



Is English Taking Over the World, Virtually?

English is the second most widely spoken language on Earth, after Mandarin Chinese. And English is the most widely spoken second language in the world. It dominates the Internet as well. Here are the 10 most prevalent languages on the Internet as of early 2005, measured as a percent of total Internet users:

English	34.7%	Italian	3.5%
Chinese	13.8%	Portuguese	2.7%
Japanese	8.3%	Dutch	1.7%
Spanish	6.8%		
German	6.5%		
French	4.5%	Top 10 languages	86.4%
Korean	3.9%	Rest of languages	13.6%

However, much of what comes across our computer and cell phone screens isn't a readily recognizable form of English. As with the diffusion of spoken English to far-flung regions of the British Empire, the English language that is spread via electronic correspondence is subject to significant modification. Phonetic, rather than stylistically correct, spelling of words is common. In addition, e-mail, instant

messaging on the Internet, and text messaging on cell phones require a lot of typing and are notoriously deficient in conveying emotions. For these reasons, users often use abbreviations and symbols to shorten the number of keystrokes used, to add emotional punctuation to their correspondence, and to make electronic communication hard to monitor by those who don't understand the language (particularly parents!). *POS* (parent over shoulder), *AFK* (away from keyboard), *VBG* (very big grin), *LOL* (laughing out loud), and *GMTA* (great minds think alike) are some examples, as are the symbol combinations depicting different emotions on sideways faces: :-) (user is smiling or joking), :- @ (user is screaming or cursing), and :- # (well, shut my mouth!). Spoken and written English are quickly picking up these cyberspeech patterns with expressions like *PITA*, used to indicate that someone is a "pain in the ass" without actually saying so! As your instructor for this class will likely confirm, such abbreviations and symbols have even worked their way into term papers at the college level, much to the consternation or delight of language scholars.

Percentages from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>.

Imposing English

English-only laws are nothing new in the United States. Its history as a nation of immigrants has led to a population that at any one point in time speaks a variety of languages besides English. In its early days as a colony, one could hear German, Dutch, French, and a multitude of Native American languages spoken alongside English. This prompted both Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to propose enforcing English as the sole acceptable language, while Theodore Roosevelt once said that "the one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin or preventing all possibility of its continuing as a nation at all would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities. We have but one flag. We must also learn one language, and that

language is English." Citing concerns that providing official documents and services in multiple languages would be just too expensive, contemporary advocates of English-only legislation claim that mandating one language is one way to reduce the cost of government. Some proponents also feel that English-only laws encourage immigrants to assimilate through learning the official language of the United States. Opponents accuse the laws of being racist and suggest that supporters of English-only legislation are threatened by cultural diversity. Debates such as these bring up questions of the legal, social, and political status of minority groups and their languages, debates that exist in many countries besides the United States.

Esperanto and Elvish

Esperanto and Elvish are the names of two constructed languages. That is, both are languages that were invented for a well-defined purpose. This contrasts to most of the world's spoken languages, which are called natural languages. Natural languages were not created intentionally with a specific purpose but rather have evolved slowly over thousands of years.

Esperanto is the most widely spoken of the constructed languages, with as many as 2 million speakers worldwide. Esperanto was invented by L. L. Zamenhof, a Polish oculist, in the 1880s. Zamenhof, who went by the pseudonym Dr. Esperanto (meaning "he who hopes"), wanted to create a language that would become a second language for everyone in the world. He based Esperanto on existing natural languages rather than inventing a completely new structure. Zamenhof wanted a language that is easily learned and easily understood as well as

one that would have a stable structure not open to the constant modification that is common to so many natural languages. Thus, there is very little slang in Esperanto. Though Esperanto is not an official language of any country, thousands of people do use it to communicate worldwide.

Elvish is one of many languages invented by J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Like Esperanto, Elvish is a constructed language invented for a specific purpose. It is one of several languages spoken by the Elvish inhabitants of Middle-Earth, the setting of Tolkien's novels. Unlike Esperanto, Elvish was never intended to supplement or replace any natural languages spoken in the human world, and its pronunciation and script are not easy to learn. However, there are several published dictionaries, language courses, and other resources available for those Tolkien aficionados who wish to learn Elvish.