The Language of Twenty-First-Century Business

I. The First *Lingua Franca* of Business

1   The term *lingua franca* has its roots in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. During the Middle Ages, this language, based on Italian, with elements of Arabic, French, Greek, and Spanish, was used as a means of communication by people whose own native languages were not mutually intelligible. Lingua franca was often used by European merchants to communicate with other merchants in the Near East. Today the term lingua franca is used to describe any language of wider communication used by people who do not share a language. For example, beginning in the seventeenth century, French became the dominant language of business, culture, and diplomacy in Europe. Arabic serves as a lingua franca in the Islamic world today, as does Swahili in parts of eastern **Africa.**

2   The dissemination of the English language accompanied the expansion of the British Empire. Later, as the populations and influence of its former colonies, especially the United States, grew, the use of English spread exponentially. English slowly replaced French as the language of diplomacy and law, and eventually also pushed aside German as the dominant language of scientific publications. In the late 1880s, a Polish eye doctor and linguist, Ludovic Zamenhof, invented a language called *Esperanto,* which he hoped would be a politically and culturally neutral lingua franca. He and many supporters believed that it would replace English as the primary language for international communication. In fact, however, the language was based exclusively on European languages, and never came close to becoming a significant lingua franca. Instead, English continued to develop as a vehicle of communication for people of diverse backgrounds, especially for international business.

II. The Rise of Global English

3   By 1950, English had become widely accepted as the language of international business. Today, as an official language in more than 60 countries, and with as many as 1.8 billion speakers worldwide, English retains its dominant role in diplomacy, business, and science. How long this dominance will last has been the subject of debate. British linguist David Graddol has suggested that English might soon be replaced by emerging international and regional languages such as Arabic, Hindi, or Chinese in its role in international business; yet others disagree that English will **relinquish** its top spot any time soon. Countries all over the world have invested heavily in the teaching of English as a foreign language, many with a great degree of success. Most experts believe that English is now

the most widely spoken language in the world, yet, only about 12 percent of the world's population claims English as a first language. In fact, non-native speakers of English vastly outnumber its native speakers, prompting the use of the term Global or World English to reflect the global context of its use.

4   Global or World English is the English spoken in countries where it is not an official language. It is believed that there are nearly 1 billion speakers of English as a second or foreign language. With this number of speakers, the varieties of native and non-native English around the world are growing more diverse. The English spoken by a call center employee from India, for example, may be difficult for a customer in New Zealand to understand. An American engineer from Alabama may struggle to converse with a colleague from Glasgow, Scotland. Though the language of communication is English, this does not always mean the speakers are intelligible to one another.

Figure 3.2 English-speaking Populations Worldwide
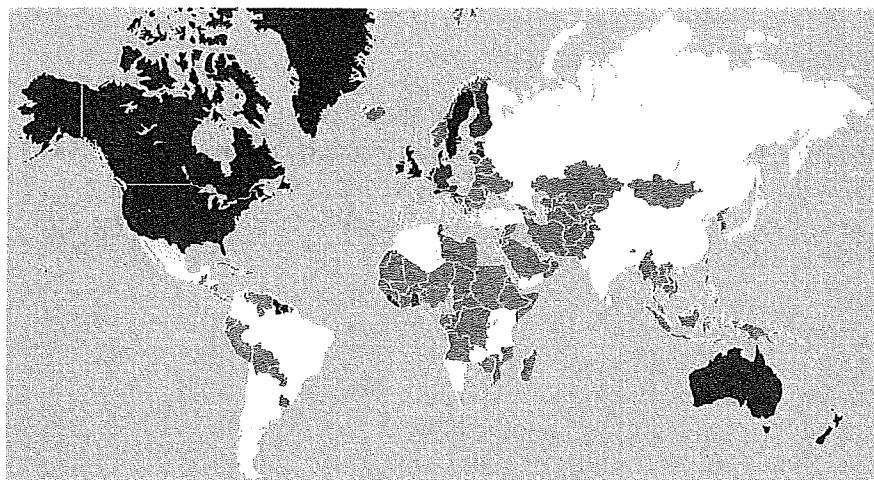
Percentage of English speakers by country:
■ 80–100%   ■ 60–80%   ■ 40–60%   ▨ 20–40%   ☐ 0–20%

5   A number of multinational corporations have imposed English as their main language of communication. This type of company may have divisions located in Brazil, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, and the U.S, and the employees from these various locations need to be able to communicate effectively. For example, when global manufacturing corporations, like the German-based company Bitzer, have to send their mechanical engineers overseas to troubleshoot problems, the language of communication is often English. But the English spoken among the supervisors, engineers, production teams, and sales forces is not always the same. When communication breaks down, productivity and efficiency suffer, which translates into potential losses for international **corporations**.

WHILE YOU READ ③
Look back at paragraph 5. What can you infer?
(a) Miscommunication can cause mistakes.
(b) Miscommunication can cause conflict.

III. "Globish": Attempting to Break through Barriers

6   Language diversity is pervasive and perhaps inevitable in international business, but it can become an impediment to conducting business effectively. When Jean-Paul Nerrière worked for IBM[1] in Paris in the 1980s, he came to the realization that he and his colleagues spoke a different kind of English than their American counterparts. Nerrière's co-workers were a diverse group, from about 40 different countries. They spoke a minimal, utilitarian variety of English, using the 1500 to 2000 words that were necessary to get a point across. Miscommunications started soon after their American colleagues introduced themselves. Inspired to solve the problem, Nerrière devised a formal subset of English consisting of about 1500 words and some basic grammar rules. He called it "Globish" – a combination of "global" and "English."

7   But questions soon arose in the international business community as to whether Globish, with its minimum vocabulary and simplistic grammar, could really bridge the gap between employees with different language backgrounds. Critics pointed to its limited capacity to express more complex thoughts and concepts. There are no jokes, no slang[2] or idioms, no eloquence. There is nothing to foster personal connections between its speakers. Nevertheless, Globish has been useful when there is no other means of communication and for some, it can be a useful first step in acquiring a higher level of proficiency in **English**.

IV. Loss and Translation: The Impact of Technology on the Language of Business

8   As much of the world rushes to acquire English proficiency, others are looking to the future and asking if these efforts are really necessary. With innovative technologies, such as translation programs and mobile apps already on the horizon, learning any second language may soon be a thing of the past. Businesses have jumped on the bandwagon[3] of instant online translation programs for written texts, such as Babylon, Google Translate, or Bing Translator. Part of the problem with these automatic translation programs and sites has been that they cannot deal with the nuances of language and particularly idiomatic expressions. In general, a human translator is needed to modify the output of these translators in order for the product to be acceptable. Every year brings improvement in accuracy of automated translators, however, and we may soon be able to use them in a wider range of contexts.

9   Until this technology is perfected and widely used, the business world will still need to reach speakers of many languages. Since the goal of most companies is to expand their customer base and increase sales, many global

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[1] *IBM:* International Business Machines, a computer and technology company
[2] *slang:* informal language
[3] *jump on the bandwagon:* to join an activity that has become popular

businesses maintain an international online presence by having websites in several languages. On Bitzer's website, for example, a user can navigate through the homepage in one of six different languages. To date, for the website development as well as communication among international employees, the best way for the business sector to overcome language barriers has been through professional translation services, in other words, humans with knowledge of more than one language. Professional translators ensure that websites, marketing materials, and employee documents have been written or translated with a high degree of accuracy.

10   The biggest challenge in bridging the gap between two languages, however, is not in the translation of written texts, but in the real-time translation of speech. The new speech translation device "Sigmo" is beginning to tackle this problem. Sigmo is the size of a small Post-it note and allows almost real-time translating of 25 languages. The user simply presses one button and speaks, and the device sends the words to the cloud[4] for translation via a Bluetooth[5] connection to the user's phone. Seconds later, the spoken translation emerges in another language. A second button reverses the process, so the user can understand what a speaker of another language is saying. In a similar effort, in 2014, Skype and Microsoft collaborated on software that offers real-time translation for Skype conversations in English, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish as well as instant translation of text messages in 45 languages. Innovations like Skype Translator and Sigmo are still at an initial stage and will undoubtedly require improvements, but these speech-to-speech systems may prove a first step in eliminating the need to learn English or any other second language. English may be the last lingua **franca.**

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[4] *the cloud:* a computer network where data can be processed and stored
[5] *Bluetooth:* a system that allows the exchange of information between electronic devices