



CONTEMPORARY GEOGRAPHIC TOOLS

English on the Internet

English was the dominant language of the Internet during the 1990s. Three-fourths of the people online were using English in 1995, and three-fourths of Web sites used English (Figure 5-1.1). An even higher percentage of e-commerce was conducted in English then. The early dominance of English on the Internet was partly a reflection of the fact that the most populous English-speaking country, the United States, had a head start on the rest of the world in making the Internet available to most of its citizens (refer to Figure 4-15).

The United States was also responsible for using English-language nomenclature for the Internet that the rest of the world has followed. The designation “www,” which English speakers recognize as an abbreviation of “World Wide Web,” is awkward in other languages, most of which do not have an equivalent sound to the English “w.” In French, for example, “w” is pronounced “doo-blah-vay.”

The U.S.-based Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has been responsible for assigning domain names and for the suffixes following the dot, such as “com” and “edu.” Domain names in the rest of the world include a two-letter suffix for the country, such as “fr” for France and “jp” for Japan, whereas U.S.-based domain names don’t need the suffix.

English remained the leading Internet language in the first years of the twenty-first century, but it was far less dominant. The percentage of English-language online users declined from 71 percent in 1998 to 46 percent in 2000 and 27 percent in 2005 (Figure 5-1.1). Mandarin language online users increased from 5 percent of the world total in 1998 to 12 percent in 2000 and 22 percent in 2005. Mandarin is set to pass English as the leading language of online users around 2010.

English has remained the leading language of e-commerce. In 2004, 47 percent of the world’s electronic purchases originated in the United States, and another 10 percent in the English-speaking countries of Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Still, the share of e-commerce in the four countries declined rapidly in just a few years, from 81 percent in 2000 (Figure 5-1.2).

The share of English-based e-business will decline even more sharply in the future unless the Web sites of these businesses are optimized to be found by increasingly important foreign-language search engines. English speakers have been accustomed to searching

the Internet with Google, or perhaps Yahoo. Searchers in France similarly can use French-language Google.fr, which may yield similar results as English-language Google.

But businesses based in English-speaking countries may not have optimized their Web sites for Viola.fr, the search engine preferred by many Internet users in France. Similar to German-language Web.de or Japanese language Dragon.co.jp are alternatives to Google.de or Google.jp. And Google was heavily criticized when its Mandarin language Google.cn was designed to block Web sites deemed unsuitable by Chinese government.

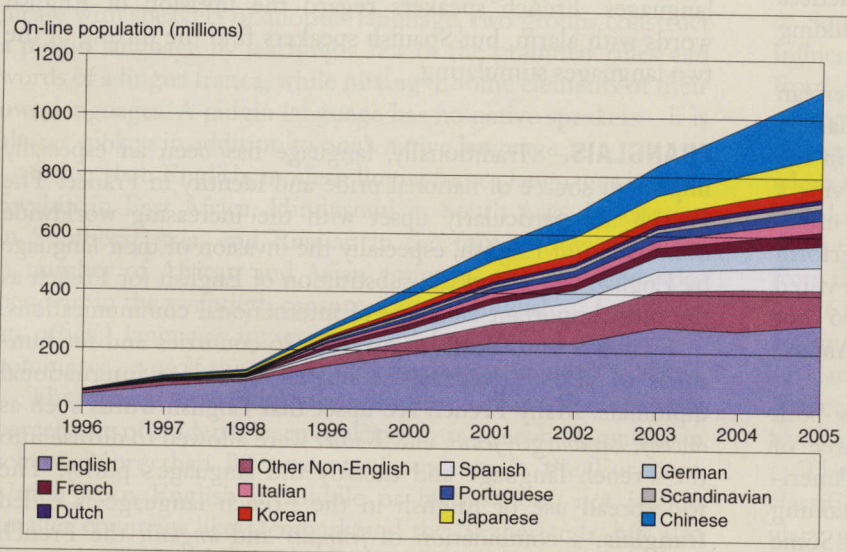


FIGURE 5-1.1 Language of online speakers 1996–2005.

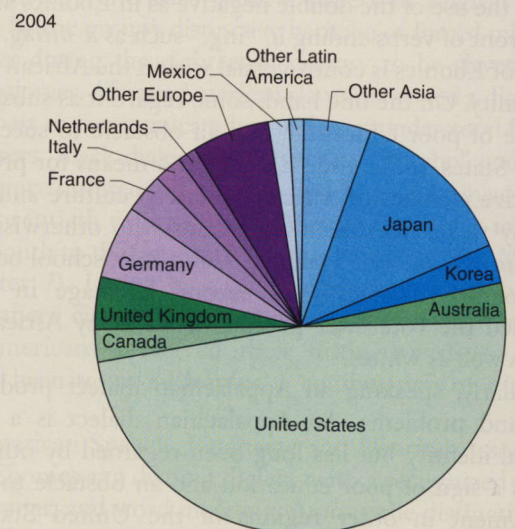
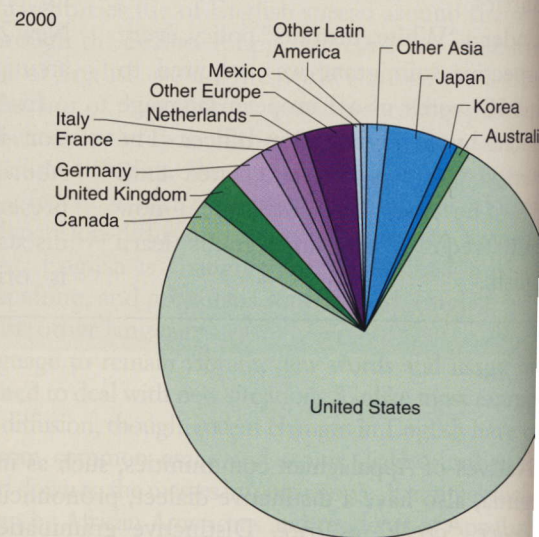


FIGURE 5-1.2 Language of e-commerce 2000–2004.