

AMERICANS & LANGUAGE

**THE FIRST IN A THREE PART EXAMINATION
OF THE RELATIONSHIP**

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“What do you call a person who speaks two languages?”

Bilingual.

“What do you call a person who speaks three languages?”

Trilingual.

“What do you call a person who speaks one language?”

An American.

This joke, which has circulated for years and now enjoys endless life on the Internet, strikes at the heart of an increasingly national and global view of the “stupid American.” This stereotype, a piñata for Jay Leno’s “Jaywalking” sketch and the cause of everything from the cancellation of “intellectual” television shows to the success of lowbrow theatrical comedies, has become even more ingrained into our society in recent years.

How better could this tall tale be inflated than through the continuous mention of the belief that Americans are monolingual drones, too selfish or ignorant to learn another language?

Yet when it comes to English in the United States, the ability to speak English isn’t a joke at all. Nearly every American and surely every American monolingual in English knows this undeniable fact – English is the language that opens more doors than any other in the United States, and indeed the world. Therefore, if an individual is going to need one language to survive on Earth today, that language is English.

English: Language of the World’s Nations

English is the most common official language of the world’s nations [1], and an official language in at least one country on every inhabited continent on the planet [1]. Simply by examining official language designations, English is the most widespread language used today.

However, official languages are only part of the equation. The power of English cannot solely be measured by its use in government. A truer picture of the reach of English can only be determined by its ubiquity in company boardrooms and in the marketplace. In his Dec. 1997 *Language Today* article “Top Languages: The World’s 10 Most Influential Languages,” George Weber measured the reach of the top 10 languages in the world by counting the nations in which the language served a prominent role in the country.

For the purposes of his tabulation, Weber suggested that the association between a nation and a language could fall into one of three possible categories.

- * “*Core Countries*” were nations where the language had full and official status, or at least de facto official status, and was the traditional language of communication. Among his designations Weber listed Japanese in Japan and French and English in Canada.
- * “*Outer Core Countries*” were nations in which the language had some form of official status, and where the language had been used by a sizable and influential minority. Weber cited English in India and French in Algeria among his examples of “Outer Core Countries.”
- * “*Fringe Countries*” represented countries where the language had no official status, and had been spoken by only a small, but quite influential minority as the language of trade and tourism and the preferred foreign language. The use of English in Japan and French in Romania were listed as examples.

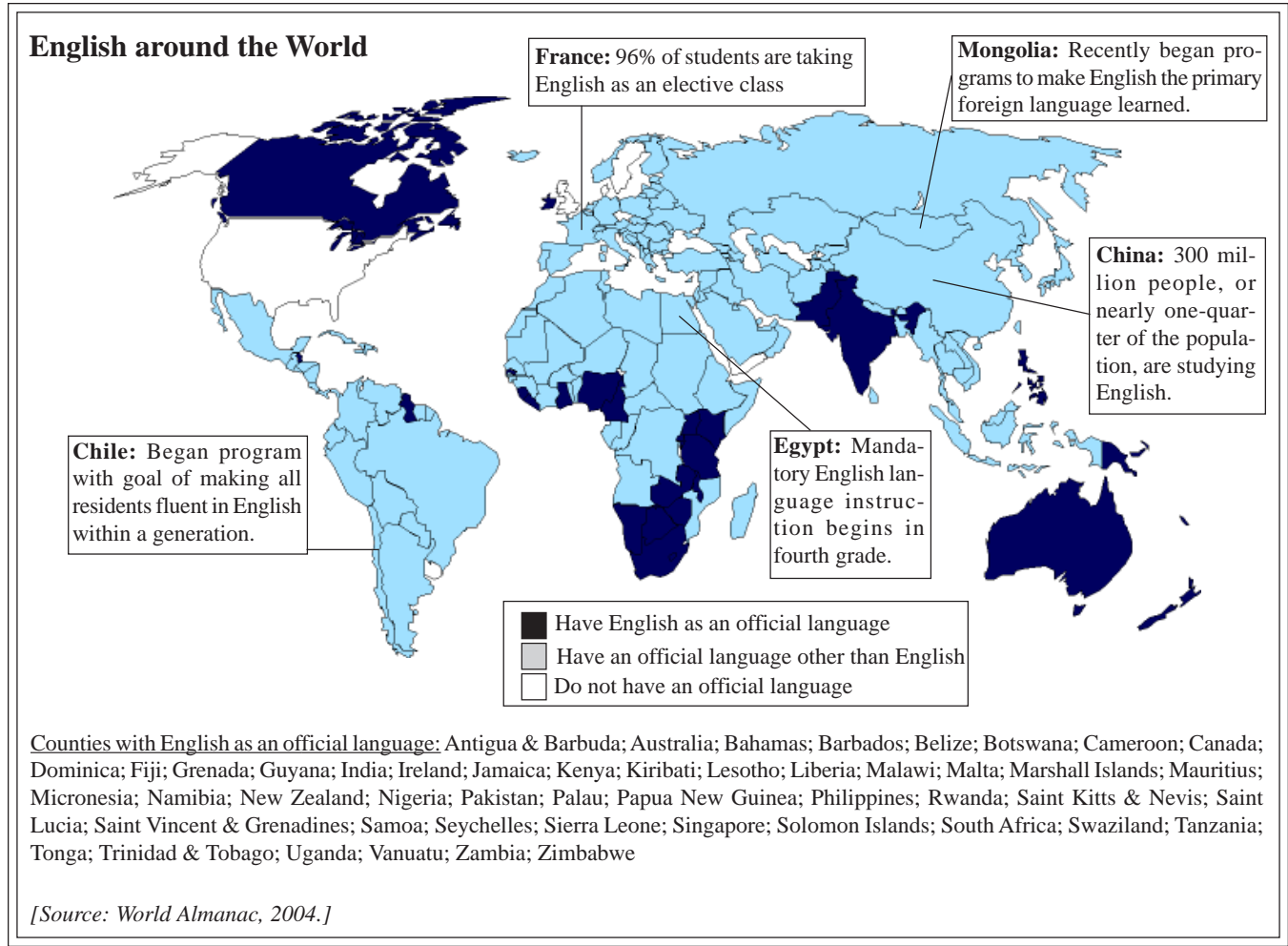
To get a glimpse of the importance of languages throughout the world, Weber tallied the total number of “Core Countries,” “Outer Core Countries,” and “Fringe Countries,” for each of the world’s top 10 languages.

With a total of 115 countries using the language in some significant capacity, English not only surpassed every other language in its usage around the world, it more than tripled the influence of second place French. Arabic, Spanish and Russian were the only other languages to record double digits.

Total Number of “Core Countries,” “Outer Core Countries,” and “Fringe Countries,” for the world’s leading languages.

1. English	115
2. French	35
3. Arabic	24
4. Spanish	20
5. Russian	16

[Source: George Weber, “Top Languages: The World’s 10 Most Influential Languages,” *Language Today*, Dec 1997.]



English: Language of the World's People

The dominance of English is visible at both the national level and the personal level. The most widespread language among the world's nations also stands strong in terms of the number of individual speakers who use it as a primary language. While the discussion of the number of speakers of a given language is rife with controversy regarding primary vs. secondary speakers, overcounts and undercounts, and differing dialects, most sources place English as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. The data from several sources is listed below.

In his 1997 article, "Top Languages: The World's 10 Most Influential Languages," George Weber listed the top 10 languages used by primary speakers. Weber's data did not differentiate between dialects in languages such as Chinese and German. In Weber's tally, 10 languages were spoken by more than 100 million people across the world, a list led by Chinese, English, and Spanish. The leading languages in Weber's study were:

<u>Language</u>	<u>Speakers*</u>
1. Chinese	1100
2. English	330
3. Spanish	300
4. Hindu/Urdu	250
5. Arabic	200
6. Bengali	185
7. Portuguese	160
8. Russian	160
9. Japanese	125
10. German	100

(*speakers in millions)

[Source: George Weber, "Top Languages: The World's 10 Most Influential Languages," Language Today, Dec 1997.]

The 2006 CIA Factbook offered a slightly different list, counting the number of "first language" speakers as of mid-2004. Unlike Weber, the CIA Factbook separated dialects within languages, reducing the number of Chinese speakers, but keeping the overall order similar to Weber's figures. According to the CIA Factbook, the top 10 languages spoken in the world and the number of speakers of each were:

<u>Language</u>	<u>Speakers*</u>
1. Mandarin Chinese	872
2. Spanish	332
3. English	308
4. Hindi	180
5. Portuguese	176
6. Bengali	171
7. Russian	145
8. Japanese	127
9. Standard German	95
10. Wu Chinese	77

(*speakers in millions)

[Source: "Field Listing-Languages," Central Intelligence Agency The World Factbook, 14 June 2007, Central Intelligence Agency, 20 June 2007, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2098.html>>.]

The 2005 World Almanac also weighed in with estimated figures for speakers of a given language. Unlike Weber and the CIA Factbook, the World Almanac estimates included first and second language speakers, demonstrating how the use of some languages reached beyond traditional country borders. According to the World Almanac, the top 10 languages spoken in the world and the number of speakers of each were:

<u>Language</u>	<u>Speakers*</u>
1. Mandarin Chinese	874
2. English	514
3. Hindustani	496
4. Spanish	425
5. Russian	275
6. Arabic	256
7. Bengali	215
8. Portuguese	194
9. Malay/Indonesian	176
10. French	129

(*speakers in millions)

[Source: The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 2005 ed.]

Regardless of which figures one accepts, English stands as one of the most commonly spoken languages in the world. When the numbers are broken down, the spread of English becomes even more evident. The Chinese language may have a greater number of speakers, but the use of the Chinese language is concentrated in only five countries, most with very high population densities. Similarly, the reach of Spanish is weak across most of Europe and virtually non-existent in Asia. English, as illustrated in Weber's example, plays a significant role in more than 100 nations from the United States through Europe and Africa.

Furthermore, the prime role of English throughout the world has not been achieved through its growth as a native language, but rather through its popularity as a second or third language. In fact, the ratio of non-native speakers of English to native speakers of English is 3-to-1 [5]. According to world renowned linguistic expert David Crystal, English represents the first language in history to have more secondary speakers than primary speakers [5].

The growth in the number of secondary speakers of English is the result of an unparalleled push toward learning the language in some of the most unexpected places. In 2004, Malaysian schools started teaching basic math and science in English instead of the native language. Recently in France, a commission recommended that English become a mandatory subject in education, comparable to math in the core curriculum of all French primary schools. Despite disapproval from the Minister of Education, 96 percent of French schools have students taking English as an elective anyway [5].

In Feb. 2003, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo directed that English be restored as the language of instruction in Filipino schools. By re-establishing English over Tagalog, the president hoped to return the Asian nation to its former competitive position in global communications [6]. In Feb. 2005, Mongolia, a nation thousands of miles away from its nearest English-dominant neighbor, began a program to make English the primary foreign language learned in the country [7]. Months earlier, the South American nation of Chile began an ambitious project toward a goal of making the entire citizenry fluent in English within a generation [8]. The effects of these policy changes may take years to pay off. But there is no denying this unprecedented push toward English learning.

English: Language Beyond the Classroom

The widespread clamoring toward English also extends beyond school hours. In 2006, officials of the World Cup soccer tournament mandated that all referees demonstrate written and spoken fluency in English in order to work the global tournament being staged in Germany [9]. The English requirement was instituted despite the fact that only three of the 32 qualifying nations had English as their official language, half the number of which had Spanish and equal to the number of nations with French and Portuguese. Likewise, those interested in working at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing are being asked to improve their proficiency in English, as are Beijing taxi drivers [5]. Increasingly it appears that the way to converse with guests from around the globe is to do so in English.

The spread of global English is not just physical, it is also virtual. The new technology of the Internet has facilitated communication, releasing it from its spoken and written boundaries to make information instantly accessible to people across the world. In the case of the Internet, the medium may have changed, but the language is most commonly English.

According to the website *internetworldstats.com*, English is by far and away the number one language of Internet users across the globe. There are almost one-third of a billion Internet users who do browsing and searching in English, almost double that of second-place Chinese and more than triple that of third-place Spanish.

Top Ten Languages Used on the Internet			
<u>Language</u>	<u>% of Internet Users</u>	<u># of Internet Users</u>	
1. English	28.9%	326,781,864	
2. Chinese	14.7%	166,001,513	
3. Spanish	8.9%	100,966,903	
4. Japanese	7.6%	86,300,000	
5. German	5.2%	58,711,687	
6. French	5.0%	56,368,344	
7. Portuguese	3.6%	40,216,760	
8. Korean	3.0%	34,120,000	
9. Italian	2.7%	30,763,940	
10. Arabic	2.5%	28,540,700	

[Source: "Internet World Users by Language," *Internet World Stats*, 2 June 2007, Miniwatts Marketing Group, 20 June 2007, <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>>.]

The online presence of English means that both English speakers can continue the spread of information in the world's common language, allowing English learners to improve their knowledge without the need for costly books or scheduled classes.

English: Yesterday and Today

While this relationship with technology opens the door to continued expansion of English usage, the growth in the popularity of English is nothing new. According to George Weber's article, *Top Languages: The World's 10 Most Influential Languages*, the standing of English has grown over the period of the last 10, 100 and 500 years, even as the importance of other languages has ebbed and flowed, over these spans of time.

Rise and Fall in the Importance of Major World Languages over the last 500, 100 and 10 Years			
	<u>Last 500 Years</u>	<u>Last 100 Years</u>	<u>Last 10 Years</u>
English	Increased	Increased	Increased
French	Increased	Increased	Steady
Spanish	Increased	Steady	Increased
Russian	Steady	Increased	Decreased
Arabic	Steady	Steady	Steady
Chinese	Decreased	Steady	Steady

[Source: George Weber, "Top Languages: The World's 10 Most Influential Languages," *Language Today*, Dec 1997.]

No matter which language becomes the second, third or fourth most necessary in the world, English is firmly entrenched in the top spot for the foreseeable future. When the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press asked residents of 41 nations whether they agree with the statement, “Children need to learn English to succeed in the world today,” the answer was a resounding “yes.” At least three-fourths of the residents in 40 of the 41 countries either completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement, with 20 nations cracking the 90 percent mark. In Vietnam, the rate of agreement was 98 percent (86 percent completely agreeing), 92 percent in China and 90 percent in Mexico [11].

**Percentage of residents who completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement:
“Children need to learn English to succeed in the world today.”**

<u>Nation</u>	<u>Agreed</u>	<u>Nation</u>	<u>Agreed</u>	<u>Nation</u>	<u>Agreed</u>
Argentina	75	India	93	Peru	88
Brazil	86	Italy	86	Philippines	92
China	92	Japan	91	Russia	84
Egypt	88	Kenya	75	South Korea	91
France	90	Lebanon	94	Turkey	89
Germany	95	Mexico	90	Ukraine	90
Honduras	92	Pakistan	83	Vietnam	98

[Source: *Views of a Changing World*, The Pew Research Center for the People & The Press, June 2003.]

Conclusion

There is little doubt that this overwhelming desire for English is based upon the knowledge that in most non-English speaking nations, English fluency permits far greater job opportunities and far higher incomes than fluency in the native language alone. For many nations of the world, English may be the second language learned, but it is the first language in determining economic power.

In the United States, however, the importance of English is magnified. Domestically, English is not only the language of economic power, it is the language of education, communication and in many cases, economic survival. To begin climbing the ladder of success, Americans must have the ability to converse in English, regardless of their ability to speak another language. While we should continue to push for additional foreign language learning opportunities in the United States, we should not let our vision be clouded by gazing at the wrong indicator.

Americans may be more monolingual than we’d desire, but so long as they are monolingual in English, we will be able to ensure that our citizens are ready for educational and employment opportunities in the United States. For this nation’s continued productivity and success, there is absolutely nothing wrong with an American who is fluent in English.

Footnotes for Americans & Language, Part I

- 1- "The Principal Languages of the World," The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 2004 ed.
- 2- George Weber, "Top Languages: The World's 10 Most Influential Languages," Language Today, Dec 1997.
- 3- "Field Listing-Languages," Central Intelligence Agency The World Factbook, 14 June 2007, Central Intelligence Agency, 20 June 2007, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2098.html>>.
- 4- The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 2005 ed.
- 5- Carla Power, "Not the Queen's English," Newsweek International, Mar. 2005, Newsweek, Inc., 20, June 2007, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7038031/site/newsweek/>>.
- 6- "President Wants English Spoken in Classrooms," Virtual Philippines, Feb. 2003, MCA Limited, 20 June 2007, <<http://www.virtual-asia.com/ph/bizpak/reports/files/President%20Wants%20English%20Spoken%20in%20Classrooms.htm>>.
- 7- James Brooke, "For Mongolians, E is for English, and F is for the Future," The New York Times, 15 Feb 2005, A7.
- 8- Larry Rohter, "Learn English, Says Chile, Thinking Upwardly Global," The New York Times, 29 Dec 2004, A4.
- 9- "English, The Common Language for Referees," China Daily, 23 Mar 2006.
- 10- "Internet World Users by Language," Internet World Stats, 2 June 2007, Miniwatts Marketing Group, 20 June 2007, <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>>.
- 11- Views of a Changing World, The Pew Research Center for the People & The Press, June 2003.

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