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# English as an Asian language

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Some observations on roles and realities in the world's largest continent

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IN *The Future of English?* (The British Council, 1997), David Graddol suggests three options for English as the already established lingua franca of Asia: first, it might keep this role indefinitely; second, Mandarin Chinese might supplant it; and third, there might not be any Asian lingua franca at all.

Which option is most likely, and are these the only options, or even the *right* options? However, before trying to answer these questions it might be good to check what commentators mean when they discuss the region called Asia and when they consider the uses to which Asians put such languages as English and Chinese. 'Asia', after all, is by no means a simple and straightforward concept.

## Where and what is 'Asia'?

Some commentators on Asia focus almost exclusively on the East, others on the South, and may not express much interest in any other areas. Among Americans, for example, 'Asians' tend to be Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans; among the British, however, they tend to be Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis. In turn, 'West Asia' is a large region, but it is seldom so called, being more commonly known (in English in an old Eurocentric way, but in similar ways in other European languages) as the 'Near' and 'Middle' East – the precise 'Eastness' of this East being little discussed.

Meanwhile, both 'Central' and 'North' Asia tend to be left out of most discussions about English in the continent, yet these are vast

regions that include much of Russia and all the so-called '-stans' (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan). And, in all these regions, from Lebanon to Korea and Russia to Timor, the situation of English is different and the pattern of languages is different.

To demonstrate this as starkly as possible it may be useful to look at Chinese first, because it is both the largest language complex in the world and might well therefore be competing with English in Asia, as Graddol (above) suggests. Yet, if they are competing, the evidence is hard to find, and it is also difficult to find situations across Asia – and even in East Asia – where Chinese serves as a lingua franca, although its size and significance are accepted everywhere. Thus, Chinese has little impact on

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Russia and the -stans, and less the further west one travels, and has no public role whatever in South and West Asia. In addition, Chinese is not alone as a major indigenous language complex. There are two other comparably large Asian language complexes: Hindi-Urdu in South Asia (in India and Pakistan), and Arabic in West Asia, as well as elsewhere in its role as the primary language of Islam. Both of these complexes also have worldwide diasporas, but even so both are largely centred on their own regions, in much the same way as Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua) is centred on its region. Arabic, Hindi-Urdu, and Chinese are large and will apparently keep gaining strength regionally, but none is likely to serve as a pan-Asian lingua franca, and – crucially – speakers of these languages in their millions learn and use English.

With the decline of Communism, Russian as a unique Eurasian language has lost ground in Asia in recent decades, most notably as a widely-learned foreign language in China, and English appears to be filling the vacuum it has left, in both China and the -stans. The shrinkage of Russian has indeed served to extend the use of English, which formerly had little significance in North and Central Asia. In addition, and notably, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) 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. Indeed, ASEAN and any further associations radiating from it serves as a particularly striking example of the use of English as an intra-Asian lingua franca.

A key reason, of course, for the use of English as an Asian lingua franca is its now unremarkable use (and almost clichéd condition in journalistic and other reports) as the *world's* lingua franca. Both the global and the regional roles are likely to continue expanding: in the air, by sea, in the media, and in telecommunications, among other socio-economic areas. 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 (in the way that French and Portuguese have lost ground across the world), English has

expanded beyond both its native and settler communities into non-native areas everywhere. It has moved beyond the UK into mainland Europe, beyond North America into Latin America, and beyond both the UK and the US in Asia. And of course it is already firmly entrenched in Australasia/Oceania. 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. These are immensely powerful demographic developments.

Set against all of this is the fact that (unlike other continental land masses) there are few indigenous mother-tongue English communities in Asia, and those that exist are relatively small. Yet, paradoxically, they have been significant in extending the use of the language. Such communities have in the main been Christian and confined to South and South-East Asia. Since colonial times they have tended to create denominational school systems in which English has been the predominant medium of instruction. Because of widespread parental pressure for English-medium education in the areas in which they are located, as well as 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 British Empire, then because of a disproportionate influence on education, social life, and career prospects 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 national élite. A similar community, referred to in the subcontinent as both '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', most notably for well-to-do girls of all backgrounds, who are

often described in marriage ads (with an upmarket effect) as 'convent-educated'.

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: that is, 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 also grown up in the Philippines, which was first a Spanish then an American colony. 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 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 distinctive Asian 'Englishes', which they use in effect as 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 large numbers of middle-class families. The English they use with their charges is very much an Asian English.

In at least eleven South and South-East Asian 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 the 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 what is often a near-native South and South-East Asian continuum, just as there are no firm figures for the number of people who use English every day in India. My guesstimate, however, is that about a quarter of the Indian population alone (currently reckoned at a billion) uses English: that is, c.250 million people.

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 lifestyle and often also of higher education, notably in Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, the Palestinian community, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Yemen, as well as in Egypt nearby, while English has long been a key language in

Israel. It is also worth noting that many teachers of English in 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 'élite' usage which has largely taken the place of French and is underpinned (as with the Philippines over a longer period) by American English. To the south of Indo-China, however, apart from the Philippines, 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 there is co-official with Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil, but is the one language known to all younger Singaporeans. An explicit state educational policy has made them fluent in an English which has both a prestigious standard variety based on UK usage and a vibrant local vernacular known as 'Singlish', which serves them well informally while often troubling their elders. However, the entire spectrum of English in Singapore is now so socially secure that the island nation may soon be treated worldwide as, to all intents and purposes, a native English-speaking country – but 'native' in an interesting new sense whose closest earlier linguistic equivalent is the everyday English of those citizens of the Irish Republic, a majority, whose ancestors spoke Irish Gaelic.

In Japan, China, and Korea (including the North) English is the foreign language of choice. The Japanese and the South Koreans have for many years invested strongly in the language within their school systems, their focus has been primarily on US usage, and elements of the language have been strongly assimilated into national life and the national language in various visual and cultural ways. The Japanese in particular, while working meticulously, and on the whole successfully, with the written language, have had great difficulty in speaking and listening to English. One reason for this has been a tendency not only to pronounce English in terms of Japanese syllable structure but also to adapt English words syllabically into Japanese, so that, for example,

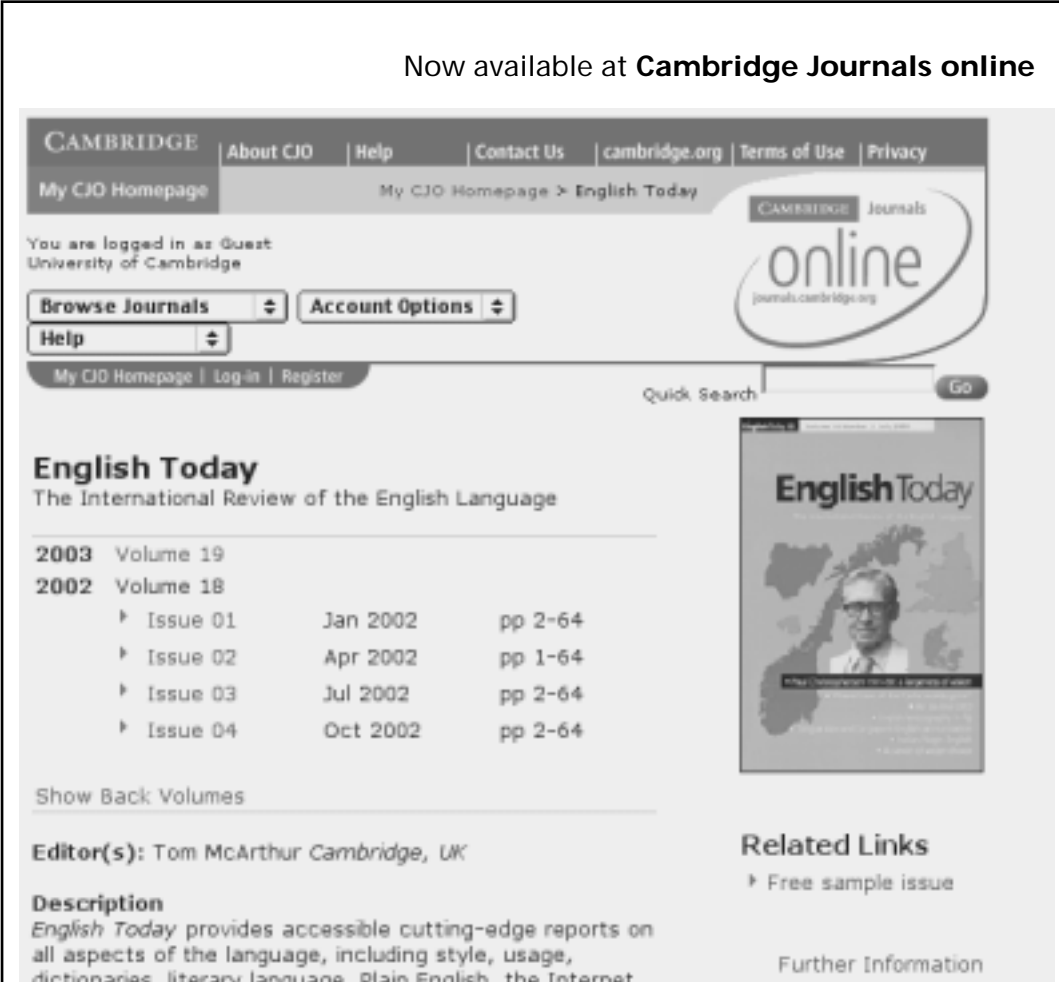
'plutonium' is likely to be pronounced *puruto-niumu*, both in Japanese and English.

In China, including both the mainland and Taiwan (and leaving aside Hong Kong as a special case where English has long had a strong public presence), 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 already account for at least half a billion users and learners of English, a total that (before seeking to bring in equally soft statistics from elsewhere in Asia) could make the

continent, in demographic terms, the heaviest 'consumer' of English in the world – and even if this is not so at the time of writing, it is likely to become so in the not far distant future.

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 with the rest of the world. One should add however that this English is now also manifestly an Asian language in its own right. It has been thoroughly indigenised. One might consequently say that whereas the centre of gravity of English as a native language continues to be the North Atlantic (in insular Europe and continental North America), the centre of gravity of English as a second language or lingua franca is manifestly Asian (especially in the South and East). ■

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