**World English: A Blessing or a Curse?**

By Tom McArthur

[1] In the year 2000, the language scholar Glanville Price, a Welshman, made the following assertion as editor of the book *Languages in Britain and Ireland*:

*For English is a killer. It is English that has killed off Cumbric, Cornish, Norn and Manx. There are still parts of these islands where sizeable communities speak languages that were there before English. Yet English is everywhere in everyday use and understood by all or virtually all, constituting such a threat to the three remaining Celtic languages, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Welsh... that their long-term future must be considered... very greatly at risk. (p 141)*

Some years earlier, in 1992, Robert Phillipson, English academic who currently works in Denmark, published with Oxford a book entitled *Linguistic Imperialism*. In it, he argued that the major English-speaking countries, the worldwide English-language teaching industry, and notably the British Council pursue policies of linguistic aggrandisement. He also associated such policies with a prejudice which he calls *linguicism* (a condition parallel to racism and sexism). As Phillipson sees it, leading institutions and individuals within the predominantly "white" English-speaking world, have (by design or default) encouraged or at least tolerated—and certainly have not opposed—the hegemonic spread of English, a spread which began some three centuries ago as economic and colonial expansion.

[2] Phillipson himself worked for some years for the British Council, and he is not alone among Anglophone academics who have sought to point up the dangers of English as a world language. The internationalization of English has in the last few decades been widely discussed in terms of three groups: first, the ENL countries, where English is a native language (this group also being known as the "inner circle"); second, the ESL countries, where English is a second language (the "outer circle"); and third, the EFL countries, where English is a foreign language (the "expanding circle"). Since the 1980s, when such terms became common, this third circle has in fact expanded to take in the entire planet.

[3] For good or for ill, there has never been a language quite like English. There have been many "world languages", such as Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit. By and large, we now view them as more or less benign, and often talk with admiration and appreciation about the cultures associated with them and what they have given to the world. And it is fairly safe to do this, because none of them now poses much of a threat.

[4] English however is probably too close for us to be able to analyze and judge it as dispassionately, as we may now discuss the influence of Classical Chinese on East Asia or of Classical Latin on Western Europe. The jury is still out in the trial of the English language, and may take several centuries to produce its verdict, but even so we can ask, in this European Year of Languages, whether Price and Phillipson are right to warn us all about the language that I am using at this very moment.

[5] It certainly isn't hard to look for situations where people might call English a curse. An example is Australia, which is routinely regarded as a straightforward English-speaking country. The first Europeans who went there often used Latin to describe and discuss the place. The word *Australia* itself is Latin; evidently no one at the time thought of simply calling it "Southland" (which is what *Australia* means). In addition, in South Australia there is a wide stretch of land called the *Nullarbor Plains*, the first word of which sounds Aboriginal, but *nullarbor* is Latin and means "no trees". And most significantly of all, the early settlers called the continent a *terra nullius*. According to the *Encarta World English Dictionary* (1999) the Latin phrase terra *nullius* means:

*... the idea and legal concept that when the first Europeans arrived in Australia the land was owned by no one and therefore open to settlement. It has been judged not to be legally valid*.

But that judgment was made only recently. When the Europeans arrived, Australia was thinly populated—but populated nonetheless—from coast to coast in every direction. There were hundreds of communities and languages. Many of these languages have died out, many more are in the process of dying out, and these dead and dying languages have been largely replaced by either kinds of pidgin English or general Australian English. Depending on your point of view, this is either a tragic loss or the price of progress.

[6] At the same time, however, can the blame for the extinction of Aboriginal languages be laid specifically at the door of English? The first Europeans to discover Australia were Dutch, and their language might have become the language of colonization and settlement. Any settler language could have had the same effect. If for example the Mongols had sustained their vast Eurasian empire, Mongolian might have become a world language and gone to Australia. Again, if history had been somewhat different, today's world language might have been Arabic, a powerful language in West Asia and North Africa that currently affects many smaller languages, including Coptic and Berber. Spanish has adversely affected indigenous languages in so-called "Latin" America, and Russian has spread from Europe to the Siberian Pacific. If English is a curse and a killer, it may only be so in the sense that any large language is likely to influence and endanger smaller languages.

[7] Yet many people see English as a blessing. Let me leave aside here the obvious advantages possessed by any world language, such as a large communicative network, a strong literary and media complex, and a powerful cultural and educational apparatus. Let us instead look at something rather different: the issue of politics, justice, and equality. My object lesson this time is South Africa. Ten years ago, South Africa ceased to be governed on principles of racial separateness, a system known in Afrikaans (a language derived from Dutch) as apartheid. The system arose because the Afrikaner community—European settlers of mainly Dutch descent—saw themselves as superior to the indigenous people of the land they had colonized.

[8] English-speaking South Africans of British descent were not particularly strong in opposing the apartheid regime, and the black opposition, whose members had many languages, was at first weak and disorganized. However, the language through which this opposition gained strength and organization was English, which became for them the key language of freedom and unity, not of oppression. There are today eleven official languages in South Africa—English, Afrikaans, and nine vernacular languages that include Zulu, Ndebele, and Setswana. But which of these nine do black South Africans use (or plan to use) as their national lingua franca? Which do they wish their children to speak and write successfully (in addition to their mother tongues)? The answer is none of the above. They want English, and in particular they want a suitably Africanized English.

[9] So, a curse for the indigenous peoples of Australia and something of a blessing for those in South Africa...

[10] How then should we think of English in our globalizing world with its endangered diversities? The answer, it seems to me, is crystal clear. Like many things, English is at times a blessing and at times a curse—for individuals, for communities, for nations, and even for unions of nations. The East Asian symbolism of yin and yang might serve well here: There is something of yang in every yin, of yin in every yang. Although they are opposites, they belong together: in this instance within the circle of communication. Such symbolism suggests that the users of the world's lingua franca should seek to benefit as fully as possible from the blessing and as far as possible avoid invoking the curse.

(1, 292 words)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Tom McArthur is founder editor of the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992) and the quarterly *English Today*: *The International Review of the English Language* (Cambridge, 1985— ). His more than 20 published works include the *Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* (1981), *Worlds of Reference: Language, Lexicography and Learning from the Clay Tablet to the Computer* (1986), and *The English Languages* (1998). He is currently Deputy Director of the Dictionary Research Center at the University of Exeter.

**EXERCISES**

**I. Reading Comprehension**

*Answer the following questions or complete the, following statements*.

1. It can be inferred from Glanville Price's statement that he is \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. happy that English is everywhere in Britain and Ireland

B. worried about the future of the remaining Celtic languages

C. shocked by the diversity of languages in Britain and Ireland

D. amazed that many people in the UK still speak their Aboriginal languages

2. Cumbric is used as an example of \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. a local dialect

B. a victim of the English language

C. a language that is on the verge of extinction

D. a language that is used by only a limited number of people

3. Which of the following is the major concern of the book *Linguistic Imperialism*?

A. English teaching overseas.

B. British government's language policies.

C. Dominance of English over other languages.

D. The role of English in technology advancement.

4. Both Price and Phillipson are \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. government officials

B. advocates of linguistic imperialism

C. in support of language policies carried out by the British Council

D. concerned about the negative effect of English on smaller languages

5. According to the text, the EFL countries \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. are large in number

B. is known as the "outer circle"

C. will be endangered by English

D. have made English their official language

6. According to McArthur, Chinese is different from English in that \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. it has made a great contribution to the world

B. it has had positive influence on other languages

C. it may result in the disappearance of other languages

D. it probably will not endanger the existence of other languages

7. When he said the jury is out in the trial" (Line 3, Paragraph 4), McArthur meant \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. punishment is due

B. the jury is waiting for a trial

C. no decision has been made yet

D. there is no one to make the decision

8. Australia might be used as an example to show that \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. languages are changing all the time

B. some English words are derived from Latin

C. English has promoted the progress of some nations

D. English should be blamed for the extinction of smaller languages

9. Many people see English as a blessing for people in \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. Australia B. East Asia

C. South Africa D. ESL countries

10. The main theme of this speech is that \_\_\_\_\_\_.

A. English should be taught worldwide

B. English as a world language does more harm than good

C. we should be objective to the internationalization of English

D. we should be aware of (realize) the danger of English as a world language

B. Questions on global understanding and logical structures

1. Why does McArthur introduce Glanville Price and Robert Phillipson's points of view on the spread of English? What is his? Intention?

2. Does McArthur agree with what Price and Phillipson argued? From as early as which section does McArthur show his attitude? Toward the dominance of English as a world English?

3. By reading "It certainly isn't hard to look for situations where people might call English a curse", could we conclude that McArthur believes English is a curse?

4. Could you pick up some words and expressions that signal change or continuation in McArthur's thought?

5. How many parts can this speech be divided? How are the parts organized?

**II. Vocabulary**

*A. Choose the best word from the four choices to complete each of the following sentences*.

1. There has been much opposition from some social groups, \_\_\_\_\_\_ from the farming community.

A. straightforwardly B. notably C. virtually D. exceptionally

2. The \_\_\_\_\_\_ view in Britain and other Western countries associates aging with decline, dependency, isolation, and often poverty.

A. predominant B. credulous C. inclusive D. sustainable

3. But gifts such as these cannot be awarded to everybody, either by judges or by the most \_\_\_ of governments.

A. tough B. demanding C. diverse D. benign

4. The foreman read the \_\_\_\_\_\_ of guilty fourteen times, one for each defendant.

A. prejudice B. verification C. verdict D. punishment

5. They fear it could have a(n) \_\_\_\_\_\_ effect on global financial markets.

A. sizeable B. adverse(negative) C. beneficial D. consequential

6. The UN threatened to \_\_\_\_\_\_ economic sanctions if the talks were broken off.

A. engage B. pursue C. abandon/ abundant D. invoke

7. There are at least four crucial differences between the new \_\_\_\_\_\_ and the old government.

A. regime B. hegemony C. complex D. federation

8. These questions \_\_\_\_\_\_ a challenge to established attitude of superiority toward the outside world.

A. evolve B. constitute C. tolerate D. aroused

9. Because of this, a strong administrative \_\_\_\_\_\_ was needed to plan the use of scarce resources, organize production and regulate distribution.

A. apparatus B. constitution C. insistence D. promotion

10. I learnt that there are no genuinely \_\_\_\_\_\_ animals in this area, all the animals were brought here from other places.

A. endangered B. domesticated C. indigenous D. extinct