

A Hi there Frank, how was your trip to Scandinavia?

B Absolutely marvellous, Jane, thanks. Superb scenery, great food, and best of all - everybody speaks English. It makes travel so easy when everybody speaks English. In fact, English seems to be the international language of the world, now. Excellent, don't you think?

A No I don't. Language isn't a mere tool for talking, it's also a huge part of our identity. It's how we think and how we view the world. So when we English speakers expect the rest

of the world to learn our language, we're actually asking people to accept many aspects of our culture, history, and traditions. Our vocabulary and grammar, like those of other tongues, have developed from the elements of our past.

B In my opinion, learning English is very valuable for people of other nations, because it's the language of the twenty-first century. We live in a global economy. The financial community especially, dealing on stock, currency, and commodity markets, needs to be able to speak one common language so that the information flow is as easy and clear as possible. English is best here.

A Why? The reason English is so dominant is not for linguistic reasons, but political ones. The reason I speak English is that my country, Ireland, was invaded by an English army, brutally colonised, and the language was imposed on us. The same is true of all the British Empire. And the English-speaking settlers in America, Canada, and Australia made sure that all the indigenous peoples in their countries learned English.

B That's all ancient history. Here are a couple of other examples. English has become the unofficial language of the internet. It's estimated that over half of the material on the billions of websites worldwide is in English, as is all the technical language that goes with it. Some countries like France are trying to resist it, but it's impossible. Have you 'liked' something on Facebook recently? Or what about the movies? Hollywood and American films still dominate TV and the cinema, and English is indispensable if you want to work in film, or just to watch something in the original language version.

A Well, I don't like the domination by Hollywood. English speakers expect the rest of the world to fall in with them. Just imagine if it was decided that, in the place where you live and work, more people spoke Portuguese than English, and Portuguese became the new language in which you had to work. Most people would be horrified at this, they'd feel they were surrendering part of their culture by being forced to learn a new language. Not to mention the effort you'd have to make to master Portuguese.

B That's not likely to happen. Besides, English is easy to learn.

A Easy to learn at a basic level, but very difficult to speak fluently. It requires a lot of time and effort. There's another factor too: restricting the information flow to English is very limiting.

B That isn't the case. International conferences are almost always held in English, and about ninety per cent of the articles in scientific journals, research documents and so on are in English too. That makes them accessible to everyone, and much easier for everyone to understand.

A Easier to understand for English speakers only. If everyone reads in the same language that reduces the quality of the academic discussion. Here's an example. Most of the Nobel Prize winners in economics are either from the USA, or have worked there, and the research they do is largely based in the English-speaking countries. That means the discussion is heavily biased towards US issues and viewpoints, and doesn't involve alternative views that would come from other language groups. I also think the prevalence of English is a major reason why so many Americans know so little of the world outside the USA.

B You're fighting a losing battle, I'm afraid. English is so flexible: it has the largest vocabulary of any language in the world, but it can also be used at a simple level. For sure Chinese is going to become more important, but English won't lose its first place in the foreseeable future.

A That's far from certain. Anyway, I'd like to see the French, Italians and Germans promoting their languages more.

Outline

The first speaker regrets the supremacy of English in world communication. One's language is not a mere tool for talking, it is also a huge part of one's identity. The English language embodies English cultural traditions, and its ascendancy results from past political dominance. Hollywood's domination of the cinema is regrettable and the fact that English is the principal language used for academic exchange reduces the quality of discussion. She would like to see speakers of other languages promoting their native languages more. The second speaker argues that this international tendency to use English is difficult to resist. The flexibility and extensive vocabulary of English means it is best adapted to be the language of finance, the internet, and entertainment.

Questions

1. Is the ignorance of most languages other than English a problem for the USA?
2. Is Hollywood the main reason why English dominates world culture?
3. Does a language carry culture and history with it?
4. Are other languages like English, easy to learn at a simple level and difficult to speak well?