

The *ET column* is where we ask people in the know – academics, broadcasters, educators, linguists, teachers and others connected with English worldwide – to write a column for the journal on issues of controversy, debate, work in the field, and matters of topical and immediate interest.

## Will Chinese take over from English as the world's most important language?

DAVID GRADDOL gives us his thoughts from Hong Kong

Whenever I've given a lecture on the future of English, the question I am most frequently asked is 'Will Chinese take over from English as the global language?'

With China's economy continuing to grow fast, whilst those of the west slow down in recession, China has been rising up the world economic rankings and has overtaken other economies faster than predicted. It seems no time since it overhauled the UK economy to become the world's number 4 (2005), and then Germany (2007) to become number 3. During the summer of 2010 it edged past Japan to become the world's second largest economy. It may take another 20 years to overtake the US economy in absolute size, though it may already have become the world's largest exporter (overtaking Germany), and has already overtaken the US in energy consumption. Next year, China is expected to take over from the US as the world's largest manufacturer – a position the US has held since it overtook the UK in the late 1890s.

So, will China's language usurp the global role of English just as fast? Will Chinese and English be as evenly balanced as the anglophone and Chinese economies in only two decades? This question has engaged me since I wrote *The Future of English?* in 1997, and I have to face it again this afternoon.

For the next few months I am a visiting professor in Hong Kong, where questions about the respective role of Chinese and English have a local edge. This afternoon is my first lecture on 'World Englishes' to a class of 75 students.

I completed *The Future of English?* in early 1997, before the UK election which brought the Labour party and Tony Blair into power. Later that

year, Britain handed Hong Kong back to China. I remind my students how much history they have already lived through: in 1997, when most of them were about five years old, Bill Clinton was just beginning his second term in office as US President. Microsoft had not yet released Windows 98. Indeed, the world of IT was dominated by fears that the Millennium Bug would bring the world to a halt. The common European currency – the euro – had not yet been introduced, and the expansion of the EU into Eastern Europe was still some years off. These are the kind of economic and political developments which change the course of language histories.

I visited Hong Kong in 1996, just before the 'hand-over', with a BBC crew. We were making a TV programme on the emergence of global English and its relationship to a new global economy. Modern outsourcing in India was just beginning – I recall we had a story about one of the British banks setting up a back office there – but telecommunications in India were still too primitive to have contemplated call centres. In Hong Kong, business was already beginning to move labour-intensive work onto the mainland, looking to exploit the forthcoming integration with China. I left Hong Kong then with the impression that at least some people were relieved that they would no longer need to struggle with English. Now the language to be learning was Putonghua (or Mandarin).

I might add, as a footnote, that the TV programme on global English was never completed.



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Neither my academic colleagues nor my BBC producer's colleagues had confidence in 1996 that there was enough substance to fill a 20 minute programme on global English – it was not deemed to be a 'big enough story'.

But, returning to the question of whether Chinese will overtake English, just as there are many different measures of economic size (GDP, manufacturing output, exports, per capita GDP etc), so it is with languages. What makes a language 'bigger' than another? Is it the number of native speakers? Is it the total number of speakers, including second language users? Does it matter what social class they belong to, or how rich they are? This indeed is one of the imponderable questions in relation to Putonghua. Putonghua (or 'Mandarin' as it is referred to by much of the world outside China) is the standard language of 1.3 billion people. So is that the number we count? Or the slightly more than 50% of the population who can actually speak it? Or do we count all the Chinese dialects as being 'the same language', on the grounds that they share a written form? That last point was brought home to me last year, when I was taking part in an English teachers' conference in Guangzhou – just over the border from Hong Kong. The hotel I was staying had few English-speaking staff. The Cantonese-speaking maid who came to clean my room struggled to tell me something. Frustrated, she tried the method she used to communicate with guests from elsewhere in China, and wrote the message down in Chinese characters on the notepad beside the telephone. Sadly, I was none the wiser.

That story brings to mind a recent anxiety amongst Cantonese speakers in Guangzhou that their own language, Cantonese, is under attack from Putonghua. Already, as in the rest of China, children are taught only in Putonghua. In August this year, thousands of people protested on the streets of Guangzhou when newspapers reported that the government wished the local TV stations to switch broadcasting to Putonghua 'so visitors to the upcoming Asian Games would be able to understand'.

So there are other concerns on the languages agenda in Hong Kong at the moment. In my first tutorial I ask student groups to discuss the topic 'Which language will be more important in future, in Hong Kong: English or Putonghua? My tutorial groups are surprisingly evenly balanced in their conclusion.

In Hong Kong, Cantonese is not yet under serious challenge, and it is the availability of Cantonese TV and radio from Hong Kong which helps maintain a cultural vitality in the language over the border in Guangzhou. However, some of my students are clearly anxious: they tell me there is a creeping 'Putonghuaisation' in official signs in Hong Kong (the Mainland uses simplified characters, Hong Kong maintains the traditional ones). But many of my students cannot see how English could diminish in local importance. Indeed, some saw a need for Hong Kong to improve its competence in English further to maintain its cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, and thus use English to protect the future of Cantonese. I am grateful for the contribution from an exchange student from Singapore, where there was first a language shift from Chinese dialects towards Putonghua, as the language of the family, and then in recent decades from Putonghua to English. My student was able to report that attitudes to Putonghua had moved on: now people were anxious to improve their Putonghua again, it being a new language of regional power.

There are, of course, some striking parallels between China's attempt to make Putonghua the national, standard language and what happened to English in earlier times, as I remind my students. An important development in the history of English was the emergence of a standard language in Britain, and the continued cultural and linguistic tensions which ensured that project was never quite completed. But the impulse for standardisation happened at the same time as the expansion of English around the world, and we ended up with competing international standards and a deep Anglo-Saxon belief that the State should play no role in regulating the language. This liberal attitude to international variation in English is envied by speakers of some other European languages – as I discovered at a conference of francophones last year in Quebec.

But after my tutorials I retreat to my temporary island home to hold a teleconference with colleagues in Madrid. I'm involved in an interesting project on 'the global impact of English and Spanish'. This is a timely reminder that in some regions, it is Spanish which is increasingly the partner language to English.

And perhaps that is the next future of English – different regional patterns of English-knowing bilingualism, and no single language taking over the role of English as a global lingua franca.