

# Could the English Language Die? [C1]

Al giorno d'oggi sembra impossibile da immaginare, ma potrebbero esserci le condizioni perché un giorno l'inglese possa morire, come è successo al latino.

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Could the English Language Die? Given that, by some estimates, a **staggering** 1,500 languages could **vanish** by the end of this century — close to a quarter of the world's total —, some may find it obscene to even ask this question. English is certainly not on the endangered list. As the one truly global language, it is more often **labelled** an exterminator, a great **lumbering** titanosaur that **unwittingly** crushes **hapless** smaller languages **underfoot** — or undertongue. The fact is, though, that no language has yet proved eternal. Subjects of the Roman or Egyptian empires might once have assumed that their languages would last for ever, like their hegemony, but they were wrong. Latin and Egyptian were eventually transformed into languages that would have been unintelligible to Augustus or Ramses the Great. "English could of course die, just as Egyptian died," says linguist Martin Haspelmath, of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. The more interesting questions are: when and how? Predicting the future of any language is, most linguists will tell you, an exercise in speculation. The code by which we communicate is subject to so many complex and interacting forces that — until AI helps find patterns in the **morass** of data — we can't do much more than guess. It doesn't help that we can't look very far back for precedents: Homo sapiens has been **nattering** for tens if not hundreds of thousands of years, but we only thought of recording our pearls of wisdom about five thousand years ago, when the Sumerians invented writing. Still, most experts would agree on a few guiding principles. Migration is a major **driver** of language change, as is technology — though the two can counteract as well as amplify each other. Some predict that international migration will rise as the climate crisis intensifies, and technological renewal is **speeding up**, but they aren't the only factors in the mix. Widespread **literacy** and schooling — both only a few hundred years old — act as **brakes** on linguistic evolution, by imposing common standards. As if that wasn't unhelpful enough, experts judge that the configuration of the linguistic landscape is terribly susceptible to Black

Swan events — those defined by their unpredictability. The Egyptian language survived the arrival of the Greeks, the Romans and Christianity, but not that of Arabic and Islam in the 7th century AD. No one quite knows why. We're in uncharted territory, in other words. English could come under pressure as a global lingua franca if China replaces the US as the world's dominant superpower, and if India drops English as an official language. Demographic factors could drive the growth of African lingua francas — Lingala and Swahili, for example, but also other legacy colonial languages such as French and Portuguese — and of Spanish in the Americas, without any major war. "A hundred years from now, the world could be very different," Haspelmath says. But English will still be spoken in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, in all likelihood. And we have to distinguish between two phenomena: the resizing of English's dominion, and its own internal evolution. English exists today in many spoken variants, just as Latin did before it exploded into Romance. Those variants are being held together by a common written form and the internet — adhesive forces that were absent in the late Roman empire, most of whose subjects were illiterate — so English is unlikely to go the way of Latin. On the other hand, the balance of power between the variants is likely to shift, so that it's no longer American- or British-English speakers setting the standards (unless the former retain their grip on communication technologies.) West African Pidgin, a creole strongly influenced by English, was spoken by a few thousand people two centuries ago, but it's now the dominant language of west Africa, and linguist Kofi Yakpo of the University of Hong Kong predicts that by 2100 it will have four hundred million speakers. It's mostly a spoken language, so Pidgin speakers revert to English when they write. "It's very clear that in half a century we'll have more books written [in English] by Nigerians or Indians than by UK residents," Yakpo says. That means that Nigerian and Indian colloquialisms will start entering 'standard' English, as those new titans pull the lexical blanket towards them, so to speak. The vocabulary of a language — its words — tends to be its fastest evolving component. Sounds or phonology, the stuff of accents, and grammar are typically more conservative, but change in them is needed to make a language unintelligible to its original speakers — to turn it into a new language, that is. So even though New Yorkers and Londoners might be

calling liquor or **booze** by the Pidgin word for it, 'ogogoru', within fifty years — they will still probably be speaking Englishes that today's Londoners and New Yorkers could understand. As for the combined impact of migration and technology on the nature of English, that's harder to anticipate. Although the language has never **stood still**, the growing influx of non-native English speakers to English-speaking **strongholds** such as Britain and North America could **usher in** a period of accelerated change, leading to a new language in need of a new name: 'post-modern English'? But a **backlash** resulting in less permeable borders and stricter language policies, could mitigate that. And if machine translation is taken up on a massive scale, both the residents and the immigrants could be relieved of the pressure to learn each other's languages. At the very least, this technology might act as a **buffer**, **stemming** the flow of **loanwords** such as 'ogogoru' between languages or language variants — countering the effect of migration, once again. The point is that even if we can't predict how English will change, we can be sure that it will, and that not even the world's first — and for now, only — global language is immune from extinction. Both Latin and Egyptian were spoken for more than two thousand years; English has been going strong for about 1,500. It's looking healthy now, some might even say too healthy, but its days could yet be numbered. Published in The Guardian on 11 May 2025.

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# Glossary

- **illiterate** = analfabeta
- **so to speak** = per così dire
- **brakes** = freni
- **stood still** = restare fermo, immobile
- **the former** = questi ultimi
- **pull the lexical blanket** = tirare la coperta
- **loanwords** = prestiti linguistici
- **lumbering** = goffo, pesante
- **driver** = forza trainante
- **to go the way of** = seguire lo stesso destino di
- **drops** = abbandonare
- **strongholds** = bastioni
- **morass** = intrigo, ammasso
- **speeding up** = accelerare
- **AD** = dopo Cristo (anno Domini)
- **nattering** = chiacchierare
- **buffer** = ammortizzatore
- **vanish** = scomparire
- **unwittingly** = involontariamente
- **underfoot** = lungo il cammino
- **in all likelihood.** = con ogni probabilità
- **grip** = dominio
- **backlash** = reazione negativa, contraccolpo
- **labelled** = etichettare, considerare
- **hapless** = sfortunati
- **uncharted territory** = territorio inesplorato
- **staggering** = sconvolgente, impressionante
- **booze** = bevande alcoliche
- **usher in** = introdurre
- **literacy** = alfabetizzazione
- **stemming** = contenere