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## English as an Encyclopedic Language

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### ABSTRACT:

English is hugely important as an international language and plays an important part even in countries where the UK has historically had little influence. It is learnt as the principal foreign language in most schools in Western Europe. It is also an essential part of the curriculum in far-flung places like Japan and South Korea, and is increasingly seen as desirable by millions of speakers in China. Prior to WWII, most teaching of English as a foreign language used British English as its model, and textbooks and other educational resources were produced here in the UK for use overseas. This reflected the UK's cultural dominance and its perceived 'ownership' of the English Language. Since 1945, however, the increasing economic power of the USA and its unrivalled influence in popular culture has meant that American English has become the reference point for learners of English in places like Japan and even to a certain extent in some European countries. British English remains the model in most Commonwealth countries where English is learnt as a second language. However, as the history of English has shown, this situation may not last indefinitely. The increasing commercial and economic power of countries like India, for instance, might mean that Indian English will one day begin to have an impact beyond its own borders. This paper focuses on the attributes such as: global language, need and emergence impact of English on personal and professional front, Is English justified as an encyclopedic language.

### WHAT IS AN ENCYCLOPEDIA LANGUAGE?

As such There is no official definition of "encyclopedic" or "world" language, but it essentially refers to a language that is learned and spoken internationally, and is characterized not only by the number of its native and second language speakers, but also by its geographical distribution, and its use in international organizations and in diplomatic relations. An encyclopedic language acts as a "lingua franca", a common language that enables people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities to communicate on a more or less equitable basis.

The essential factor for the establishment of an encyclopedic language is that it is spoken by those who wield power. Latin was the lingua franca of its time, although it was only ever a minority language within the Roman Empire as a whole. Crucially, though, it was the language of the powerful leaders and administrators and of the Roman military - and, later, of the ecclesiastical power of the Roman Catholic Church - and this is what drove its rise to (arguably) encyclopedic language status. Thus, language can be said to have no independent existence of its own, and a particular language only dominates when its speakers dominate (and, by extension, fails when the people who speak it fail).

The influence of any language is a combination of three main things: the number of countries using it as their first language or mother-tongue, the number of countries adopting it as their official language, and the number of countries teaching it as their foreign language of choice in schools. The intrinsic structural qualities of a language, the size of its vocabulary, the quality of its literature throughout history, and its association with great cultures or religions, are all important factors in the popularity of any language. But, at base, history shows us that a language becomes an encyclopedic language mainly due to the political power of its native speakers, and the economic power with which it is able to maintain and expand its position.

### **WHY IS AN ENCYCLOPEDIA LANGUAGE NEEDED?**

Mostly argued that the modern “encyclopedic village” needs an “encyclopedic language”, and that (particularly in a world of modern communications, globalized trade and easy international travel) a single lingua franca has never been more important. With the advent since 1945 of large international bodies such as the United Nations and its various offshoots - the UN now has over 50 different agencies and programs from the World Bank, World Health Organization and UNICEF to more obscure arms like the Universal Postal Union - as well as collective organizations such as the Commonwealth and the European Union, the pressure to establish a worldwide lingua franca has never been greater. As just one example of why a lingua franca is useful, consider that up to one-third of the administration costs of the European Community is taken up by translations into the various member languages

Some say a planned or constructed language as a solution to this need. In the short period between 1880 and 1907, no less than 53 such “universal artificial languages” were developed. By 1889, the constructed language Volapük claimed nearly a million adherents, although it is all but unknown to day. Today the best known is Esperanto, a deliberately simplified language, with just 16 rules, no definite articles, no irregular endings and no illogical spellings. A sentence like “It is often argued that the modern world needs a common language with which to communicate” would be rendered in Esperanto as “Oni ofte argumentas ke la moderna mondo bezonas komuna linguon por komunikado”, not difficult to understand for anyone with even a smattering of Romance languages.

Many of these universal languages (including Esperanto) were specifically developed with the view in mind that a single world language would automatically lead to world peace and unity. Setting aside for now the fact that such languages have never gained much traction, it has to be said this assumption is not necessarily well-founded. For instance, historically, many wars have broken out within communities of the same language (e.g. the British and American Civil Wars, the Spanish Civil War, Vietnam, former Yugoslavia, etc) and, on the other hand, the citizens of some countries with multiple languages (e.g. Switzerland, Canada, Singapore, etc) manage to coexist, on the whole, quite peaceably.

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## IS ENGLISH APPROPRIATE FOR AN ENCYCLOPEDIA LANGUAGE?

Some have also argued that there are other intrinsic features of the English language that set it apart, and make it an appropriate choice as an encyclopedic language, and it may be worthwhile investigating some of these claims:

□ The richness and depth of English's vocabulary sets it apart from other languages. The 1989 revised "*Oxford English Dictionary*" lists 615,000 words in 20 volumes, officially the world's largest dictionary. If technical and scientific words were to be included, the total would rise to well over a million. By some estimates, the English lexicon is currently increasing by over 8,500 words a year, although other estimates put this as high as 15,000 to 20,000. It is estimated that about 200,000 English words are in common use, as compared to 184,000 in German, and mere 100,000 in French. The availability of large numbers of synonyms allows shades of distinction that are just not available to non-English speakers and, although other languages have books of synonyms, none has anything on quite the scale of "*Roget's Thesaurus*". Add to this the wealth of English idioms and phrases, and the available material with which to express meaning is truly prodigious, whether the intention is poetry, business or just everyday conversation.

□ It is a very flexible language. One example of this is in respect of word order and the ability to phrase sentences as active or passive (e.g. *I kicked the ball*, or *the ball was kicked by me*). Another is in the ability to use the same word as both a noun and a verb (such as *drink*, *fight*, *silence*, etc). New words can easily be created by the addition of prefixes or suffixes (e.g. *brightness*, *fixation*, *unintelligible*, etc), or by compounding or fusing existing words together (e.g. *airport*, *seashore*, *footwear*, etc). Just how far English's much-vaunted flexibility should go (or should be allowed to go) is a hotly-debated topic, though. For example, should common but incorrect usages (e.g. *disinterested* to mean *uninterested*; *infer* to mean *imply*; *forego* to mean *forgo*; *flout* to mean *flaunt*; *fortuitous* to mean *fortunate*; etc) be accepted as part of the natural evolution of the language, or reviled as inexcusable sloppiness which should be summarily nipped in the bud?

□ Its grammar is generally simpler than most languages. It dispenses completely with noun genders (hence, no dithering between *le plume* or *la plume*, or between *el mano* or *la mano*), and often dispenses with the article completely (e.g. *It is time to go to bed*). The distinction between familiar and formal addresses was abandoned centuries ago (the single English word *you* has seven distinct choices in German: *du*, *dich*, *dir*, *Sie*, *Ihnen*, *Ihr* and *euch*). Case forms for nouns are almost non-existent (with the exception of some personal pronouns like *I/me/mine*, *he/him/his*, etc), as compared to Finnish, for example, which has fifteen forms for every noun, or Russian which has 12. In German, each verb has 16 different forms (Latin has a possible 120!), while English only retains 5 at most (e.g. *ride*, *rides*, *rode*, *riding*, *ridden*) and often only requires 3 (e.g. *hit*, *hits*, *hitting*).

□ Some would also claim that it is also a relatively simple language in terms of spelling and pronunciation, although this claim is perhaps more contentious. While it does not require

mastery of the subtle tonal variations of Cantonese, nor the bewildering consonant clusters of Welsh or Gaelic, it does have more than its fair share of apparently random spellings, silent letters and phonetic inconsistencies (consider, for example, the pronunciation of the “ou” in *thou*, *though*, *thought*, *through*, *thorough*, *tough*, *plough* and *hiccough*, or the “ea” in *head*, *heard*, *bean*, *beau* and *beauty*). There are somewhere between 44 and 52 unique sounds used in English pronunciation (depending on the authority consulted), almost equally divided between vowel sounds and consonants, as compared to 26 in Italian, for example, or just 13 in Hawaiian. This includes some sounds which are notoriously difficult for foreigners to pronounce (such as “th”, which also comes in two varieties, as in *thought* and *though*, or in *mouth* as a noun and *mouth* as a verb), and some sounds which have a huge variety of possible spellings (such as the sound “sh”, which can be written as in *shoe*, *sugar*, *passion*, *ambitious*, *ocean*, *champagne*, etc, or the long “o” which can be spelled as in *go*, *show*, *beau*, *sew*, *doe*, *though*, *depot*, etc). In its defence, though, its consonants at least are fairly regular in pronunciation, and it is blessedly free of the accents and diacritical marks which festoon many other languages.

Some argue that the cosmopolitan character of English (from its adoption of thousands of words from other languages with which it came into contact) gives it a feeling of familiarity and welcoming compared to many other languages (such as French, for example, which has tried its best to keep out other languages).

- Despite a tendency towards jargon, English is generally reasonably concise compared to many languages, as can be seen in the length of translations (a notable exception is Hebrew translations, which are usually shorter than their English equivalents by up to a third). It is also less prone to misunderstandings due to cultural subtleties than, say, Japanese, which is almost impossible to simultaneously translate for that reason.
- The absence of coding for social differences (common in many other languages which distinguish between formal and informal verb forms and sometimes other more complex social distinctions) may make English seem more democratic and remove some of the potential stress associated with language-generated social blunders.
- The extent and quality of English literature throughout history marks it as a language of culture and class. As a result, it carries with it a certain legitimacy, substance and gravitas that few other languages can match.

On balance, though, the intrinsic appeal of English as a world language is probably overblown and specious, and largely based on chauvinism or *naïveté*. It is unlikely that linguistic factors are of great importance in a language's rise to the status of world language, and English's position today is almost entirely due to the aforementioned political and economic factors.

## IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH

It's become almost a cliché that speaking English well is a huge help in the business world, and it's increasingly true as international trade expands every year, bringing new countries into contact. Many of the best MBA programs are taught in English, so speaking it well can put you

in a position to get the best training and credentials. With more and more companies being bought or merging with foreign firms, you never know if one day you might need to speak English to your new boss!

If your ambitions lie in science or medicine, you can't neglect English either. Much of the technical terminology is based on English words, and if you want to learn about the latest developments and discoveries from around the world, you'll read about them in journals and research reports published in English, no matter whether the scientists who wrote them are from China or Norway. And, of course, with good conversational English, you'll be able to mix at conferences and seminars.

English also opens doors in the academic world. Of course, if the best program in your field is in England or America, English will give you the opportunity to study with the top scholars. Many Western universities are becoming highly international, with visiting scholars, students and professors from all around the world, and their common working language is English. Attending international conferences and publishing in foreign journals are some of the key steps to success in academia.

Journalists and writers around the world are finding a good command of English to be an increasingly useful skill. Even if you're writing your articles and doing interviews in your own language, with good English you can get background material from international wire services and papers and magazines from around the world. You can interview foreign businessmen, diplomats and maybe even get sent to cover overseas stories.

## CONCLUSION

Five hundred years ago, between five and seven million people spoke English, almost all of them living in the British Isles. Now, anywhere up to 1.8 billion people around the world speak English. To tell you as to how did this happen? Here is the answer-The growth of English has nothing to do with the structure of the language, or any inherent qualities, and everything to do with politics and history. English is now the dominant or official language in 75 territories: a direct legacy of the British Empire. Advertisers pride themselves on riding the cultural zeitgeist. Some people suggest that English has become ubiquitous because it is "easy to learn" or especially flexible, but a glance backwards suggests that this is irrelevant. Despite a devilishly complex case system, Latin was Europe's most influential language for over a thousand years (and its descendents are still going strong). People learned Latin then for the same reasons they learn English now: to get ahead in life and have access to knowledge. Yet now Latin is only spoken by priests and scholars. Languages and borders change over time, but English is likely to remain the world's number one language during our lifetimes.

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