

英語人口の変遷

英語という言葉は昔から現在のように世界の“Common Language”(共通言語)だったわけではありません。16世紀の末(日本では戦国、秀吉の時代ですね)には、ほんのローカルな言葉に過ぎなかったのです。以下の英文を読んで、英語を使う人々の数の変遷を捉まえて下さい。(但し、文章中の数字は1988年出版当時のものです。)

In the glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth (the first, that is, from 1558 to 1603), the number of English speakers in the world is thought to have been between five and seven million. At the beginning of the reign of the second Queen Elizabeth, in 1952, the figure had increased almost fiftyfold: 250 million, it was said, spoke English as a mother tongue, and a further 100 million or so had learned it as a foreign language.

Thirty-five years on, the figures continues to creep up. The most recent estimates tell us that mother-tongue speakers are now over 300 million. But this total is far exceeded by the numbers of people who use English as a foreign language – at least a further 400 million, according to the most conservative of estimates, and perhaps, a further billion, according to a radical ones. ‘Creep’, perhaps, is not quite the right word, when such statistics are introduced.

What accounts for the scale of these increases ? The size of the mother-tongue total is easy to explain. It’s the Americans. The estimated population of the USA was just under 239 million in 1985, of whom about 215 million spoke English as a mother tongue. The British, Irish, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, and South Africans make up most of the others – but even combined they don’t reach 100 million. There’s no doubt where the majority influence is. However, these figures are growing relatively slowly at present – at an average rate of about half a per cent per annum. This is not where the drama lies.

A much more intriguing question is to ask what is happening to English in countries where people *don’t* use it as a mother tongue. A highly complicated question, as it turns out. Finding out about the number of foreigners using English isn’t easy, and that is why there is so much variation among the estimates. There are hardly any official figures. No one knows how many foreign people have learned English to a reasonable standard of fluency – or to any standard at all, for that matter. There are a few statistics available – from the examination boards, for example – but these are only the tip of a very large iceberg.

(David Crystal, *The English Language*, pp.1-2)