

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- How important is learning English in your country?
- Why are you learning English?
- Do you think English will be the world's main international language in 100 years?
Why or why not?

2 Key words

a. Write a word in bold from the article next to the correct definition.

1. to change words from one language into another language _____
2. people who study languages and how they work _____
3. when people move from one country or place to another to live _____
4. to make something happen or cause a result _____
5. in danger of disappearing completely _____
6. continues to exist or stay alive _____
7. affected or changed by something or someone _____
8. the effect that something has on a person or situation _____
9. a very powerful country _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. This movie has been _____ into 20 different languages.
2. Some languages are _____ because not many people speak them anymore.
3. Harry's decision to leave the company could _____ big problems later on.
4. China and the United States are both _____.

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5. _____ from rural areas to cities is increasing every year.
6. The building's design was _____ by traditional Japanese houses.
7. _____ say that English is always changing.
8. The new law will have a big _____ on small businesses.
9. This type of milk _____ for several weeks in the fridge.

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For the time being it's dominant – but as the Romans could tell you, nothing lasts forever

Laura Spinney

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- 1 **Linguists** believe that about 1,500 languages could die out by the end of this century (almost a quarter of the world's total), but English is certainly not **endangered**. But the fact is that no language **lasts** forever. Romans or Egyptians probably thought that their languages would last, but they were wrong. "English could die, just as Egyptian died," says linguist Martin Haspelmath, of the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig, Germany. The more interesting questions are: when and how?
- 2 Understanding the future of any language is, most linguists will tell you, very difficult. It doesn't help that we can't look very far back for examples of how people spoke because but we only started recording our languages about 5,000 years ago, when the Sumerian people invented writing. However, most experts agree on a few things. **Migration** and technology both bring about changes in language. School education also slows down changes in languages because people usually learn standard grammar and vocabulary.
- 3 But English could stop being a global language if China takes over from the US and becomes the world's **superpower**, and if India gets rid of English as an official language. People will still carry on

speaking English in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. However, the different varieties of English are likely to change. West African Pidgin, a language **influenced** by English, was spoken by a few thousand people two centuries ago, but it's now the main language of west Africa. Kofi Yakpo of the University of Hong Kong believes that by 2100 it will have 400 million speakers. That means that Nigerian words will probably start entering "standard" English.

- 4 The **impact** of migration and technology on the nature of English, is more difficult to understand. The number of non-native English speakers in English-speaking countries such as Britain and North America could **lead to** a new language. But if AI tools and technology are used to **translate** languages, people won't need to learn each other's languages.
- 5 The point is that even if we don't know *how* English will change, we can be sure that it will, and that not even the world's first – and for now, only – global language won't disappear. Both Latin and Egyptian were spoken for more than 2,000 years; English has been spoken for about 1,500. It's looking healthy now, but it may not be healthy forever.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and decide if the following statements are True or False.

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. About 1,500 languages could die out by the end of this century. | True / False |
| 2. We started writing down languages about 2,000 years ago. | True / False |
| 3. School education makes languages change more quickly. | True / False |
| 4. West African Pidgin is now spoken by more people than 200 years ago. | True / False |
| 5. English has been spoken for longer than Latin and Egyptian. | True / False |

4 Key language

a. Find these phrasal verbs in the article. Then match them to the correct definition.

gets rid of

bring about

die out

takes over from

carry on

1. to continue doing something _____
2. makes something disappear _____
3. to disappear completely or stop existing _____
4. replaces someone or something in a position or role _____
5. to cause something to happen or make something start _____

b. Complete the sentences with the correct phrasal verb from the previous activity.

1. Elena _____ a lot of her old clothes and the end of summer.
2. Many traditional jobs will _____ because of new technology.
3. The new manager _____ Sarah next month.
4. The government wants to _____ changes in the education system.
5. Even though he was tired, Eddie decided to _____ working until midnight.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- How would you feel if English stopped being the world's most important language in the next 100 years? Would it make a difference to your life?
- Should countries try to keep their own languages safe from English? Or should they accept that English is important for talking to people from other countries? Why?

6 In your own words

a. Work in small groups. Choose one word from the list. Search the internet for the information on how this word has changed meaning over the years.

b. Present your information to your classmates.

Common words that changed meaning in English:

nice

awful

garbage

awesome

silly

naughty

bully

luxury

radical

clue