

# One world, one lingua franca: English

By H.D.S. Greenway  
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Prince Philip, the duke of Edinburgh, came to New York the other day to attend a banquet for the venerable English Speaking Union.

The duke recalled an incident flying into Algeria. He spoke to the air traffic controller in English. Later he met the traffic controller and they spoke in French.

"But surely you can speak English," the duke said.

"No," said the air controller. "I know only the words for air traffic control..."

English is the official international language of air traffic. Controllers and pilots, no matter what their mother tongue, must learn at least enough English to receive takeoff and landing instructions.

The language of Shakespeare, once spoken only in the southern part of a rainy island off the European littoral, has taken over as the world's international language — not only of pilots, but of businessmen, doctors, scientists and just about anyone who needs to communicate with someone in another part of the world.

According to the English Speaking Union, 40 percent of the world's population now speaks English, either as a first or second language.

The percentage of English speakers among educated people is even higher.

*Lingua franca*, or common language, translates literally as "Frankish language" — the language by which the people of the Mediterranean could talk to each other in the Middle Ages.

As late as the 19th century, French was still considered the language of diplomacy and culture.

Today, when a European parliamentarian from Italy wants to chat up his German counterpart in a Strasbourg café, the language, likely as not, will be English.

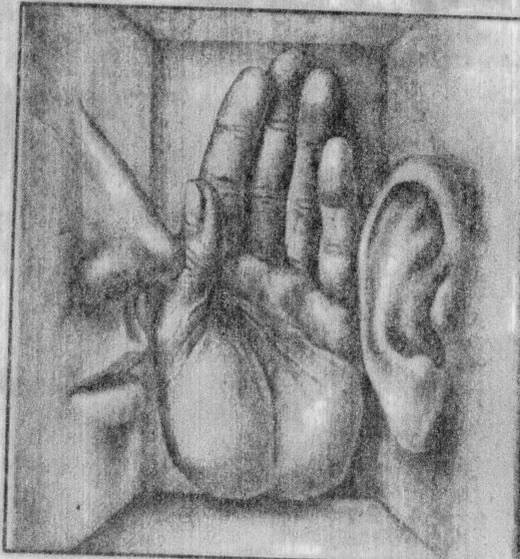
When a Japanese businessman sits

with an Indonesian client in a Bangkok restaurant, their conversation, and the menu, will be in English.

India has nine official languages, but government business is carried on in English because no Indian language group would agree to let any other become the official language of the country.

"Without English they wouldn't know how to talk to each other," says Sunil Sethi, an Indian journalist. "It's the bridge."

In New Guinea, where there are more than a hundred languages, the official language is Pidgin; a *lingua franca* derived



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from English.

The famous Bible story translated into Pidgin, for example, would read: "King Herod he kilim, makim dai, all pikinini bolong Bethlehem."

It was the spread of the British Empire that brought English to the four corners of the world. But it was the United States, as it emerged after World War II, that crowned English as the language of technology and science.

Scientists, who might have learned German 50 years ago, today have to read English to be able to keep up with developments.

"International conferences now, as opposed to the early years after World War II, are held in English even when most of the participants may be from a single, non-English-speaking country," says David Baltimore, a molecular biologist and Nobel laureate.

He remembers a conference in Germany, where more than 90 percent of the participants were German, yet all the meetings were in English.

"This is partly because they know that Americans are unlikely to be fluent in any foreign language, one of the great defects in American education, but also because they are all so comfortable talking about science in English."

England may be in eclipse and the United States in relative decline, but it is too late for Japanese or any other language to take over from English as the *lingua franca* to the world. As the language of high tech, computers, communications and the accelerating spread of information, English is the *sine qua non* for students in every country around the world who want to compete in the 21st century.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the communist countries of Indochina.

Twenty years ago, if you didn't speak Lao, Cambodian or Vietnamese, you had to know French to get along in these former French colonies.

Today, the overwhelming favorite foreign language of the young is English. In Phnom Penh there are private tutoring schools springing up in back streets advertising "English Book Number One" or "Streamline English."

"It is sad for the French who love their language, and their language is so beautiful," a Vietnamese recently told me.

"They send delegations to Hanoi to keep us in the Francophone world, but the young people all want to learn English. We want to be a modern country and catch up with technology. Without English you cannot even read the manuals."

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