

The *ET column* is where we ask people in the know – academics, broadcasters, educators, linguists, teachers and others connected with English worldwide – to write a column for the journal on issues of controversy, debate, work in the field, and matters of topical and immediate interest.

Notes from East Asia: English in the Pearl River Delta

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I've recently been looking around the Pearl River Delta, doing some research for Cambridge English Profiles. Who is learning English? Why? What kind of level of proficiency do they need? Where are they learning? The delta (which contains the cities of Guangzhou, Dongguan and Shenzhen as well as the 'Special Administrative Regions' of Macau and Hong Kong) is the manufacturing powerhouse of China, from where most of the world's computers, mobile phones, watches, shoes and toys are exported. Guangzhou (still sometimes known by its older name, Canton) is where the story of English in China began in the 17th, and especially in the 18th century, when it acted as the arterial trade link between China and the West. That trade was originally dominated by the Portuguese – and today, Macau must be one of the few places in the world (perhaps the only place?) where official signs are trilingual in Chinese, English and Portuguese. It is a mix which makes the language

landscape of Macau distinct from nearby mainland Zhuhai, where there is now strong demand for learning English.

The pattern of English use and demand is surprisingly varied across the cities in the delta region. I've been reading a book by the American-born Chinese author Leslie Chang, called *Factory Girls*, which follows the lives of several young women who migrated from rural provinces to work in the factories of Dongguan. A whole chapter is devoted to 'assembly-line English' and the weird inventions of an entrepreneur who set up a language school without any knowledge of the teaching of English (and, indeed, it seems, little knowledge of the language either). But I was more struck by the instrumental motivation of the factory workers: English was the ticket which enabled the workers to abandon the assembly line and get a better paid and easier job as a clerical worker. It seems not much English was always required: just enough to talk your way into a job. In the constant churn of employment, where migrant workers were regularly shifting jobs, certification was rarely sought or checked.

Meanwhile, Shenzhen – which has overtaken Hong Kong in size – has declared that in 2012 it will promote an 'international language environment'. That's code for 'English'. A local news source explains:



Getting it right in Zhuhai, Guangdong, China (Photo: Zhuhai)



The trilingual mix of Portuguese, English and Chinese gives public notices in Macau a distinctive appearance (Photo: Macau)

According to an official at the Municipal Foreign Affairs Office, they will focus next year on strengthening the internationalization of both the civil service and the government's official English-language websites. A series of English lectures will be held for civil servants, in order to make it more convenient for foreigners who are working in the city. Work will also be done to standardize Chinese-English signs, supervise the use of English language signs in public facilities, and create measures to make sure that translation errors are prevented. Finally, a series of language books will be published and given as a gift to the local population.

(<http://www.echinacities.com/shenzhen/city-in-pulse/shenzhen-to-promote-an-international-language-environment.html>)

The high priority given to improving the English used in public signage will strike a chord with many travellers. Here in *English Today*, we have published a number of amusing, or simply bemusing, signs in 'Chinglish' over the years. But a recent posting on the Language Log – a long-running commentary on matters linguistic – suggests there may be a new development: away from Chinglish (which, because of its human origins, has been providing hints of an emerging variety of China English) towards machine-translated English. Victor Mair – Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Pennsylvania – posted a photograph of a sign at Kunming airport in SW China which read: 'The cart pleases walk opposite elevator, embark elevator, ask a customer to pull well and hand well, the child sits elevator beard the parent accompany, don't get on the elevator to beat to make' (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3736>).

There followed a long, but often interesting, set of comments on the use of internet translation tools, and the difficulties of distinguishing in the Chinese language between elevators, lifts, escalators and travellers (which, at least here in Hong Kong, go up mountains as well as on the level). One comment voiced 'a suspicion (nothing more): signage is delegated to a lower official who squirrels away the translation budget and hires a free automatic translator, and higher officials don't remember to check'. So, perhaps this particular future of English can be regarded as being shaped by technology and economics as much as by linguistic matters.

I found this an interesting digression from another point of view, as it indicates the growing penetration of automatic translation software into everyday life. Nic Ostler, in his 2010 book *The Last Lingua Franca*, suggested that the one thing we know about widespread lingua francas such as English – and his earlier book *Empires of the Word* documents exactly how many of

them there have been – is that they rise in dominance, reach a peak, and then decline. Ostler's argument, however, is that unlike in earlier eras, as English declines as a world lingua franca it will not be replaced by any other language. Instead its role will be undermined by the ubiquity of machine translation. In an interview on the BBC's morning news programme *Today*, when the book was first published, I suggested that if we take the history of Latin as an example we might surmise that English 'has only another thousand years left'. I now rather regret the hubris which this remark perhaps suggested, but for a number of reasons I don't think machine translation is an imminent threat to the popularity of English.

The following news article plopped into my mailbox whilst writing this column, about the problems of hiring workers in the factory town of Dongguan:

And last year, after the Spring Festival, to hire again across industries. The enterprise dongguan clothing manufacturing town many clothing enterprise parking work in short supply, mouth in the town industrial park, a lot of enterprises open car like please go to the factory job seekers soliciting look. SMW the reporter understands, face to hire problem, many clothing enterprise also tries to factories provider, or simply take orders the foundry to the mainland.

Could you understand all that? It's a problem I'm increasingly familiar with as I carry out my research work in the delta. This is not 'Chinglish'. It looks rather as if a Chinese-language report has been through the mangler of Google Translate. Or perhaps another machine translation tool – I often use Google Translate myself when browsing Chinese language websites, and I can usually determine at least the gist of what is going on.

The mangled report is, I suspect, discussing what is a growing problem in the Pearl River Delta: the economic model of supplying mass, cheap labour to assemble parts – whether they be computers or shoes – is failing. The cheap labour supply is diminishing each year, as the number of young adults in China falls and workers are demanding better working conditions and higher wages. Here in Hong Kong, schools have been closing classrooms and laying off teachers because of declining numbers of local children. Meanwhile, the global recession is shrinking the demand for the goods the factories make. The container ships that I see in Hong Kong harbour every day seem to be sitting higher in the water than in earlier times.

Hence there are several economic and demographic trends affecting the Pearl River Delta at the moment, encouraging local factories to 'move up the value chain', to move into design, for example, rather than

just assembly. Shenzhen, in particular, eyes the Hong Kong economy, based on financial and business services, and wants to move in the same direction. But to do that, it needs more graduates, and more English speakers.

Many of the factories of the delta are already closing and shifting to cheaper locations in western China, or out of China altogether. Some toy manufacturing has already gone to Vietnam, for example, and some garment manufacturing to Bangladesh. But in the drive to cut costs and keep contracts, some Chinese firms are themselves now outsourcing – to Africa. This is quite a complex story, but it is possible not only that Africa will eventually take over China’s role as the new ‘workshop of the world’, but that many of its factories will be owned and managed by Chinese enterprises. This has a number of potential implications for the future of English as a lingua franca, but the trend reflects how Africa’s demographic is rising just as China’s is falling.

Last year, the United Nations Population Division released their latest projections for the world population. I have used these projections extensively in the past for estimating likely populations of speakers of different languages, and the potential numbers of learners of English in different parts of the world. What makes the latest data especially interesting is that the United Nations have now taken the projections forward to 2100 – fifty years further ahead than previous projections, which all ended in 2050. Of course, that reflects the fact that 2050, which seemed so far away when I began using these projections in *The Future of English*, does not look quite so far in the future now. Furthermore, population trends have probably become a little more predictable over the next few decades – as the demographic impact of AIDS in Africa has become better understood, the effect of China’s population control shows consistently in census figures, and the pattern of ageing in developed economies also becomes clearer.

Quite simply, the children of Africa will overtake those of Asia in number, within the new time horizon. This is the first time we have seen a horizon in which Africa takes such a leading role. The two regions, Africa and Asia, will dominate by numbers the

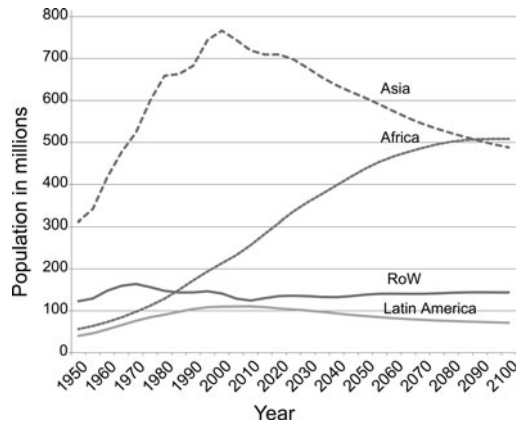


Figure 1.

emerging youth cultures of the world; they also represent both the new consumers and the new workforce.

The new figures have implications for languages. Figure 1 shows the future populations of 5–14-year-olds by four world regions – Africa, Asia, Latin America and Rest of the World. Those ‘RoW’ figures include all the children in North America, Europe and Oceania. The 5–14-year-olds are an interesting group because they represent the compulsory school age in many countries – though there is a tendency everywhere to raise the school-leaving age. Given the recent trend (now so extensive it can be regarded as an educational orthodoxy) to start teaching English in primary schools, these children also represent the population amongst whom the future of English language learning is likely to be determined.

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