The Language Revolution (David Crystal)

The twentieth century has seen English emerge as the global language. Meanwhile the world loses another language every fortnight. David Crystal argues that we are witness to an era of unprecedented linguistic change.

We are living in an age of dramatic and unprecedented linguistic revolution. I do not believe that this is too strong a word. A 'revolution' is any combination of events which produces a radical shift in consciousness or behaviour over a relatively short period of time, and this is what is currently taking place.

What makes the second half of the twentieth century - and the 1990s in particular - a highly significant period in the history of language is that we find a coming together of three major trends, each global in its implications, first, there has been the emergence of English as a genuinely global language, and the accompanying development of new varieties of English around the world. Second, there is the realisation that huge numbers of languages are endangered or dying, which has resulted in a sense of crisis and fresh initiatives towards preservation and regeneration. And third, there is the arrival of Internet technology, which has supplemented spoken and written language with a linguistically novel medium of communication, and added a further dimension of variety to our linguistic experience.

**English as a Global Language**

In my book English as a Global Language (1997) I discuss the reasons for the arrival of English as a genuine world language in the twentieth century. Chief among them is the growth in the number of countries wanting to talk to each other, for political, commercial, or cultural reasons. The membership of the main political forum, the UN, grew in the second half of the twentieth century from some fifty members to its current level of 189, and there has been corresponding growth in many international bodies. Other global trends in the use of English, in such domains as air transportation, advertising, science, technology, and broadcasting, have been repeatedly documented. It is possible to assert with confidence that every major twentieth century cultural trend was either initiated in an English-speaking country or (as in the case of cinema) quickly facilitated by one. The result has been a global spread for English which, although sometimes exaggerated, is unprecedented.

**‘everyone, not just teachers, is faced with the uncertainties of a rapidly changing linguistic world’**

Current statistical wisdom suggests chat about one in four of the world's population (circa 1.5 billion) use English to some degree. This remarkable figure is not of course on account of its mother-tongue speakers (which account for only some 400 million people, behind several other mother-tongue populations, notably Mandarin Chinese), but because of its use by people as a second or foreign language, who outnumber native-speakers in a ratio of some 3:1.

**Language death**

The chief external consequences of any language acquiring global status are bound up with the second component of the revolution, a trend I deal with in my Language Death (2000). Although languages have come into existence and died away throughout human history, it is only in the second half of the twentieth century, and in the 1990s in particular, that we have seen the process of endangerment and death emerge into public view so dramatically. Again, the thrust of the facts is easy to summarise, even though people are understandably tentative over the exact figures involved: of the 6,000 or so languages in the world, it seems probable that about half of these will disappear in the course of the present century - an average of one language dying out every fortnight or so - and that, this rate of loss is significantly greater than at any previous time in recorded history. Professional awareness of the crisis developed only in the 1990s, following the publication of a series of worldwide surveys, and popular awareness is still very limited, and certainly nowhere near the corresponding awareness of biological loss that we associate with the environmental movement. Most people have yet to develop a language conscience. But the extent of the ongoing loss in the world's linguistic diversity is so cataclysmic that it makes the word 'revolution' look like an understatement, when we consider it in this context.

The connection between these first two revolutionary trends needs to be recognised, but not oversimplified. The impact of dominant languages on minority languages is a matter of universal concern, and the role of English is especially implicated. But it is important to stress that all majority languages are involved: the growth of English as a global language is not the sole factor in explaining language endangerment. Although it is English that has been the critical factor in the disappearance of languages in such parts of the world as Australia and North America, this language is of little relevance when we consider the corresponding losses that have taken place in South America or in many parts of Asia, where such languages as Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese have replaced local languages. Nor, for that matter, is it always the chief factor in colonial Africa, where inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalries at a local level are often the reason for the endangerment of a particular language. The thrust of the point is a general one: we are having to deal with the consequences of a globalisation trend in which unprecedented market and cultural forces have been unleashed, steadily eroding the balance of linguistic power and involving all major languages.

**Language and the Internet**

Terms such as 'global village', which became ubiquitous during the 1990s, were reinforced in that decade by the third component of my revolution, which I have dealt with in Language and the Internet (2001). Although the Internet as a technology has been around for several decades, very few of the people reading this paper would have had access to it ten years ago. Most people came on-line for e-mails and chat during the 1990s, and mostly since the mid-90s. The World Wide Web itself only came into existence in 1991. And what we now have is a new medium - computer-mediated communication - which is undeniably a revolution technologically and socially, and which I argue is just as much a revolution linguistically. Netspeak - my term for the features of language on the Internet unique to that medium - is remarkable not just because it has introduced new vocabulary and jargon, or because of the speed at which innovation in language can be circulated worldwide (though this latter point is itself an important revolutionary feature), but because it has provided us with new alternatives to the way in which human communication can take place. It is neither speech nor writing. The absence of immediate feedback distances Netspeak from face-to-face conversation, and demands new ways of expressing rapport and anticipating reaction (the invention of emoticons, or smileys, are an early primitive attempt at solving this problem). The process of e-mail framing (in which we routinely cut-and-paste bits of messages and add comments to produce new messages indistinguishable in form from their originals) is without precedent in written and spoken language. Netspeak is unlike writing in its impermanence: pages on screen can change as we watch (through animation, text movement, and so on), and be refreshed in ways that written language, with its stability, cannot match. Chatroom conversations are unlike speech in that they enable us to participate in many conversations simultaneously. Netspeak is neither spoken language nor written language: it has adapted features of speech and of writing to suit the new medium, and added other features that neither speech nor writing could ever convey. This if nothing else confers on it revolutionary status in the history of human communication.

But for languages - and especially for minority and endangered languages - its effect is also nothing short of revolutionary. The Internet began as an exclusively English-language medium, for obvious reasons to do with its point of origin in the USA; but by the mid-1990s it had already attracted a significant other-language use.

**‘The potential is present for great things to happen. But as always with revolutions, it is up to individuals to capitalise on them’**

The statistic most often cited at that time was that up to twenty per cent of the Internet - by which people generally meant web pages - were in languages other than English. By 2000 this figure had risen to thirty per cent, and some service providers were already anticipating an increase to fifty per cent by the middle of the decade.

Much of this increase was the result of the larger languages coming increasingly on-line - German and Japanese, for example - but the opportunity the Net provides for minority and endangered languages had also not gone unnoticed. The number of languages present on the Internet now must be in the region of 1,500.

Many of these languages have only a few sites, but the more resourceful (and resources-available) minority languages are represented by thousands of sites. Moreover, the arrival of chatroom technology has meant the emergence of virtual speech communities, in which people who had previously found it impossible to use a language because separated by distance can now join a chat-group in that language, and experience the immediate benefits that routine interaction can bring. The convenience, economy, and reach of the medium makes it a godsend to language communities which previously would have found the public expression of their language (through broadcasting or the press) beyond their resources. And it is the sudden availability of this language-reinforcing technology which yields the third element in my revolutionary decade. It should perhaps be added that the medium is one which intrinsically privileges diversity, because of its lack of centralised ownership. Although standards of expression, presentation, and design are

emerging, the overriding impression of the Net is its variety of language and style. The Net holds a mirror up to our linguistic natures, and all aspects of our traditional linguistic expression may be found there, as well as several new styles.

**Re-thinking language identity**

It is notable how each of these three trends - the emergence of a global language, the phenomenon of language endangerment, and the arrival of the Internet - have had consequences for our developing notions of linguistic diversity. Global English has given extra purpose to a variety of standard English, in the way it guarantees a medium of international intelligibility; but it has also fostered the growth of local varieties as a means of expressing regional identity, and some of these new varieties will, in due course, evolve into new languages. The Internet has provided us with fresh dimensions of linguistic and stylistic variation, and provided new ways of focusing on language use. There is even an up-side to language endangerment: the manifestation of language death on such a scale has sharpened the minds of minority language users wonderfully, and fresh initiatives are now everywhere - not least the one which led to the European Year of Languages in 2001 - to influence public opinion about what linguistic identity means and how it can be fostered. The potential is present for great things to happen. But, as always with revolutions, it is up to individuals to capitalise on them. And to do this we have to rethink several of our long-established notions about the nature of language. It is not always a comfortable process.

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