

English: the universal language?

THEO CUTTEN

Yes, English IS the universal language! Who says so? I do. I am not alone. Authorities agree with me. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that I agree with the authorities.

See what Professor F. Marquardt, one of the staunchest proponents of English as a world auxiliary language, has to say:

There is one language which was already beginning to suffuse the world well before Descartes first posed the desirability of a universal language. This is, of course, English. During the past century, and especially since World War II, it has been well on its way to becoming the planet's second language. That English has won so many speakers all over the world is due both to its intrinsic merits and to the fact that a person of any nationality and station in life is handicapped nowadays if he doesn't know English.

The professor cites some of the reasons for the widespread and still-growing acceptance of English. It is spoken as a native language by more than 270 million persons in such strategically dispersed countries as Great Britain, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland and the Republic of South Africa. (A later estimate puts the total at 360 million.)

It is used as an official language in thirty nations situated on every continent. It is the language most essential to military

operations in most countries. Knowledge of it is one of the surest ways to advancement in government, business and education in most non-English-speaking countries. There are more publications in English in the fields of knowledge, technology, politics and literature than in any other language. It is the common language of aviation and one of the most used in international conferences, commerce, travel and the United Nations. It is commonly being taught in more schools in non-English-speaking countries than any other language is. More people speak it as a second language than they speak any other language and more literate people speak it than any other.

This paean for English is quoted by Gary Jennings in his book, *Personalities of Language*.

Two former presidents of the English Academy of Southern Africa, one, alas, no longer with us, have also broken a lance for English as a universal language.

Mr Michael O'Dowd, a former president and now secretary of the Academy, in an address to the Academy's conference in Pretoria on the teaching of English, reminded his audience that English was not only the tongue of Shakespeare but also a language in which a Japanese airport gives landing instructions to an Iraqi pilot and in which Russians make contact with Italians. Mr O'Dowd said that there was no substance in the idea that because English is an international language it is not a South African language. English is the language of several nations and is politically and culturally neutral.

It is the principal language of diplomacy and is also used extensively as the common language between people who do not speak each other's language. English is emerging as the common language in South Africa — where there are five main African languages and two European languages — not because of a policy decision, but as a result of natural evolution. It serves as the common language with South Africa's neighbours, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana. It is the only official language in Zambia, is widely used for official purposes in Tanzania and is the official language in Kenya, Uganda and many countries in West Africa. Because it is being used as a second or an official language in so many parts of the world by so many people, enormous effort and resources are going into devising better, quicker and more modern methods of teaching English.

At the present rate 1 000 000 South Africans will be touring other countries by 1986 and they will make their way in English.

Any scientist, irrespective of his home language, will get a far wider audience by publishing his works in English.

Mr O'Dowd's immediate successor as president of the Academy, Dr Whitmore Richards (now deceased), said in his address to the annual general meeting in 1977 that 150 years ago English was already an important language with an important literature, a language widely spoken round the world and used, before and then, by many of the great thinkers as a vehicle for their dissertations, research and inventions.

Since then, with the spread of the British Commonwealth and the subsequent rise to pre-eminence of the United States, the language has become dominant and its world importance becomes greater with each addition to the media up to the reflecting satellites and computerised composition!

I believe that on balance the better educated people of all races here speak better English, enunciated more clearly, and understand the meaning of the words better than equivalent people in many other parts of the world who use it as their main means of communication, but we must not be complacent; we must remember that if we are to make friends and influence people around the world we must be on the watch ever to improve our use of English and see that we are able to write and speak it in a way which will be universally understood.

Dr Richards told his audience that some of the leading international Dutch firms encouraged their employees in Holland to speak and write memos to one another in English, although their social communication is presumably always in Dutch.

Writing from West Berlin, Leslie Colitt says that the most widely spoken language of Western Europe is fast becoming the lingua franca of the communist countries of Eastern Europe. The blond young German guard at the Wall in Berlin speaks English to Swedish, Polish and Dutch visitors who cross into East Berlin. A few years ago it was strictly German and the only foreign language the controllers had was a smattering of school Russian.

East Germans buy 'air tickets' which not long ago they still called 'Flugscheine' and even the East German Communist Party holds 'meetings' and arranges 'cocktails', which are diplomatic receptions. In Poland and Czechoslovakia words such as 'trip', 'smoke', 'car', 'dance', 'gag' and dozens more are part of the every day vocabulary of the younger generation. Airline pilots in Eastern Europe communicate with ground control in English, despite the fact that

Soviet equipment is almost exclusively used. Even Soviet pilots must learn English to communicate with control towers in Warsaw, Prague and Budapest.

Substantiating her claim that English is today's world language, Gwynne Dyer declares (in *The Star* on May 20, 1980): "A practical and helpful fact, as any English-speaking traveller will have gratefully noted, is that in anything bigger than a village almost anywhere on earth you can easily find someone who speaks English. About half the books published each year are in English and fully ninety percent of the world's scientific and technical books are in English."

"English is the world's communication language and it is necessary to learn to speak and write it correctly." These are the opening words of Lesson One in a series of English lessons published in the *Rand Daily Mail*.

I think that I have produced sufficient evidence to support my thesis that English is the universal language (without the question mark).

Of course English words, phrases and sentences do not always mean the same thing to all people and the standard of the language varies from country to country. For example, in Britain, Devon and Cornwall police ordered the following notice to be exhibited on surfing beaches: "Quit scuffing your creepies, man. Do it like now". In this way it was hoped to stop the theft of Malibu surfboards. Chief Inspector John Lewis, chief crime prevention officer for the West of England countries, explained: "The only way to get through is to speak the surfers' language".

"Grip this" is the opening sentence of the notice, which goes on to say: "Someyhuk with a perch for 'boo boards has dipped plenty on this scene. If you're making out with the weepies on a loss awareness of your 'loo board: nix out on the fade with it stashed on the make or cooling on the sale grip. Make it with the twirl in some up-tight spot, quit scuffing your creepies, man. Do it like now. Spread by the fuzz of Devon and Cornwall to helpnssock it to the mean cats."

Freely translated it means that the fuzz — the police — are concerned about the number of surfboards being stolen from the beaches. Owners are warned to lock them away.

Thomas Clogger in *Home Front*, the *MOTH* magazine, sums up the position in Africa. "It is impossible to estimate how many languages and

dialects are in use in this continent. It was as a result of this course of Babel that in many areas English was debased into pidgin. The development of Africa depends largely upon rapid mass communication and over much of the continent the chief medium for that education and for technical training must be English. Paradoxically, it would seem that the language of the colonialists on the lips of the liberated is the language of progress."

"America is turning into a foreign-speaking nation as the British and American phonetic systems get more and more apart", writes Martin White, of the *Daily Mail*, London. In 200 years' time, Robert Burchfield, editor-in-chief of the Oxford English dictionaries, believes the British and Americans will need interpreters. Oscar Wilde said: "The English really have everything in common with Americans, except, of course, language". Since then many distinguished authors and radio comedians have made the same joke.

"The Americans are convinced that they talk and write English, whereas the English think that Americans use some kind of bastard English, badly pronounced and spelt. The Americans say the English speak 'British', which they claim is not real English. I remember reading during the war that Franklin D. Roosevelt was accused by his political enemies of speaking with a British accent." (A.B. Hughes in the *Rand Daily Mail*.)

Mrs Irene McBride, writing in *Legion*, the journal of the Royal Canadian Legion states, "When I married a Canadian serviceman in war-torn England I was blithely confident that I spoke recognizable English. The minute I stepped off the ship at Halifax I realized my mistake. Every time I opened my mouth I put my origins in it. The idiom of Lancashire is a far cry from the way my Canadian husband's family talked. Every time I said something wrong it was always in a room full of people, never in a cosy, less embarrassing twosome."

"China has placed a substantial order for English language courses with the department of the British Broadcasting Corporation which organizes this service. It indicates a decision by Peking to step up the size of China's foreign language instruction programme with a deliberate emphasis on English as the preferred tongue. Presumably the British brand is deemed politically acceptable and presumably non-aligned in terms of super power diplomacy" (Patrick Keatley in *The Star*).

Christian Volbracht told in *The Star* of the French language being in peril: "A grave danger is hanging over the French language and the (then) president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, gave his blessing

to a government attempt to stop it. From what? English. Giscard d'Estaing announced a new charter of the French language. "It must be defended".

But the law accomplished little. The French refused to replace 'know-how' with 'savoir faire' or to refer to 'les duty-free shops' as 'boutiques franches'. 'Français' terms, such as 'le week-end', 'le ferry boat', 'after shave', 'container' and 'T-shirt', continue to enrage the purists. Worse still, they must tolerate their countrymen watching 'le football' and putting their motorcars in 'les parkings'."

"In India, the elite upper classes rather send their children to English language schools than submit them to the rigours of learning the complicated, high-flown Hindi. Many members of the upper- or middle-class speak English. Defenders of the native tongues often voice their opinions in the larger newspapers, ironically in English, since newspapers in the local idioms are written for simple souls and represent no forum for Indian intellectuals" (*The Star*).

The number of anglicised words that have crept into Italian would constitute a dictionary on their own. 'Flash-back', 'crack', 'zipper' and 'il weekend' would certainly be strange to the poet of the *Divine Comedy*. The flood began after the Allied liberation of Italy and has continued ever since, assisted particularly by pop-songs and Hollywood movies. The only real attempt to purge Italian of foreign influence was made by Benito Mussolini during the years of fascism. He tried to replace such words as 'bar' but anyone who has had even a cappuccino in Italy will know the extent of his failure. Most Italians are resigned to this 'Italanglo' slang. They shrug their shoulders and say 'okay'.

Dene Smuts, features editor of *Fair Lady*, kindly sent me a copy of an article in that magazine in May 1982 on "English Broken Here" by Bill Bryson. Here are two Japanese examples of broken English.

*A warning to motorists in Tokyo: "When a passenger of the foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet at him melodiously at first but if he still obstacles your passage then tootle him with vigour."

*A police request in a Tokyo establishment: "It is forbidden to steal the hotel towels please. If you are not a person to do such a thing please do not read notis."

From the ridiculous to the sublime:

Dr Richards, mentioned earlier, says that whatever the 1820 Settlers brought to South Africa in moral values — and they were vitally

important — the fact that they brought the English language was probably the most important of the many things that they did It was not the cherry on the top but a pearl.

"This wonderful pearl has been presented to us as part of nature's bounty but we must realise that it must be worn close to the skin if it is to be, pearl-like, that rich opalescence which can serve us so well."

OBITUARY

It was with regret that we learned of the death of Mr Theo Cutten, author of this article, shortly before our journal went to print. During his long career as a journalist with *The Star*, Mr Cutten became known for his keen interest in the correct use of English — an interest which is reflected in the weekly features he wrote, as 'Purist', and in his book *Why can't the English?*, published in 1971.