

“English, once accepted as an international language, is no more secure than French has proved to be as the one and only accepted language of diplomacy or as Latin has proved to be as the international language of science.” Discuss this quotation by Edward Sapir.

The success of the English language is a “tremendous run of luck” – Nicholas Ostler¹. Edward Sapir, as a linguist in the USA, studying indigenous languages², must surely have felt the almost oppressive dominance of English compared to the Native American languages that he worked with. This essay focuses on English’s future as a *lingua franca* (a language used for communication between groups of people who speak different languages³) like French and Latin were, until they both lost their dominance, due to varying factors that will be touched on. Using the work of Ostler, Kohl, Gil, Rosen and Crystal, among others, a few arguments against this statement that will be discussed include the power that the USA holds in today’s society, the spread of English through colonialism and the influence of the internet. However, this essay will explain how these can all be disproved by the linguistic prestige that English has, the rejection of colonial history and the rise of artificial translators, with the aim of showing that, while English may remain a dominant *lingua franca* for many years to come, it will eventually fall and give way to another language, or to no language at all.

Some people may argue that the USA has driven and continues to drive the success of English as a world language, so it is unlikely ever to fall. Michael Rosen writes, “Benefiting from the rise in influence of the most powerful member of [the British] Empire – the USA – English (or kinds of English) is being spoken all over the globe”⁴. The rise of the USA proves particularly helpful in English’s hold as an international language. In the 1800s, it was the world’s fastest growing economy, providing it with an economic stronghold. Despite participating in both the World Wars in the 20th century, it remained less affected by them compared to its European counterparts, as in both cases, it joined relatively later than the others. Later on in the 20th Century, during the Cold War, it was one of the major world powers, along with Russia - and when the Soviet Union collapsed, it remained the only one of those two powers to remain as powerful as it was before⁵. Moving into the 21st century, the USA is a leader in technological advancements, with the invention of the internet and the mobile phone. As a result of the success of the USA, English is now associated with developments in science and technology⁶. Furthermore, the majority of popular culture nowadays is heavily Americanised,

¹ Ostler, N., *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* (London, England : HarperCollins Publishers, 2005)

² Preston, R.J., *Edward Sapir*, online, [<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/edward-sapir>], Accessed 16th April 2023]

³ Cambridge Dictionary, *LINGUA FRANCA | English Meaning*, online, [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lingua-franca>], Accessed 16th April 2023]

⁴ Rosen, M., *How English Evolved into a Global Language*, online, [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-12017753>], Accessed 14th April 2023]

⁵ Gil, J. & Marsen, S., *Exploring Language in Global Contexts* (Oxon, England : Routledge, 2022)

⁶ Gil, J. & Marsen, S., *Exploring Language in Global Contexts* (Oxon, England : Routledge, 2022)

with major films, series and music originating from the States. As a political power, the USA is highly influential. The political moves of the president of the United States of America are followed by news channels across the world. Often, with political and economic power, comes linguistic power. As Stanko Nick states, “the dominant role of one language or another has resulted from the political, strategic, economic, cultural or other domination of one power or another”⁷. This demonstrates the idea that due to the USA’s strong influence over the rest of the world, English is incredibly secure in its status as a world language, and will not fall.

Due to Britain’s colonial history and the USA’s political and economic success, it is easy to see that English certainly holds prestige in society across the world. However, looking back at the *lingua franca* of history, it is common to see that languages holding prestige tend to be resented and overtaken by the vernacular. This is often seen in the languages spoken by colonising powers or more generally, the socially elite. An example of this is Akkadian, spoken by the ruling classes of the ancient Mesopotamia during the time of the Akkadian Empire. Despite being the language officially used in governing the empire, it reached a point where most ordinary people were more used to speaking Aramaic in their daily lives. Therefore, Akkadian was slowly replaced by Aramaic. Aramaic itself would later be overtaken by Persian, as this became the more commonplace tongue in the region. Similarly, Latin, at some point between the 17th and 19th centuries, was relegated to a place in religion and science exclusively, having previously been commonplace in the Roman Empire, then in the Catholic Church (which was well established throughout Europe) and academia⁸. This proves that English too, as it has been held in prestige, due to its history of colonialism and economic and political standing as an official language in some of the world’s most powerful countries - including the USA – is equally likely to succumb to the more common languages found in areas across the world.

Many people point out that it was Britain’s colonial success until the 20th century that firmly established the dominance of English as a world language. It is true that military conquest is a key factor in the global coverage of any *lingua franca*, from Latin, to Persian, to French and Spanish.⁹ An example of this is India. As a country where many languages are spoken, English is not necessarily the first language one might hear on its streets. However, it is considered one of the official languages, despite the fact that India became independent of British rule in 1947. The main reason for this is exactly the fact that there are so many languages spoken there. It has been proposed that English be rejected as an official language in favour of Hindi, however there was overwhelming rejection from the states that did not speak Hindi, and wanted English as a way to communicate with the majority Hindi-speaking states¹⁰. This demonstrates how English has continued to be prevalent in countries that were once colonised. In addition to this, the fact that the USA speaks English at all owes itself to the colonisation of the country by the British, establishing English as the linguistic power of the area. The natives would have found it difficult to resist, as often, minorities cannot be recognised if they are also linguistically marginalised, as pointed out by Katrin Kohl¹¹. The presence of Australia as a penal state established English as the majority language there as well,

⁷ Nick, S., *Use of Language in Diplomacy*, online, [<https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/use-of-language-in-diplomacy/>], Accessed 14th April 2023]

⁸ Ostler, N., *The Last Lingua Franca: the rise and fall of world languages* (London, England : Penguin Group, 2011)

⁹ Ostler, N., *The Last Lingua Franca: the rise and fall of world languages* (London, England : Penguin Group, 2011)

¹⁰ Ostler, N., *The Last Lingua Franca: the rise and fall of world languages* (London, England : Penguin Group, 2011)

¹¹ Kohl, K., *Modern Languages: why it matters* (Cambridge, England : Polity Press, 2021)

demonstrating that colonialism has spread English so far that it has become a mother tongue in places where it did not originate – something which Ostler explains is a key factor in a lingua franca's survival, showing that English will not fall so easily¹².

On the other hand, colonial history is exactly the reason why many countries reject languages. The need to protect linguistic diversity and minority languages has been increasingly recognised, and the association of the language with those who spoke it can become increasingly resented¹³. Kohl explains that “cultural or national pride may fuel the urge to establish cultural independence by strengthening a linguistic identity that is distinct to English”, adding that “there is an inescapable tension built into seeking to decolonize”¹⁴. An example of this is how Taiwan has banned the teaching of English to young children in favour of local, indigenous languages to protect them¹⁵. This shows that people are increasingly beginning to resist the hold of English and other languages brought onto them by colonialism, in favour of nurturing the languages that are tied to their heritage and ancestry so that they can preserve their own culture, likely destroyed by those who colonised their countries in the past. Moreover, there is always the possibility that the history of the presence of English in these countries will morph into the formation of an entirely new language: each variety of English across the world has its own features that do not exist elsewhere. Latin, for example, prevailed across the Roman Empire, but then gave rise to the vernaculars across the different regions, known as “vulgar” Latin, which in turn resulted in the formation of the Romance languages¹⁶. It is possible that English will do the same, and form a new set of languages¹⁷, spoken across the Commonwealth, resulting in its downfall as a *lingua franca*.

The internet, originating in the USA, contributes greatly to the spread of English nowadays. A possible argument may be that the internet will help English to remain a constant dominant language forever¹⁸. As of 2001, 82.3% of the internet's content was in English¹⁹, showing that it is significantly geared towards the Anglosphere, and in order for speakers of other languages to be able to interact with the internet in the same way as English speakers, they should learn English. This promotes the learning of English as a foreign language, and although Jeffrey Gil's textbook shows that a lack of incentive to learn a global language is a route to its downfall²⁰, with the Internet, it is difficult to see that happening. It is also difficult to compare English with previous world languages, as they did not have the same continuous outreach with others across the globe. Once they started to fall, geography restricted them from being able to stop their own demise. However, with the internet, it is possible that this may not be the case. People will continue to need to learn English, in order to access the wealth of content available to them on the internet in that language.

The internet, however, is more likely to bring about the lack of incentive to learn English, over a long period of time. David Crystal states that “the Web is increasingly reflecting the

¹² Ostler, N., *The Last Lingua Franca: the rise and fall of world languages* (London, England : Penguin Group, 2011)

¹³ Kohl, K., *Modern Languages: why it matters* (Cambridge, England : Polity Press, 2021)

¹⁴ Kohl, K., *Modern Languages: why it matters* (Cambridge, England : Polity Press, 2021)

¹⁵ Gil, J. & Marsen, S., *Exploring Language in Global Contexts* (Oxon, England : Routledge, 2022)

¹⁶ Ostler, N., *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* (London, England : HarperCollins Publishers, 2005)

¹⁷ Gil, J. & Marsen, S., *Exploring Language in Global Contexts* (Oxon, England : Routledge, 2022)

¹⁸ Crystal, D., *Language and the Internet* (Cambridge, England : The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001)

¹⁹ Crystal, D., *Language and the Internet* (Cambridge, England : The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001)

²⁰ Gil, J. & Marsen, S., *Exploring Language in Global Contexts* (Oxon, England : Routledge, 2022)

distribution of language presence in the real world”²¹, and while English may have had the advantage, with the internet having been invented in an Anglophone country, this may not be the case anymore. A strong case supporting the idea that English will fall at some stage is the rise of artificial translators. Crystal adds that once translators have achieved an acceptable language level, they will “act as a natural force counteracting the currently accelerating trend towards the use of English (or any other language) as a global *lingua franca*”²². The most interesting thing about this is that it presents the possibility of not even needing to replace English at the end of its domination. It takes away the diplomatic issue presented by Nick of which neutral *lingua franca* to use, and if translators are advanced to an extremely high level, the issues of inaccuracy in interpretation and inadequate knowledge of the topic²³. Without these issues, no *lingua franca* would be required, leaving people the chance to embrace their native languages, and communicate with anyone in the world.

Overall, English is unlikely to lose its dominance as an international language any time soon, but it is equally, if not more, unlikely to remain the main global language forever. While the economical, political and cultural prowess of the USA, the strength and vastness of the British Empire and the relatively new introduction of the internet contribute to sustain English’s reign as a world language, it is ultimately the prestige that this allows the language to achieve, the rejection of colonialism and the technological advancements in translation that will contribute to its demise at the end. An aspect of English’s future that could be considered in more detail, leading on from this quotation, is whether, like French or Latin, it will become the main language of a particular sector, rather than across the world. It could become the international language of business, for example. Another very interesting point of further research is into what language will replace English. Prime candidates appear to be Mandarin Chinese and Spanish, whose popularity has continued to grow in recent years. Whichever language it may be, as Nicholas Ostler states, “[world languages] are strangely fleeting”²⁴.

²¹ Crystal, D., *Language and the Internet* (Cambridge, England : The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001)

²² Crystal, D., *Language and the Internet* (Cambridge, England : The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001)

²³ Nick, S., *Use of Language in Diplomacy*, online, [<https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/use-of-language-in-diplomacy/>], Accessed 14th April 2023]

²⁴ Ostler, N., *The Last Lingua Franca: the rise and fall of world languages* (London, England : Penguin Group, 2011)

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