



MODERN ENGLISH



Speaker: Professor David Crystal says that the migratory patterns of our language as it continues to move across the globe, gives us a whole range of Englishes, and that process is becoming ever more intense.

Professor: So just as once upon a time there was British English and American English, and then there came Australian English and South African English, and then Indian English and then Caribbean English. Now. It's down to the level of Nigerian English, Ghanaian English, Singaporean English and so on. And these are the new Englishes of the world. What happens is this: that when a country adopts English as its language, it then immediately adapts it to suit its own circumstances. I mean why have a language? You have to express what you want to say which is your culture, your people, your identity. And when you think of everything that makes up an identity - all the plants and animals that you have, the food and drink, the myths, the legends. the history of your culture, the politics of it, the folk tales, the music, everything has to be talked about in language. And that means your local language, local words to do with the way you are, and different from the way everybody else is. And so the result has been, as English has been taken up by, well over seventy countries in the world as an important medium of their local communication. But they have developed their own local brand of English.

Speaker: How many people spoke the language we are now conversing in say six hundred years ago?

Professor: Ahh, well, certainly we know around about 1500, 1600, there were four million speakers of English in England,

Speaker: And now in the early part of the twenty first century, how many... ?

Professor: Well, if you distinguish between, sort of first language speakers and foreign language speakers there's about 400 million or so first language speakers. English as a mother tongue - or father tongue, depending on your point of view - around the world, and about five times as many who speak English as a second or a foreign language, so we're talking about two billion people, you know, a third of the world's population really. The important point to notice is that for every one native speaker of English, there are now four or five non-native speakers of English, so the centre of gravity of the language has shifted with interesting consequences.

1. How many languages are there?

It's estimated that up to 7,000 different languages are spoken around the world. 90% of these languages are used by less than 100,000 people. Over a million people converse in 150-200 languages and 46 languages have just a single speaker!

Languages are grouped into families that share a common ancestry. For example, English is related to German and Dutch, and they are all part of the Indo-European family of languages. These also include Romance languages, such as French, Spanish and Italian, which come from Latin.

2. What are the world's most spoken languages?

The world's most widely spoken languages by number of native speakers and as a second language, according to figures from UNESCO (The United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), are: Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German and French.

3. Which are the hardest languages to learn?

The ease or difficulty of learning another language can depend on your mother tongue. In general, the closer the second language is to the learner's native tongue and culture in terms of vocabulary, sounds or sentence structure, the easier acquisition will be.

So, a Polish speaker will find it easier to learn another Slavic language like Czech than an Asian language such as Japanese, while linguistic similarities mean that a Japanese speaker would find it easier to learn Mandarin Chinese than Polish.

4. Endangered languages

Globalisation and cultural homogenisation mean that many of the world's languages are in danger of vanishing. UNESCO has identified 2,500 languages which it claims are at risk of extinction.

One quarter of the world's languages are spoken by fewer than 1,000 people and if these are not passed down to the next generation, they will be gone forever.

6. Why learn another language?

Around 75% of the world's population don't speak a word of English and a grasp of a different language improves your abilities to use your first language and explore other cultures more successfully.

According to research, on average, people who use languages in their jobs earn around 8% more!

Many scientists also believe that knowledge of another language can boost your brainpower. A study of monolingual and bilingual speakers suggests speaking two languages can help slow down the brain's decline with age. And to quote Nelson Mandela, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."