

Summary

English is an Asian Language

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Some important facts:

English has been used in various parts of Asia for almost 200 years.

There are more fluent users of English in Asia (estimated at 350 million) than on any other continent.

English sometimes enables different ethnic groups in the same country to communicate with one another, as in the Philippines, India, and Singapore, helping to establish a sense of nationhood.

Frequently conferences are conducted in English (and their proceedings published in English) when only a few, if any, of the participants are mother-tongue English speakers.

English is the working language of ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations) even though it is not the first language of any of the member countries.

Nationally produced and published English newspapers can be found in practically every major metropolitan city across Asia.

More people are studying English in this region than in any other part of the world. China alone has more than 200 million.

Although most people in Asia do not speak English (certainly it is not a universal language), Asian leaders in very diverse fields including the arts,

business/commerce, education, diplomacy, military science, space exploration, and tourism usually do use it freely and easily. Of course, as in the rest of the world, it is the predominant language of Cyberspace.

English has borrowed from the languages of Asia. Just a few examples include *bungalow* from Bengali, *pajama* from Hindi, *sugar* from Sanskrit, *serendipity* from Singhalese, *kowtow* from Mandarin, *ketchup* from Malay, *boondocks* from Tagalog, and *tycoon* from Japanese.

Of course there are also national coinages in English, which are familiar primarily to local populations. These include *dirty kitchen* (the Philippines), *minor wife* (Thailand), *lah* (Singapore/Malaysia), *field chickens* (China), *paper driver* (Japan), and *crow and sparrow story* (India).

On-going articulate debates about English in Asia have continued for some time. One side (e.g. Tsuda, 1997) takes the position that English is an instrument of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism. They argue that the spread of English is designed to promote a Western life style and an economic dominance for Western powers. They must be listened to carefully when they argue that linguistic diversity is greatly diminished by the spread of English and results in linguistic genocide for many minority languages. The other side does not see English as an alien language or necessarily as an instrument of Western hegemony. This group maintains that English belongs to all those who use it, not only to its mother-tongue users and that it represents many different cultural values and worldviews. They claim it can (and does) easily express Asian culture. They point out that Indian leaders such as Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948 and Jawaharlal Nehru

(1889-1964) both wrote in English to reach a national audience and to promote a national agenda. They make the point that English has no claims to intrinsic superiority but that it has a preeminent role in Asia because it is a medium for science, technology, law and literature. Senior Minister Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore is a modern day example of a fluent English user who has used English for building a nation with Asian values.

Pronunciations vary across Asia but intelligibility of the different varieties of English is no more of a problem in Asia than it is in other parts of the world. As in the United States, grammar use across Asia ranges from pidgin to an international standard. Whenever there is variation, questions of intelligibility arise. Although an educated form of English may be mutually intelligible among all educated English-using populations, pidgin-like forms of English or colloquial forms of a particular variety or region may not be intelligible across cultures or national boundaries. This should not be surprising since for at least the last 200 years mother-tongue speakers of English from different parts of the world have not always been understood by one another. Today with millions of people using many different varieties of English, it is inevitable that this lack of complete understanding will continue.

Discourse patterns are frequently different in different varieties of Asian English.

E.g.

Greeting: It may be "Have you eaten?" (China) or "Where are you going?" (Thailand).

Form of address: *Last* name plus title is typical in Korea (e.g. Mr. Park) but should be title plus *Given* name in Thailand (e.g.

Ms. Mayuri) Title plus full name is appropriate in Myanmar

(e.g. Mr. Thi Ha)

Showing politeness is important in every culture but it is done differently in different varieties of Asian English. Because Japanese are reluctant to say "No" directly, a person from Osaka may say "I will consider it," or a person from Tokyo may say, "That will be difficult," when they mean "No." Nodding the head and saying "Yes" does not always mean agreement from a Thai speaker of English. Neither does "I'm sorry" and "I apologize" necessarily mean an acceptance of guilt or responsibility for a mistake when spoken by a Korean speaker of English.

The more varieties one is exposed to, the more one learns how to accommodate the differences in accent, vocabulary and discourse strategies. One therefore needs "authentic language material" from the varieties of English that one is likely to encounter. In order to become better acquainted with more spoken varieties of English, the Internet and cable network news are examples of two media through which one can get exposure to almost all varieties of educated English.

The foreseeable future of English in Asia (Graddol, 1997) is for continued increase in its use and variation. In almost every Asian country the percentage of the population fluent in English is growing rapidly and it is predicted that by the year 2010 30-35% (vs. 8-10% today) of the population will use English daily.