

The Future of the English Language

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The importance of the English language is naturally very great. English is the language not only of England but of the extensive dominions and colonies associated in the British Empire, and it is the language of the United States. Spoken by over 260 million people, it is in the number who speak it the largest of the occidental languages. English-speaking people constitute about one tenth of the world's population. English, however, seems likely to occupy an increasingly prominent place in international communication,

English is the mother tongue of nations whose combined political influence, economic soundness, commercial activity, Social well-being, and scientific and cultural contributions to civilization give impressive support to its numerical precedence.

The extent and importance of the English language today are such as to make it reasonable to ask whether we cannot attempt an intelligent speculation as to the probable position which it will occupy in the future. It is admittedly hazardous to predict the future of nations; there are individuals who doubt even the permanence of our present civilization. But, assuming that a people's past is to some extent an index of its future, at least over a moderate period of time, and that the future development of Europe (and its colonial extensions) will continue more or less along the lines which that development has pursued in recent centuries, some speculation seems justifiable at least concerning the growth and possible spread of the European languages. Growth in language is primarily a matter of population. Consequently the most important question affecting the future size of a language is, how much undeveloped territory does it have in which to expand? An almost equally important consideration is the climate and fertility of that territory. Of all languages, English, Russian, and Spanish possess the largest areas. As a result of the colonial expansion of England in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the English-speaking nations today control about a quarter of the earth surface, while Russian controls a sixth and Spanish a ninth.

Today the pre-eminence of English in commercial use is undoubted. Its employment for purposes of science and research has increased notably of late, especially in Scandinavian countries and among the smaller nationalities of Europe. Its influence is dominant in the East; cultivated Chinese and Japanese have adopted it as a second language. It is nowhere a question of substituting English for the native speech. Nothing is a matter of greater patriotic feeling than the mother tongue. The question simply concerns the use of English, or some other widely known idiom, for international communication. And as John Galsworthy remarked, "any impartial scrutiny made at this moment of time must place English at the head of all languages as the most likely to become, in a natural, unforced way, the single intercommunicating tongue."

All in all, we may conclude that the English language is best provided with the facilities for expansion. Such expansion will come partly from the natural growth of the present population, partly from immigration. Between 1901 and 1910 over thirteen million people emigrated from Europe. While the world wars have brought about changes in this movement of people, both in the countries from which and the areas to which population is flowing, humanity still seeks and will probably continue to seek the opportunities and advantages offered by those districts in which a favorable soil and climate, abundance of natural resources, and populations of lesser density prevail. English, Russian, and Spanish are, in varying degrees, in a position to benefit by this transfer. On the basis of territorial control it is probable that at no very distant time the English language will be spoken by a fifth, perhaps even a quarter, of the population of the world.