Episode 2: Global English

This is Radio Australia, hello I'm Barry Clarke and welcome to our series, 'Smart Societies' where we ask what does it take to be smart in the 21st century. In this program, 'Global English', we look at the rise of English as a world language.

FEMALE TALENT: Never before have there been so many people from different linguistic backgrounds wanting to chat to each other, and so we need obviously a world language and English is in a very good position currently to take that role.
CHINESE SFX: Hello.
FEMALE TALENT: Hi there.
PROFESSOR CHEN HONG: Indeed in China there have been various public debates arguing against the use or overuse of English. People are saying that this is actually bad and is a threat to our culture, but of course I think this is a kind of global trend, a language to be used in common. There is no threat, actually, at all to our cultural integrity, I think through our learning and use of English.
CLARKE: Professor Chen Hong from Shanghai and we'll hear more from him later in the program.

So, why are people driven to learn English when many more people speak other world languages?
JIM DAVIDSON: Many more people speak Chinese and you'd have to say that Spanish and Russian are also extremely significant world languages. But of course all those three groups have this in common that they're geographically concentrated. Whereas the thing about the British Empire is that alone among the great colonial empires it was established on all six continents.
CLARKE: Jim Davidson teaches world history at Victoria University.

Learning English seems to be the smart thing to do. English has become the pre-eminent language of business and international trade, however it hasn't always been the case. For over 2,000 years, Latin was widely spoken, at least in Europe.
JIM DAVIDSON: Well Latin of course was the language of the Roman empire and a lot of European languages grew out of it, ordinary languages like French and Portuguese and Spanish and Italian. It's still of course officially the language of the Catholic Church and until quite recently was the language that services in Catholic churches throughout the world were conducted.

In the European Middle Ages the various states drew on the clergy because they were educated and they drew on them as public servants. And in fact in English our word 'clerk' is related to a very old word for the clergy or the priests, namely 'cleric'. And that close relationship with the two words is not accidental. So in Medieval and Renaissance times you fund that Latin functioned as a European wide language, and that the famous Erasmus, who was a Dutchman could happily go to England or to Venice or to Switzerland or elsewhere and always be able to conduct perhaps somewhat stilted conversations in Latin.
CLARKE: Although Latin died out as a speaking elite it nevertheless remained an influential means of communication for a very long time.
JIM DAVIDSON: The famous Isaac Newton in 1687 published his first great tract on mathematical principles in Latin and it wasn't actually translated into English until about 40 years later. And then

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there's the example which always rather takes my fancy - that Hungary, which in those days was a much bigger country than it is now and contained a number of different racial groups, found the only way to solve this problem was that in its Diet, or parliament, it would conduct its debates in Latin. And of course in universities until well into the mid-20th century it was usual for people even in Australia who wanted to do a Bachelor of Arts to have to do either Latin or Greek.
CLARKE: It was colonisation that transmitted many European languages across the globe, but it was English that gained the major foothold.

Jim Davidson again.
JIM DAVIDSON: France really emerged as the great cultural power and so it was French that was most desirable in the 19th century and which was used as the major diplomatic language. When Austria delivered the ultimatum to Serbia, which began the First World War it was written in not terribly good French. And English in fact was a bit slow to emerge. You do find Chaucer and other people writing in the Middle Ages, but the first dictionary in English doesn't appear till the middle of the 18th century in 1755. And what's interesting if we go back to Newton again is that for his second great work 'The Optics', which was published in 1704 he does go into English and that's the first major scholarly and scientific work to appear in English.

But if we're looking as to what established English as a world language it's an interesting question because many more people speak Chinese, and you'd have to say that Spanish and Russian are also extremely significant world languages. But of course all those three groups have this in common that they're geographically concentrated. If we take the case of Spanish for example it's just basically in Central America, South America and Spain with a few little bits elsewhere, but that's mostly where it is. Whereas the thing about the British Empire is that alone among the great colonial empires it was established on all six continents.
And so in a way it established bridgeheads for the language right throughout the world, and then just at the moment when England began to lose power and influence, America came in, the successful former colony. And so the importance of English was consolidated by the rise of American power, and then that's modulated further in that for a very considerable time now, 50 or 60 years at least, America has led in technology. So now if you want to be connected, if you want to be wired you have to know English.
CLARKE: Kate Burridge holds the chair of linguistics at Monash University. She agrees that the rise of IT means more and more people are wanting to learn English.
KATE BURRIDGE: The statistics that are usually given are something like 350 million speakers of English as a first language, and about the same, 350 million speakers of English as a second language although that group is rapidly growing and outstripping the native English speakers.

And then there's this huge group that's been estimated at around one billion speakers of English as a foreign language. I mean that's in a vast range of competencies, you can have people there who speak quite good English and you get those that may know just enough English to rip off tourists or whatever or manage to sing their lyrics in English, they might you know sing pop songs or whatever. That's an interesting group, it's been estimated I think that one in every five of the world's population

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can speak English in some way, and there's about one billion people currently learning English. So these statistics are changing all the time.
CLARKE: But will English remain as the dominant global language?
KATE BURRIDGE: It looks pretty secure at the moment certainly but as I think the linguist David Crystal says we just should not be complacent because no one could ever have predicted the disappearance of Latin. But the other thing is too, an interesting perspective is that some linguist, I can't remember who it was now, described English as being a bit of a linguistic vacuum cleaner. I mean English sucks up words from all over the place, something like I think it's three-quarters of our vocabulary for instance has been borrowed already from somewhere else. And in some ways that I suppose makes it suitable for a global lingua franca, because we are this bitser of a language to start with, our vocabulary and certainly our grammar shows the effects of contact also with a number of varieties. And so we will certainly continue to just suck up words from all over the place.
JIM DAVIDSON: I think of dinghy for example, which is actually from Hindustani, but as a small rowing boat of that kind and being fairly common it was first encountered in India and so the word was taken over, and now we wouldn't even dream that it was originally an Indian word. When I was young in Australia there was an expression, 'head-sherang', which actually probably came via the P and O boats referring to the head of the Goanese who were the waiters or the laskers, who were the sailors and deckhands, and it's actually an Indian word, again from Hindustani, and yet it was being used in ordinary Australian speech and I suppose people wouldn't have had a clue where it came from.
KATE BURRIDGE: We're what you call an adopting language rather than an adapting language. Once we suck these words up they tend to be sort of beaten into shape and turned into English words so that they get disguised, you don't think of cabbage for example as being a French borrowing, we no longer say 'cabbage' or something like that, it's been beaten into shape to make it sound like an English word. And so what we're seeing now is wherever English has taken hold all round the world so you get different Englishes, Singapore English, Hong Kong English, Indian English, Chinese English.
HENRY LEDLIE: A lot of countries adopted the language, I mean I would certainly disagree to that in India, we didn't adopt the language, it was forced upon us.
CLARKE: Henry Ledlie.
HENRY LEDLIE: The spread of English in India is so vast, today I mean in India there are people who speak English better than the English themselves. I'm an Indian, we always spoke English at home, my parents spoke English, we call it the Queen's language you know, India never had queens, India had kings. And all the kings spoke English, so for us it's the king's language.
CHEN HONG: In China actually because China is a big country with diversity, its dialects and language, but in the modern times English has become increasingly an important language for communication.
CLARKE: Chen Hong from China.
CHEN HONG: Especially in the recent years with our opening up, reform policies, so actually international communication actually depends on a common language with which we can actually communicate with overseas visitors, businessmen, various people. So that actually English has increasingly assumed an important role in people's daily life, even among Chinese, especially among young people. So this is indeed a kind of globalised trend linguistically.

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CLARKE: In spite of the trend for Chinese to learn English, Professor Chen observes the growing interest in the west in learning Mandarin.
CHEN HONG: Actually it's very interesting because yesterday evening when I was in Chinatown in Melbourne I was in a noodle house, there was an Australian young man walking into the restaurant and he was asking for a bowl of noodle from the girl in Mandarin, and the girl actually was astonished and said, wow your pronunciation is so good, why do you learn Chinese? So I can understand what the girl was thinking that because she's coming to Australia to learn English while there is an Australian person learning Chinese to such perfection in his pronunciation, so she was actually shocked.

But actually I think with the increasing interaction between China and the rest of the world of course a lot of people will be learning Chinese to have better communication with Chinese people. Interpretation or translation may not achieve the same result as yourself commanding the language itself. I think some kind of exchanges, a two-way flow with Chinese learning English, with other people learning Chinese is a kind of two-way flow, just for more effective communication.
CLARKE: This is Smart Societies on Radio Australia and we're looking at why English has become a global language.
ANNARITA BARDEGGIA: My full name is Annarita Bardeggia and I come from Italy and I grew up there in the eastern side of Italy in a town called Pesaro, which is famous because Rossini was born there.
CLARKE: Although born in Italy, Annarita Bardeggia has lived in seven countries, including Australia, China and Japan. She explains how English was the vehicle she used to learn a number of European and Asian languages.
ANNARITA BARDEGGIA: The first country I went to was France and of course because it's a Latin language is very close to Italian so it was not that hard. And then I went to London to be an au pair and I studied English in a school there. And then I went to New York because I was a dancer, so I wanted to study dance in New York. So that's with a little bit of English from England I learnt a bit of more English in New York, and I started to survive, I started teaching Italian. And then I went back home, I went back and I felt out of place so I decided to go to Germany, to Berlin, and Berlin at that time was West and East. And I didn't know any words in German, so I decided to study German. But to survive in Berlin the language that I used was English. So this is what you do, you know you go into a country and there is a different language and you just use the common language, which is English.

When I was in Berlin I heard that my hometown established a sister city program with a town in China. So because my girlfriend at that time was an interpreter using English between the Chinese party and the Italian party, and she said do you know that they're looking for two people for an exchange program. So I started ringing the mayor of my hometown and I sort of rang him so many times until he said ok, you can go. So I went, I went to China and I didn't know one single word of it, but I had the scholarship so I studied for two years and again the language that the Chinese teacher was using was English to communicate and to teach until you get to a certain ability in the language to actually you switch, you leave the English behind and you start using the new one.

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CLARKE: Not content with learning one Asian language, Annarita Bardeggia moved to Tokyo where she started learning Japanese.
ANNARITA BARDEGGIA: And in Tokyo how can you go from one complicated Asian language to another? So I had a bit of a crisis, I didn't want to leave Chinese behind, I actually loved their language, it's so amazing, and so I decided to study Japanese, and I went to school for two years every morning while I was teaching Italian in Tokyo using again English to teach Italian to Japanese. So that is quite common, that's what you do when you teach a foreign language in a country that you don't master the language of the country. And I found that especially in a culture like Japanese culture because the language is so depending on the culture the Japanese were opening up speaking Italian or English and they were like feeling different and freeing up. And it's just an amazing process to watch; it's like another person. And so yes, so I did, I studied Japanese and I got to quite a good level then I stayed there for four years and I did have a little TV program on the educational channel teaching Italian, and I used to take Japanese tourists to Italy for operas. So I was quite involved using all the time Japanese and English and Italian, and then I came here.
CLARKE: While learning languages undoubtedly gives you a window into other cultures, the learning of English seems to be increasingly important as globalisation takes hold, and countries are drawn into global markets connected by computer networks.
JIM DAVIDSON: English, I suppose you might say, has become the midwife to the computer and all it represents. And I think you could say that it's the computer though, not English, which is the new Latin. To have access to the computer and to the net is to be connected, almost to be the member of a very broad international elite if we look at the worldwide picture. Not to have that is like not knowing Latin in the Middle Ages. To be literate then was to know Latin, now to be fully computerate, to use a new word; it's best to know English.
CHEN HONG: I myself have got an uncle who can't use a computer, not to say English, so that actually indeed you know he lost his job.
CLARKE: You were saying I think that children as young as three and four are beginning to learn English. How is this coming about?
CHEN HONG: Parents, they're aware of the necessity of this linguistic capability for the future of their kids so that actually they try to initiate their kids into learning English. And of course English is a difficult language in comparison with Chinese because English has got all those reflections, tenses and plurality, which the Chinese language hasn't.
CLARKE: Despite its difficulties, English has almost become a necessity for those wanting to pursue an international education.

Professor Chen Hong from East China Normal University in Shanghai and Henry Ledlie, Director of the International Development Program in India, were keynote speakers at an Australian conference looking at the internationalisation of education.
CHEN HONG: In China also there are a lot of people, students, and they are going to America, Australia, Britain for their study, so indeed it's become a kind of necessity for them to learn English, because actually the destinations of their education, overseas education are mainly English speaking countries, so indeed they have to learn the language.
HENRY LEDLIE: I mean I remember many years ago so many Indians spoke Russian because India and Russia were partners and a lot of people spoke Russian, a lot of kids went to Russia to

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educate themselves. That's finished today. What I know from what's happening in the marketplace - it's all with respect to jobs, money and a better tomorrow.
CHEN HONG: Yeah and also I think what kind of English are we talking about? For example what kind of British English and also American English and I think in China people are actually increasingly adopting the American way of pronunciation in terms of English because of the Hollywood culture and because of internet and various other media forms.
KATE BURRIDGE: The question is what will world English sound like? I suppose there are two possibilities here. What often happens when you get different varieties coming together is that they go through a kind of a melting pot effect and what happens is then a variety emerges that's fairly uniform. We've seen this happen in Australia in fact, I mean Australian English is a mish-mash of the different varieties that came across and then what emerged was a fairly uniform variety, which we now know as Australian English. So we could have that happening with the sort of melting pot effect of British English and American English and the other Englishes. My feeling is that if that happens there's still a hefty dose or dollop of American English in that melting pot, so there will be probably a distinctive American flavour.

The two giants are of course British English and American English, well there's a tug of war between those two varieties. Currently I think American English has more of the rope if I could say that, I think if you speak to people who are involved in the teaching of English worldwide, the Berlitz people for example, they say the demand is overwhelmingly for American English in pronunciation.
CLARKE: In spite of the variations in spoken English, there's a clearly discernable standard for written English.
KATE BURRIDGE: I think we can already talk about there being a world English in writing. David Crystal in fact did a study whereby he took newspapers from all round the world, from China, from India, from the UK, from America, on the same day dealing roughly with the same theme and wanted to see whether you know he could see anything that identified that piece as being from the UK or wherever and he couldn't, other than perhaps the occasional lexical item, the occasional word that gave the game away, he couldn't. I mean there is already clearly I think a global standard with respect to writing.
CLARKE: However, there are exceptional situations where spoken communication needs to be standardised.
JIM DAVIDSON: And a very good example of that is what happens in the aeronautical industry in that English is the language of the airways and apparently the English required has a very small vocabulary, it may be only 500 or a 1000 words, it's something of that order, but everybody has to know exactly those words for pretty obvious reasons.
CLARKE: But as he points out, there's always regional differences in the way people adapt the language.
JIM DAVIDSON: And interestingly enough to take India again, there were enough Indian words in English by 1886 for the first dictionary of Indian English to appear. And of course you get extreme cases, that where there are a number of languages converging that the need for trade is great then of course the language will become more simplified, will take in more local words and become much more recognisable as a pidgin or a Creole language, and almost become another language.

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KATE BURRIDGE: Say in Australia where we have Creoles here in the north of Australia so you have speakers of Aboriginal English that is pretty close to standard Australian English, and then you have, they can also speak Creole, which is not mutually intelligible and is really a language in its own right even though one of the input languages originally was English, and they have this just extraordinary range that they have at their command. I know in some Aboriginal communities in the north they speak of standard English, standard Australian English they call it flash language, I mean that's the sort of language you use to outsiders and at school, not the language you use at home. So you get these very, very different varieties all round the world.

I suppose there are two competing pressures on globalisation aren't there, there's this need for conformity but you also want to continue to signal your identity, and so you do so with your different English. I think what we're going to see is speakers being bi-multi dialectal, I think you'll speak, you know perhaps your home variety of English, you'll perhaps be able to speak the national standard, and then if you have to participate in the world you will also be able to speak world English. I think that's probably what we'll see.
CLARKE: Whether English continues to be the dominant world language is open to question, but according to Kate Burridge, there's little doubt that minor languages are disappearing at an alarming rate.
KATE BURRIDGE: The dominance of English is at a real cost, I mean languages are disappearing at an alarming rate, it's been estimated that the current rate of destruction that in another 100 years time only 10 per cent of the world's current languages will continue to be spoken. So that's in fact I think roughly one language dying a week at the current rate of destruction. Now poor old English is not the only language to blame, I mean we are one of the main linguistic bulldozers but there are other varieties, Mandarin Chinese, Indonesian..., Spanish, they're also bulldozers but of course not quite so effective as English.

So I think it is tragic and UNESCO have identified language endangerment as a high priority. It's hard for us to imagine what it'd be like to be a speaker of a dying language; you know, such a vital part of your social and cultural identity just disappearing. For linguists like me it's just horrifying these linguistic systems vanishing, and who knows what additional information is stored with these languages that also disappear, you know information about plants which can lead to new medical discoveries or whatever. So it is distressing.
CLARKE: Kate Burridge.

In the next program, we look at the internationalisation of education.
ANTHONY BOHM: On all of our scenarios we find that India and China represent just on half of the total demand for Australian higher education by 2025, and that in itself is going to represent some challenges for Australian institutions in managing diversity, in managing the growth.
This program was produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke from Radio Australia.

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