse themselves in American popular culture. In contrast to the past, no military or conquering power, no missionary organization forced English on citizens of the world. Rather, English became a globally used lingua franca *by choice*.

Teaching English as a Global Mission for Economic Advancement

After centuries of geopolitical shifting, English today is the leading language of science, commerce, tourism, diplomacy, international relations and trade, medicine, literature and formal education. Researchers in institutions of higher learning understand that if they want their work to be read and included in the corpus of literature on their subject of interest, they must make it accessible to all. The way to do this is to write and publish their research findings in English. Global technology and medical research is all published in English, international shipping and travel are all conducted in English, and global cooperative organizations such as OPEC, ASEAN, EFTA, and the World Bank use English as their exclusive working language of communication. "If an institution wishes to become a center of international excellence, it needs to both attract teachers and researchers from around the world, encourage international students to enroll on its courses, enriching the universities prestige, revenue and intellectual climate."⁴⁹ Students and professionals understand that mastering English is the key to scientific, technological and academic resources that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Being able to fluently communicate in English is recognized as the fundamental way to achieve economic and professional goals, driving governments around the world to include English as a fundamental part

⁴⁷ G. Behrman, *The Most Noble Adventure: The Marshall Plan and the Time When America Helped Save Europe*, New York, 2007, p. 315.

⁴⁸ G. Behrman, *op. cit.*, p. 315

⁴⁹ D. Graddol, *English Next. Why global English may mean the end of "English as a Foreign Language"* UK, 2006, p.74.

of their curricula and further motivating businesses worldwide to use English as their official language.

Referring to the Gartner Hype Cycle, whose five stages help to “understand the process of innovation diffusion,”⁵⁰ it is evident that English has surpassed the initial four stages (Trigger, Inflated Expectations, Disillusionment, and Enlightenment) to have reached the “Plateau of Productivity,” in which it is mainstreamed and clearly providing benefits. Economically and professionally, it is manifest that speaking English is beneficial as “numerous German and French multinationals now use English in board meetings and official documents.”⁵¹ Most, if not all, citizens of the world and especially businessmen and business-women with networks of contacts spread all over the world, see spoken English as a stable tool whose benefits are invaluable and known to all. That wide acceptance is the momentum that will keep English, in our opinion a global lingua franca for many years to come, even in the face of the changing geo-political spectrum and hegemony.

Ramifications of English as a Global Lingua Franca

There are now more non-native speakers of English than native ones, which shows how common, practical and influential English really is as a means for communication among global populations. English has many innate advantages over other widely spoken languages. It provides for gender equality and therefore, solves the issue of whom to address- males or females. In addition, because it is frequently a second language in numerous countries around the world, it can provide neutral ground and consequently, be utilized as a tool for conflict avoidance and relationship building. Graddol (2006) in his book “English Next” asserts that

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 109

⁵¹ “The English Empire” Accessed on 21.2.17 from <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21596538-growing-number-firms-worldwide-are-adopting-english-their-official-language-english>

steadily, across Europe, English has become the ‘first foreign’ language in education systems, often replacing another language from that position. For example, in Switzerland, some German-speaking cantons have controversially decided that English will be introduced at an earlier age than French, the second national language of Switzerland. In the Baltic states and post-Soviet countries, English has, in many cases, now replaced Russian as the main foreign language taught in school. In Estonia, for example, the census in 2000 asked citizens which foreign languages they could speak. It found that the decline of Russian speaking was exactly matched by [a] rise in English amongst young people.⁵²

Ironically, while as of 2017, China boasts over 900 million native Mandarin speakers⁵³ – more than two and a half times the number of native English speakers in the world – English language learning has become compulsory from grade 3. Many other Asian countries such as Singapore, Philippines and Japan have adopted “China’s decision to make English a key part of its strategy for economic development”⁵⁴ by introducing new education initiatives and including English in their curricula at younger ages.

English is an indispensable and fundamental tool for the business professional today. What are the implications of English being the global language for the career men and women in the 21st century? What happens to a business man or woman in the global arena who isn’t proficient or confident in his or her English oral communication skills? How does this affect their identity and image? Is it possible that the professional progress of an individual with poor English communication skills might be stunted and impeded? Is it conceivable that this professional will be glossed over for promotions or his company’s net profit will decline as a result? These questions must be kept in mind for governments and corporations alike as we continue into this millennium of the English lingua franca.

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⁵² D. Graddol, English Next. Why global English may mean the end of “English as a Foreign Language” UK, 2006, p.93.

⁵³ R.G. Gordon (Ed.), Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Chinese, Mandarin, Accessed on 21.2.17 from <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/cmn>

⁵⁴ D. Graddol, op. cit., p. 95

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