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Why English Became a Global Language An Analysis of Historical, Technological and Social Factors

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Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola ingliz tilining global muloqot vositasiga zaylanish sabablarini tahlil etadi. Britaniya imperiyasining mustamlakachilik siyosati, AQShning XX asrdagi yetakchi mavqei, globallashuv jarayoni hamda kompyuter va internet texnologiyalarining tarqalishi — ingliz tilini butun dunyo bo'ylab yoygan asosiy omillar sifatida ko'rib chiqiladi. Maqola shuningdek ushbu tilning bugungi kunda ta'lim, ilm-fan, biznes va diplomatiya sohasidagi rolini baholaydi.

Kalit so'zlar: ingliz tili, global til, Britaniya imperiyasi, globallashuv, internet, lingua franca, ta'lim, sun'iy intellekt.

Abstract: This article analyses the forces that propelled English to its current status as the world's foremost language of international communication. The colonial legacy of the British Empire, the geopolitical ascendancy of the United States in the twentieth century, accelerating globalisation, and the emergence of the internet and digital technology are examined as the principal drivers of the language's worldwide spread. The article further assesses the role of English today across education, science, business, and diplomacy, and considers the implications for linguistic diversity in the era of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: English language, global language, British Empire, globalisation, internet, lingua franca, education, artificial intelligence

Introduction

Аннотация: В данной статье анализируются факторы, определившие нынешнее положение английского языка как основного средства международного общения. Рассматриваются колониальное наследие Британской империи, геополитическое доминирование США в XX веке, ускорение глобализации, а также роль интернета и цифровых технологий как ключевых движущих сил распространения языка по всему миру. Дополнительно оценивается роль английского языка в сферах образования, науки, бизнеса и дипломатии, а также рассматриваются последствия для языкового разнообразия в эпоху искусственного интеллекта.

Ключевые слова: английский язык, глобальный язык, Британская империя, глобализация, интернет, лингва-франка, образование, искусственный интеллект





English today stands as the world's foremost language of international communication. With over 1.5 billion speakers globally — of whom roughly 400 million are native speakers — it has achieved a reach that no language in human history has ever matched. How did a tongue that originated on a small island in northwestern Europe come to encircle the globe? The answer lies not in any inherent linguistic superiority, but in a convergence of historical conquest, economic power, and technological dominance that unfolded across several centuries. [1]

This article examines the principal forces that propelled English to its current position: the legacy of the British Empire, the rise of the United States, the processes of globalisation, and the digital revolution. Together, these forces created a self-reinforcing cycle in which the usefulness of knowing English continuously multiplied, drawing ever more speakers into its orbit.

1. Historical Factors

1.1. The British Empire

The foundation of English's global reach was laid by the British Empire, which at its height in the early twentieth century controlled approximately a quarter of the world's land surface and governed roughly 400 million people. From North America and the Caribbean to South Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, British colonial administration imposed English as the language of law, governance, and formal education [2].

The consequences of this imposition were profound and enduring. Colonial subjects who wished to advance economically or politically had little choice but to acquire English. Schools modelled on British curricula produced generations of educated elites for whom English was a gateway to power. When these territories eventually gained independence — most of them during the mid-twentieth century — they retained English as an official or co-official language, partly because it served as a neutral medium among ethnically and linguistically diverse populations. Nigeria, for instance, has over 500 indigenous languages; English remains the glue that holds its national institutions together.

1.2. The Rise of American Power

The twentieth century transferred the main engine of English's global spread from Britain to the United States. After the Second World War, the United States emerged as the dominant economic, military, and cultural power. The Bretton Woods monetary system, the Marshall Plan, the founding of the United Nations, and the establishment of international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank all took place within an English-language framework.





American cultural exports — Hollywood films, jazz and rock music, fast-food chains, television serials — created enormous soft-power pressure to learn English. For millions of young people across the world, English was not merely useful but desirable: the language of modernity, aspiration, and global participation.

1.3. Globalisation

From the 1980s onward, the accelerating integration of the world economy created an urgent practical demand for a shared business language. Multinational corporations operating across dozens of countries needed a single working language for internal communication. International organisations, summit diplomacy, academic publishing, and aviation safety all converged on English as the de facto standard. The network effect took hold: the more people who used English as a lingua franca, the more valuable it became for everyone else to learn it.

2. Technology and the Internet

2.1. The Computer Revolution

The microcomputer revolution of the 1970s and 1980s was born in English-speaking Silicon Valley. The operating systems, programming languages, and user interfaces that came to define personal computing — MS-DOS, Windows, C, BASIC, FORTRAN — were built around English keywords and commands. For the first two decades of the personal computing era, accessing advanced software almost necessarily meant navigating an English-language environment.

This created a powerful incentive for technically minded people worldwide to acquire at least functional English. Manuals, error messages, developer documentation, and technical forums were overwhelmingly in English. Programmers in Tokyo, Moscow, and Cairo learned to think in English syntax.

2.2. The World Wide Web

The emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s extended English's technological dominance to a mass audience. In its early years, estimates suggest that well over 80 percent of online content was in English. Email, newsgroups, e-commerce, and eventually social media platforms — Google, Amazon, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube — were designed by English-speaking engineers for a primarily Anglophone market, then adopted globally.

The proportion of English-language web content has declined as broadband penetration has expanded in China, India, and Latin America, but English retains a disproportionate presence in high-value domains: academic repositories, technical documentation, financial data, and the commanding heights of artificial intelligence research.





2.3. Artificial Intelligence and the Digital Future

The generative AI systems of the 2020s — large language models trained on vast web corpora — have inherited and amplified English's digital predominance. These models perform best in English, having been trained on a corpus in which English-language text is dramatically over-represented relative to world population [3]. As AI tools become increasingly central to knowledge work and scientific research, fluency in English becomes ever more tightly coupled with effective use of cutting-edge technology.

3. The Significance of English Today

3.1. Science and Higher Education

English is today the overwhelmingly dominant language of science. Major international journals — Nature, Science, The Lancet, the Proceedings of the IEEE — publish exclusively in English. According to various bibliometric studies, more than 90 percent of indexed scientific articles are written in English. Researchers who wish their work to be read and cited internationally have no realistic alternative but to publish in English. [4]

In higher education, the world's most prestigious universities — Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, MIT, Stanford — conduct instruction in English. International standardised tests such as IELTS and TOEFL serve as gatekeeping instruments for admission to these institutions.

3.2. Business and Commerce

In the corporate world, English has become the default language of cross-border communication. Companies such as Samsung, Toyota, Volkswagen, and Siemens have adopted English as their internal corporate language — not because their employees are native English speakers, but because it provides a common medium across subsidiaries in dozens of countries. The World Economic Forum at Davos, G20 summit communiqués, and WTO negotiations are all conducted in English.

3.3. Diplomacy and International Institutions

Among the six official languages of the United Nations, English functions in practice as the primary working language. Most international treaties are drafted in English; even agreements between non-Anglophone parties frequently use English as the authoritative text. Civil aviation worldwide is conducted in English: air traffic control communications, pilot training standards, and ICAO documentation are all in English, a choice driven primarily by safety considerations.

Conclusion





English did not become a global language because it is inherently simpler, richer, or more beautiful than its rivals. It became global because the societies that spoke it were, for several centuries, the most powerful forces shaping the modern world. The British Empire spread English across the globe; American hegemony in the twentieth century entrenched it; and the digital revolution locked it in as the default medium of the information age.

For speakers of every other language, this presents both an opportunity and a challenge. English proficiency opens doors to education, employment, and participation in global culture and science. At the same time, the dominance of English raises legitimate questions about linguistic diversity, cultural equity, and the cognitive advantages that native speakers enjoy.

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