

# The Spread of the ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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## — A 2YA Talk —

*The people of Great Britain and some of the colonies are notoriously narrow-minded on the language question. They have a habit of looking with something like pity upon anyone who cannot speak English, yet the Chinese and Hindus had a written language thousands of years before Christ, and English is less than 1200 years old. But English is widely spoken—more so than any other European language. The Japanese, Chinese, Russians, and Indians teach it extensively in their schools, for they recognise that a knowledge of English enables them to keep their people abreast of the thought of foreign countries.*

THERE is no greater force in the social life of the world than language. Possibly it is true to say that the barriers of language are responsible for more international misunderstanding than any other influence. It is quite certain, at any rate, that if we all spoke the same tongue the causes of friction between nations would be very much reduced. A capable critic of the affairs of Europe to-day, Count Coudenhove Kalergi, has given it as his opinion that "the chief obstacle to free intercourse between individuals of different nationality in Europe to-day is the existence of language barriers."

Any of you who have travelled abroad will fully understand what this means. It is possible to live in a foreign country for quite a while and not to learn anything of the thoughts and ideas of its people simply because one does not understand the language. Incidentally this is what makes so much that is written about Russia to-day of very little value. Practically none of the observers speak Russian. Everything they see has to be explained to them by interpreters.

It is strange to think that until quite recently the tendency of mankind was constantly to multiply dialects and languages. However hard nations fought to conquer others, and however severely they insisted on imposing their language upon the conquered, new dialects and separate tongues increased with each age rather than diminished. Uniformity of language is all a matter of easy movement and intercourse. In the olden times people never travelled from one village to another. They could only travel on their feet, and (in England at any rate) they were not permitted to sleep outside their own village. Consequently villages only a few miles away were a far unknown land. There were no books or newspapers; very few men or women were educated, and there was no exchange of ideas at all. Mere self-defence prompted the local chief and his retainers to keep themselves to themselves and have no truck with others.

This deliberate isolation, the sparse population of the country, and the hostility to everybody who did not belong to one's own community encouraged differences in language. We see it surviving in England to-day in the form of local dialects. The countryman of Somerset speaks an English which is very difficult to the Yorkshireman to follow.

The chief law of linguistic biology is this: that intercourse breeds similarity; want of intercourse breeds dissimilarity. If we see it in English dialects to-day it is even more marked in the dialects of a great and ancient country like China. There a written language holds

good throughout. Certainly it is only used by the educated people, who are few in number, but it is universal throughout the great Empire of nearly five hundred million people. When it comes to be spoken, however, by the rank and file of these vast masses, the dialects are so different that Chinese from different districts cannot make themselves understood.

The people of Great Britain and some of the colonies are notoriously narrow-minded on the language question. They have a habit of looking with something like pity upon anyone who cannot speak English; and thinking that they deserve any misfortune that comes to them. That is the outcome, no doubt, of our very insular

life, and the success we have enjoyed in the world. It certainly does not arise from the perfections of the English language, for it is hard to think of any that is more difficult to learn and to speak. It is rather humiliating to us to think that whereas the Chinese and the Hindus had a written language thousands of years before Christ, there is no documentary evidence of the English tongue more than 1200 years ago. It first appears in quotations and references in Latin works about that time. To-day it is the general language of about 200 million people out of the 1800 millions in the world, and in recent years has looked like becoming paramount among the languages of the world. In spite of the variations of dialect, which tend to become less noticeable in recent times, English is spoken throughout the British Isles. There are still about 10,000 Scots who cannot speak anything but Gaelic. There are a certain number of Welsh who speak their own tongue habitually in the villages, just as there are Irish who speak only Erse.

NATIONALISTS everywhere try to foster ancient languages. But in the British Isles to revive Welsh, Gaelic and Erse can hardly succeed in face of the overpowering influence of recent inventions. Everything to-day favours an international language. We can compare the importance of the chief European languages by the following table, showing the number of people who are believed to speak them as their customary tongue:—

|         |      |              |            |       |             |
|---------|------|--------------|------------|-------|-------------|
| English | .... | 200 millions | Spanish    | ....  | 50 millions |
| Russian | .... | 140 millions | Italian    | ..... | 50 millions |
| German  | .... | 80 millions  | Portuguese | ..    | 25 millions |
| French  | .... | 70 millions  |            |       |             |

The bulk of the English speakers are across the Atlantic (U.S.A.). The Russian speakers are all in Russia (Continued on page 23.)