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Expert: New 'must learn' language likely to be Mandarin

Share of people who are native English speakers declining

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- The world faces a future of people speaking more than one language, with English no longer seen as likely to become dominant, a British language expert says in a new analysis.

"English is likely to remain one of the world's most important languages for the foreseeable future, but its future is more problematic -- and complex -- than most people appreciate," said language researcher David Graddol.

He sees English as likely to become the "first among equals" rather than having the global field to itself.

"Monolingual speakers of any variety of English -- American or British -- will experience increasing difficulty in employment and political life, and are likely to become bewildered by many aspects of society and culture around them," Graddol said.

The share of the world's population that speaks English as a native language is falling, Graddol reports in a paper in Friday's issue of the journal *Science*.

The idea of English becoming the world language to the exclusion of others "is past its sell-by date," Graddol says. Instead, its major contribution will be in creating new generations of bilingual and multilingual speakers, he reports.

A multi-lingual population is already the case in much of the world and is becoming more common in the United States. Indeed, the Census Bureau reported last year that nearly one American in five speaks a language other than English at home, with Spanish leading, and Chinese growing fast.

And that linguistic diversity, in turn, has helped spark calls to make English the nation's official language.

Yale linguist Stephen Anderson noted that multilingualism is "more or less the natural state. In most of the world multilingualism is the normal condition of people."

"The notion that English shouldn't, needn't and probably won't displace local languages seems natural to me," he said in a telephone interview.

While it is important to learn English, he added, politicians and educators need to realize that doesn't mean abandoning the native language.

Graddol, of the British consulting and publishing business The English Company, anticipates a world where the share of people who are native English speakers slips from 9 percent in the mid-twentieth century to 5 percent in 2050.

As of 1995, he reports, English was the second most-common native tongue in the world, trailing only Chinese.

By 2050, he says, Chinese will continue its predominance, with Hindi-Urdu of India and Arabic climbing past English among 15-to-24 year olds, and Spanish nearly equal to it. Graddol said he focused on the 15- to 24-year-old group in 2050 to give an indication of the future past that point.

Swarthmore College linguist K. David Harrison noted, however, that "the global share of English is much larger if you count second-language speakers, and will continue to rise, even as the proportion of native speakers declines."

Harrison disputed listing Arabic in the top three languages, "because varieties of Arabic spoken in say, Egypt and Morocco are mutually incomprehensible."

Even as it grows as a second language, English may still not ever be the most widely spoken language in the world, according to Graddol, since so many people are native Chinese speakers and many more are learning it as a second language.

English has become the dominant language of science, with an estimated 80 percent to 90 percent of papers in scientific journals written in English, notes Scott Montgomery in a separate paper in the same issue of Science. That's up from about 60 percent in the 1980s, he observes.

"There is a distinct consciousness in many countries, both developed and developing, about this dominance of English. There is some evidence of resistance to it, a desire to change it," Montgomery said in a telephone interview.

For example, he said, in the early years of the Internet it was dominated by sites in English, but in recent years there has been a proliferation of non-English sites, especially Spanish, German, French, Japanese and others.

Nonetheless, English is strong as a second language, and teaching it has become a growth industry, said Montgomery, a Seattle-based geologist and

energy consultant.

Graddol noted, though that employers in parts of Asia are already looking beyond English. "In the next decade the new 'must learn' language is likely to be Mandarin."

"The world's language system, having evolved over centuries, has reached a point of crisis and is rapidly restructuring," Graddol says. In this process as many as 90 percent of the 6,000 or so languages spoken around the world may be doomed to extinction, he estimated.