



# Language, soft power and asymmetrical Internet communication

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## **Abstract**

This paper rejects Joseph Nye's interpretation of the international spread of English as a soft power resource of the United States. As an alternative to Nye's model of the attractive power of America, this paper proposes an interdependence model in which communication occurs in a common language between participants pursuing diverse interests. If there is symmetry in understanding between participants A and B, neither gains an advantage. If understanding is asymmetrical, then soft power is enjoyed if B understands A better than A understands B. Succeeding sections document the dominant role of English as the common language of international political communication and the Internet's role in expanding the trans-national use of English as a foreign language (EFL). It argues that the dominance of English encourages Americans to be introverted while people who use English as a second language are more likely to have a cosmopolitan understanding of American political interests as well as their own. It follows from this that the diffusion of English as a foreign language will tend to increase the soft power of non-Americans for whom English is *not* their native language and weaken the influence of Americans who mistakenly assume that because those with whom they communicate are speaking English they also share the same political values and goals. The conclusion identifies how understanding, rather than language, can give countries lacking hard power a degree of persuasive or manipulative soft power, and that countries with hard power but lacking understanding must rely on brute power rather than smart power.

*Information is power, and modern information technology is spreading information more widely than ever before in history.*

Joseph Nye, 2004: ii

Political communication is a mechanism for the exercise of power. A unique feature of the Internet is its speed and range: information can be sent almost instantaneously anywhere in the world; it is also cheap. The resulting 'death of distance' (Cairncross, 2001) is creating a growing number of people worldwide who can be informed about other countries as well as their own, including the great majority constituting the opinion-formers and attentive public of international relations. But because users are embedded in different national political systems, they do not form a trans-national community of interests.

Because the percentage of Internet users in a society reflects its technological resources (International Telecommunications Union, 2003; Kellerman, 2002; Rose, 2005a: Table 2), the United States has played the leading role in the development of information technology and the Internet. Not only does the United States today have the largest number of Internet users but also many users outside the United States employ American-designed IT hardware and software and access American web sites (Zook, 2001; for a review of interpretations, see Nye, 2003: 545ff). America's role in Internet development is such that Conklin (2004: 2) argues it has become 'Wallerstein's Internet', an international system in which the United States has 'undoubted hegemony' (Cf. Wallerstein, 1984).

To communicate across national boundaries requires a common language and a network of people sharing understandings. If people do share a common language, communication is symmetrical, and it is asymmetrical if one participant understands the other's position but the other does not have a reciprocal understanding. However, in a world in which 140 languages are in regular use by at least one million people (Crystal, 1997: 286ff), a common language is problematic and so is a common understanding of the subject matter of international relations. International relations routinely involves communication between countries that do *not* share a common language and have different political understandings and interests.

Joseph Nye (2004: ii) has described the growing use of English as a medium of trans-national communication as giving the United States 'soft power ... the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments'. Today, the United States appears doubly advantaged in its soft power resources, for English has replaced French as the lingua franca of international diplomacy and the Internet has increased the quantity and intensity of trans-national communication in English. Moreover, America's soft power can be used to augment its very substantial military and economic power.

However, non-Americans can use English to advance their own interests rather than to become informed and follow American leadership. Because of the impact of America's hard power, foreign governments are forced to understand American

as well as national politics, whether they regard the impact of the United States as positive, negative or variable. The growing fluency of English among the French elite is an outstanding example of the self-interested acquisition of English. Trans-national terrorists and anti-globalization campaigners also use English to challenge American policy. By contrast, Washington has much less incentive to understand the politics or language of countries that lack hard power. This produces a dialogue in a common language, English, but it is a dialogue with an asymmetry of understanding.

## **I. Language plus understanding equals soft power**

Language is a sine qua non of communication, but words, mathematical symbols or physical gestures are meaningless without a degree of common understanding between the partners in communication, whether they are expressing themselves in English, Japanese or mathematics (Cf. Cowan et al., 2000). Since the development of the Internet today is occurring at a faster rate than the increase in the understanding of unfamiliar countries and systems of thought that it can link, it increases the potential for asymmetrical communication, in which those with greater understanding can exercise a degree of soft power.

### **Multiple languages and forms of understanding**

The concept of language is broad: 'a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, gestures, marks or vocal sounds' (Webster's, 1963: 474). Communicating ideas or feelings thus requires more than memorizing a foreign vocabulary or a table of chemical elements; it also requires an understanding of the particular technique that these signs represent. For example, a temperature of 20 represents cold weather in Fahrenheit but warm weather in Centigrade and the value of the 'bottom line' in a bill varies with the currency being used.

Whereas a literary language is rich in connotations and tacit knowledge, technical languages usually involve terms with their meaning denoted by a specific conceptual framework. Given common understanding, signs can communicate without any verbal language. The icons of Windows require more understanding of how a computer operates than of an alphabetic or script language. The gestures of referees in World Cup football games are understood by athletes and spectators with dozens of different home languages. The radius of understanding is a variable: for example, the signs of World Cup football referees are understood far more widely around the globe than the signs of American football referees.

Congressman Tip O'Neill's dictum—'All politics is local'—presupposes the existence of a semiotic community (Wedeen, 2002: 722) in which citizens voice their demands in words and ways that their representatives understand. National governments promote a common language and understanding, starting with primary school, and taxes are levied and social benefits disbursed in the national language.<sup>1</sup> The language of e-governance is the national language too. The official Hungarian government website, like that of its statute book, is in Hungarian ([www.magyarorszag.hu/ugyintezo](http://www.magyarorszag.hu/ugyintezo)) and that of the government of Thailand is in Thai ([www.thaigov.go.th](http://www.thaigov.go.th)). While government

departments involved in international relations must often communicate in a foreign language, in election campaigns the primacy of the national language reasserts itself.

Trans-national communication may be conducted in the home language of one or both participants or in a third language that both adopt for convenience. Whatever the language, technical understanding of trans-national issues is more important than linguistic fluency. By definition, a common understanding is present among epistemic communities of professionals who share a body of knowledge obtained through postgraduate education and professional practice in fields such as medicine or computer science. The Internet increases the ease and speed with which members of such epistemic communities can communicate with each other. Ernst Haas (1990) argued that epistemic communities are gaining soft power within international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Health Organization, but this is limited by the asymmetry between professional advisors and decisionmakers exercising harder forms of political influence (see, for example, Stone, 2002).

### **Hard and soft resources of asymmetric power**

Robert Dahl's (1967: 203) dyadic model of power postulates an asymmetric relationship in which A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do, and that relationship holds for relations between 'nation-states or other human aggregates' as well as between individuals. In classical international relations literature, A's power resources are 'hard', that is, guns and money, and if one country has a concentration of hard resources, it can consistently dominate others as a hegemon. Joseph Nye (2003: 553n) adds the resource of 'soft' power, 'the attractiveness of one's culture and ideology'. A necessary condition for exercising hegemonic power is that there is a symmetrical understanding of what constitutes power.

Since communication is about the exchange of information, interdependence is a more appropriate model than the unilateral exercise of power. Keohane and Nye (2001: 6) define interdependence as a relationship in which an outcome is significantly influenced 'by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries'. Thus, it is insufficient to focus solely on what A says to B; it is also necessary to consider how B understands and responds to what A has said, and then how A understands B's response in a continuing interaction between the two. The fact that B responds in A's language, English, is not ipso facto evidence of attraction.

In an interdependent system of international relations, the generic form of soft power is an understanding of other countries, since attraction without understanding is no more than empty enthusiasm. Understanding may be encouraged by the positive attractiveness of one country to another, as Nye suggests. However, the fact that B wants to learn about A's culture is not proof of attraction or submission. It may reflect a desire to influence or evade the hard power of A. The cold war promotion of Russian studies in the United States and the sophisticated study of American politics within restricted Soviet circles was driven by a desire to know one's enemy. Even if A and B share a common understanding, it is not proof of B's agreement or of submission. The Iraq War illustrates that foreign governments, including quondam allies, have refused cooperation because of their own understanding of messages coming from Washington.

In communication between A and B, understanding may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. Political communication is symmetrical if A and B each understand the interests, resources, goals and values of the other. In such circumstances the language employed will not confer an advantage on either participant, for each understands what the other is talking about. On the other hand, communication is asymmetrical if one participant is cosmopolitan, understanding the other's context and goals, while the second participant is not and thus fails to understand what is behind the other's communications. Asymmetries of political communication can create a situation in which a country that is hegemonic in terms of hard power may have this advantage partly or wholly offset by the soft power of another country.

Hegemony implies a symmetry of understanding and an asymmetry of hard and soft power. However, interdependent systems can exist without a hegemon. The European Union is an example, because no member state has the hard or the soft power to dominate all the others, and a minority have the treaty right to veto policies favoured by a majority. Differences between states within the EU must be reconciled through political discussions in which the equilibrium point is arrived at by cosmopolitan negotiators who understand how to package diverse national interests in a multi-national bargain that is then translated into 20 different national languages.

Logically, we can identify four categories of countries participating in international relations: a country with both hard power and understanding; a country with neither form of power; a country lacking hard power but high in the soft power of understanding; and a country high in hard power and low in understanding. If A is low in understanding, then the use of A's language as the language of communication will be a handicap insofar as A thinks that just because familiar words are being used, then B is agreeing to do what A wants.

Most states are small powers lacking the resources of hard power needed by a hegemon (Cf. Hey, 2003). In the words of Rothstein (1968), 'A small power is a state which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities and it must rely fundamentally on the aid of others'. Lacking hard power, small states have an incentive to cultivate a superior understanding of conventionally powerful countries with which they must interact. As long as A does not reciprocate, then B will gain a measure of soft power to offset the hard power of A. A few small states, such as Sweden, may even enjoy a degree of attractive power because they are neutral as between countries with a lot of hard power (Cf. Singer, 1972). By definition, non-state activists lack conventional hard power. When subject domestically to a repressive regime their understanding of international norms and institutions can be deployed as a form of soft power through the Internet and trans-national civil society institutions such as Amnesty International in order to exert influence on a repressive regime (Cf. Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

It is naive to describe the asymmetry of hard and soft power as a matter of misunderstanding. When B uses its superior understanding to get A to act on a false premise, it is exercising manipulative soft power. Within authoritarian societies, groups can develop what Scott (1990) calls 'hidden transcripts' as a weapon of the weak to resist domination by powerful groups that do not understand the duplicitous dialogue in which they are caught up. In international relations, a government weak in hard

power can use manipulative soft power to accept conditions verbally from a foreign aid donor while in practice allocating resources according to local understandings (for a Kosovo example, see Bache and Taylor, 2003).

In a single interaction, hard power can defeat a military enemy. However, a war is not a single interaction but the extension of a political process that must be followed up by occupation and a post-war settlement, in which occupiers and occupied engage in learning to understand each other in pursuit of their own particular interests. Moreover, much of international relations, from treaty negotiations to G-8 summits, is a diplomatic dialogue eschewing force. In the day-to-day interactions of national governments, the extent to which each understands the position of the other is a variable that can result in asymmetrical communication. When interaction is continuing, this justifies the following soft power hypothesis:

*If A lacks an understanding of B and B has an understanding of A, then the more they interact, ceteris paribus, the more outcomes will favour B.*

The Internet makes a distinctive contribution to the exercise of soft power because it increases the speed of interactions between states and involves more non-state participants in the media and in non-governmental organizations (Grant, 2004).

## **II. English as the lingua franca of international communication**

A precondition for political communication and the exercise of soft power is a lingua franca, that is, a common language for use by all participants in a discussion. Within national politics, communication is *introverted*, insofar as both A and B share the same home language.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as all participants share a common understanding as well as a common language, political communication is symmetrical. Ceteris paribus, the greater the population and material resources of a country, the greater the tendency for political communication to be introverted. Because Americans and Russians live in societies that have more than 100 million citizens, this can be their 'world'.

Communication is *provincial* when two national governments share a common language, for example, Germany and Austria. A common language facilitates trans-national communication but is restricted in its reach. While the English-speaking world has 400 million citizens, it remains provincial in comparison to a world of more than 6 billion people. Within a provincial group of countries using the same language, disparities in population can make one country dominant numerically and generate asymmetries of understanding. Disparities are great within the English-speaking 'world'. The population of the United States is more than four times that of the United Kingdom, 10 times Australia or Canada and hundreds of times greater than small island-states in the West Indies, and Canadians and New Zealanders look at American web sites far more than the opposite occurs.

When home languages differ, trans-national communication requires one or both partners to become *cosmopolitan*, conducting foreign policy in a foreign language. In United Nations meetings involving representatives of countries with more than 100 home languages, at least one partner must become cosmopolitan, communicating

in a language not its home language. When there are major differences in national population and/or economic development, the result is asymmetrical cosmopolitanism. Country B uses the language of country A, while country A continues to use its home language. The Dutch, for example, communicate in English with the United States, for they do not expect American officials to learn Dutch. A country with a great deal of hard power is less likely to communicate in a foreign language or to have a cosmopolitan understanding insofar as it believes that hard power is sufficient to achieve its foreign policy goals. Furthermore, international prominence reduces the attention that policymakers at the highest level can give to understanding in depth all of the many foreign countries with which they interact. Given limited understanding, policymakers from country A may project their own national outlook onto other countries. This is likely to have the consequence of increasing the soft power of the countries on which it projects its misunderstandings.

### **A lingua franca reflects hard power**

While international relations has always required a lingua franca, the use of a particular language for this purpose has more to do with hard national power than with characteristics of the language itself (Crystal, 1997). This is illustrated by the fate of Esperanto, invented as a secondary language to provide people living in a polyglot Europe with a lingua franca not identified with any one state (Pei, 1958). Esperanto has a simple, regular grammar and a vocabulary combining roots from Latin, Greek, Romance and Germanic languages. However, because it was not the language of a hegemonic state, Esperanto failed to become the cosmopolitan language of Europe.

The determination of *which* language is a lingua franca has varied historically with the waxing and waning of Imperial powers. The Roman Empire spread the use of Latin in much of Europe, and the Norman Conquest of England added many Latinate words to the language then spoken by Anglo-Saxons. In medieval times the use of Latin as a lingua franca in trans-national communication across Europe reflected the power of the Roman Catholic church. By the eighteenth century the growth in the hard power of the French state made its national language the standard language of European diplomacy and attracted American *philosophes* such as Thomas Jefferson.

The global spread of European empires made their languages the lingua franca of rulers and ruled in their colonies (Abernethy, 2000). While empires have fallen, they have left a linguistic legacy: English, French, Portuguese and German can be found in use in different parts of Africa. In the federal Republic of India, in which 18 languages are officially recognized in constituent parts, nationalists seek to promote Hindi as the language of governance but since it is spoken by less than a third of India's population and English was historically the language of administration, English remains an official language too. Tsarist and then Soviet expansion has made Russian the lingua franca of a dozen post-Soviet countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The absence of a powerful hegemon encourages official status being conferred on a multiplicity of languages. When the United Nations was founded in 1945 it recognized six official languages—Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish—written in four different scripts. When the European Union was created in 1957, the home languages of its six founder members were French, German, Italian, and Dutch or variants thereof and all the official languages of member states were accepted for

official use. Efficiency encouraged agreement on a de facto lingua franca and French was adopted. The entry in 1973 of the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark, made English a second common language for communication. However, EU member states want the patronage and other advantages of having their national language an official language, and have the votes to block the EU having a single or two official languages.

The importance of understanding the substance of discourse, as distinct from the language of discussion, is illustrated by diplomatic negotiations between the European Commission and applicant countries seeking to join the EU in 2004. Acceptance for membership required each applicant state to implement within their country the *acquis communautaire*, that is, the laws and regulations adopted by the established member-states (Leach, 2000: 4). While the negotiations were usually conducted in English, the language most familiar to Central and East European negotiators, the object was to commit governments whose national laws were written in Czech, Estonian, Greek, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, Slovenian or Turkish to transpose into national legislation an *acquis* which was prepared, often in French. In such circumstances, an understanding of comparative law was the essential point of departure (Watson, 1993).

### **The spread of EFL (English as a Foreign Language)**

The motivations for learning one or another form of English are instrumental rather than aesthetic: they include education, economic advancement, and entertainment and convenience when travelling. An African reading an English-language computer science text whilst studying in Norway for a university degree is doing so to improve his or her career opportunities. Similarly, a Norwegian speaking English in a restaurant at a Spanish beach resort does so because it will produce a meal faster than searching for a waiter who speaks Norwegian.

In the past quarter-century English has become the global lingua franca to such an extent that the number of speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is now greater than people speaking English as the home language. This reflects English being the home language of less than 8% of the world's population. Moreover, the proportion of people speaking English as a Foreign Language is increasing far more rapidly than the number of native-speakers. A Swedish-based website, Majority English (2005), for people who are not native English-speakers, estimates that between 600 and 700 million people speak English as a foreign language and that this number will treble in a decade. This is consistent with the much greater knowledge of English among the younger generation. In Russia, for example, while only 2% of persons over the age of 60 know English well enough to read a newspaper, 14% of Russians aged 18 to 29 can read documents in English (Rose, 2005b: 22).

The spread of English among people with different native languages means a great growth in the bilingualism and multi-lingualism of the world's population; especially among those who are members of the attentive public for international relations. While the great majority of members of international organizations come from countries where English is not the official language, more than five-sixths of international organizations make English the sole or major official language, almost double the proportion of organizations recognizing French (Crystal, 1997: 79).

The diffusion of English worldwide means that 'English is now so widely established that it can no longer be thought of as "owned" by a single nation' (Crystal, 1997). Linguistically, Anglophones can be divided into two major groups, two-thirds oriented toward American English and one-third toward English English.

Politically, Anglophone countries speak with multiple voices: for example, Ireland is not a member of NATO, and Canada, New Zealand and Ireland were not part of the coalition of the willing invading Iraq in 2003. Given Nye's claim that the use of English confers soft power on the government of the United States, these distinctions are important. Moreover, a speaker of English as a Foreign Language has the choice between reading the *New York Times* and *TIME* magazine or the *Financial Times* and *The Economist*.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to Nye's assertion that attention given to English and the United States is an indicator of America's attractiveness, the Pew Global Attitudes Project survey of public opinion about the United States, undertaken in 53 countries in 2002 (that is, after the 9/11 attack and before the Iraq War), found that many respondents were not attracted to American culture. Only 33% favoured American ideas and customs spreading to their country, 49% favoured American ways of doing business, 50% said they liked American views about democracy, and 57% said they liked American music, movies and television (Pew, 2002: tables 54–57).

In international politics those who communicate in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) do so in order to advance their own national interests. If these happen to coincide with interests as defined in Washington, this creates a coalition of the willing. If not, no coalition is formed. A cosmopolitan's understanding of American policy can be used as a form of soft power to advance its alternative objectives. For example, anti-American demonstrators will hold up protest signs in English in hopes of attracting the attention of American television networks. Islamic terrorist groups will use their understanding to send threatening and gruesome messages through *al-Jazeera* or the Internet.

The growth of English as the lingua franca of international political communication implies an increase in asymmetrical political communication. While policymakers from country B are necessarily cosmopolitan bilinguals when speaking English in Washington, there is no assurance that the same is true of American officials. Moreover, countries involved in systems of interdependence in which the United States is the chief player have more time and incentive to understand Washington than high-level American officials will have to comprehend all the countries with which it interacts. Moreover, the end of the bipolar cold war now requires Washington officials to understand a diverse range of countries that challenge America's security concerns, for example, North Korea, Sudan, Iran, China and Cuba.

Confronted with diversity, ideology offers one means of understanding (*sic*) unknown lands. In his major national security statement of 17 September 2002, President Bush (2002) proposed 'a single sustainable model for national success', based on the assumption that American values of 'freedom are right and true for every person in every society' (Cf. Halper and Clarke, 2004). A study of textbooks for teaching foreign policy in American universities found that most adopt an 'internalist' approach. Foreign policy is defined as 'the actions and activities of the US government' and 'only rarely do the syllabi explicitly invite students to consider what the United States or US foreign

policy looks like from the outside' (Hurrell, 2004: 103, 106).<sup>4</sup> However, reasoning from first principles has limits, for without contextual knowledge policymakers cannot consider the risks in choosing between alternative courses of action in contexts where their premises are insufficient to understand or influence events (Alexander, 2002).

Paradoxically, the growth of English as the lingua franca has created an asymmetry in political communication between the United States and many other countries. While Americans will communicate in their home language and be inclined to understand what is said in American terms, their cosmopolitan partners will understand both American interests and their own national interests. While this may not be sufficient to override hard power, the soft power of superior understanding can reduce its influence or help evade its impact.

### **III. The internet expands the use of EFL**

While the technology of the Internet allows communication without regard to national boundaries, the sociology of the Internet does not. The ability of users to speak with each other is not only a function of the percentage of a country's population that is on line but also of the number of users sharing understandings and a common language.

#### **Home languages of Internet users**

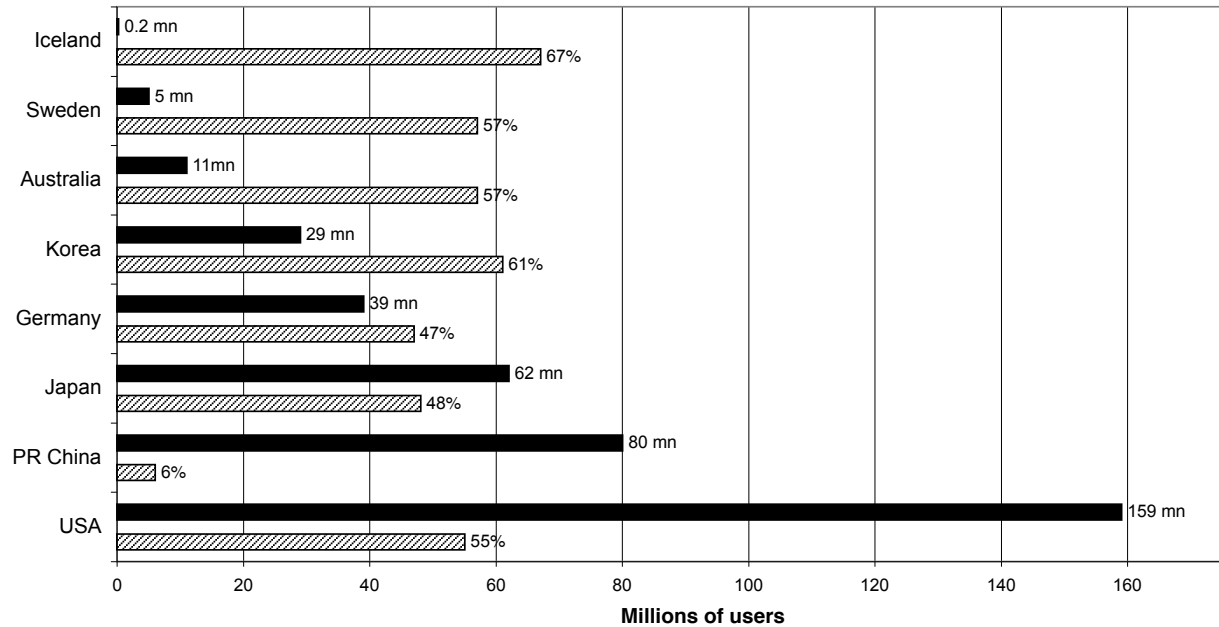
Our understanding of Internet use is skewed by the convention of reporting users as a percentage of a country's population rather than focusing on the total number of users. This highlights countries such as Iceland and Sweden, where the percentage of Internet users is higher than the United States, but the population is far less. It also diverts attention from countries where the number of Internet users is large while the percentage is low.

Because there is no significant correlation between the number and the percent of Internet users in a country ( $r = -0.02$ ), differences in reporting give radically different pictures of global Internet use (Figure 1). The People's Republic of China is second worldwide in the number of people using the Internet, even though it ranks very low in percentage of users. By contrast, the Nordic countries, where more than half the population is using the Internet, have very little displacement in the global picture. Even though only 1.7% of Indians use the Internet, the 18 million Indian users are almost half again the total users in Nordic countries. Likewise, even though the percentage of Internet users in Japan is less than in Australia, Canada or New Zealand, the number of Japanese Internet users is a quarter greater than in five English-speaking countries—the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand—combined.

The countries with the most Internet users are in every sense very diverse. Three are Asian countries—China, Japan and Korea—each with a different Asian language. The three European countries—France, Germany and Italy—each use different languages. Two more countries—India and Canada—have two or more official languages. Only the United States and the United Kingdom are English-speaking countries (ITU, 2003: [www.itu.int/ITU-D](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D)). When Internet users are grouped geographically, the pattern remains diverse: the ITU reports that 36% of the world's Internet users are in Asia; 28%

are in Europe; 25% in North America<sup>5</sup>; and 11% scattered throughout Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Oceania. However, the geographical grouping of Internet users is misleading linguistically, because both Asia and Europe are linguistically fragmented.

**Figure 1. No relation between number and percentage of Internet users**



*Solid black bars: millions of users; hatched bars: % of users*

*Source: International Telecommunications Union, [www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics), table dated 16 September 2004; accessed 8 March 2005*

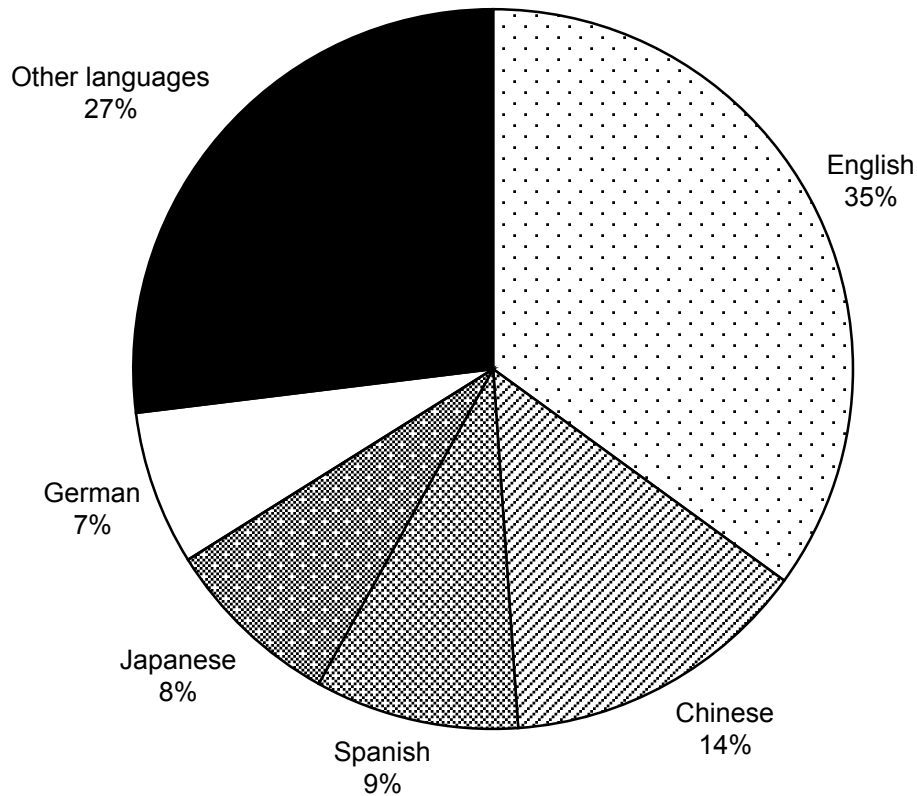
In terms of their home language, Internet users do not form a single global community (Figure 2). According to estimates of Global Reach (<http://global-reach.biz.globstats/refs.php3>), which take into account different language practices in countries that are bilingual or polylingual, people who speak English at home now constitute 35% of the world's Internet users, and Americans are just under one-quarter of the global total. One in seven Internet users has Chinese as their home language; this group includes residents of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia as well as the People's Republic of China. Although Internet use in Spanish-speaking countries is below Asian levels, because there are dozens of Spanish-speaking countries, 8% of Internet users speak Spanish, one percentage point more than Japanese, and two points more than speak German. Although more than 40 million native French-speakers are on line, such is the scale of global Internet use that this constitutes only 4% of the world's users. The two other official United Nations languages, Arabic and Russian, have less than 2% of the world's Internet users.

### **EFL-users on the Internet**

The extent of linguistic fragmentation on the Internet encourages the development of a lingua franca. English is the obvious choice, because well over half the web sites in the world are in English (ITU, 2003). Thus, people who use the Internet to search for information, and many users do, are likely to find English-language web sites turning up on their screen. A Google search on democracy in five different languages

illustrates the centrality of English-language sources on the World Wide Web. Of the 37 million citations, three-quarters were to the English word, 4.4 million to the Spanish *democracia*, 3.2 million to the German *demokratie*, 1.7 million to the Italian *democrazia*, and 1.0 million to the French *democratie*.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2. Home languages of Internet users



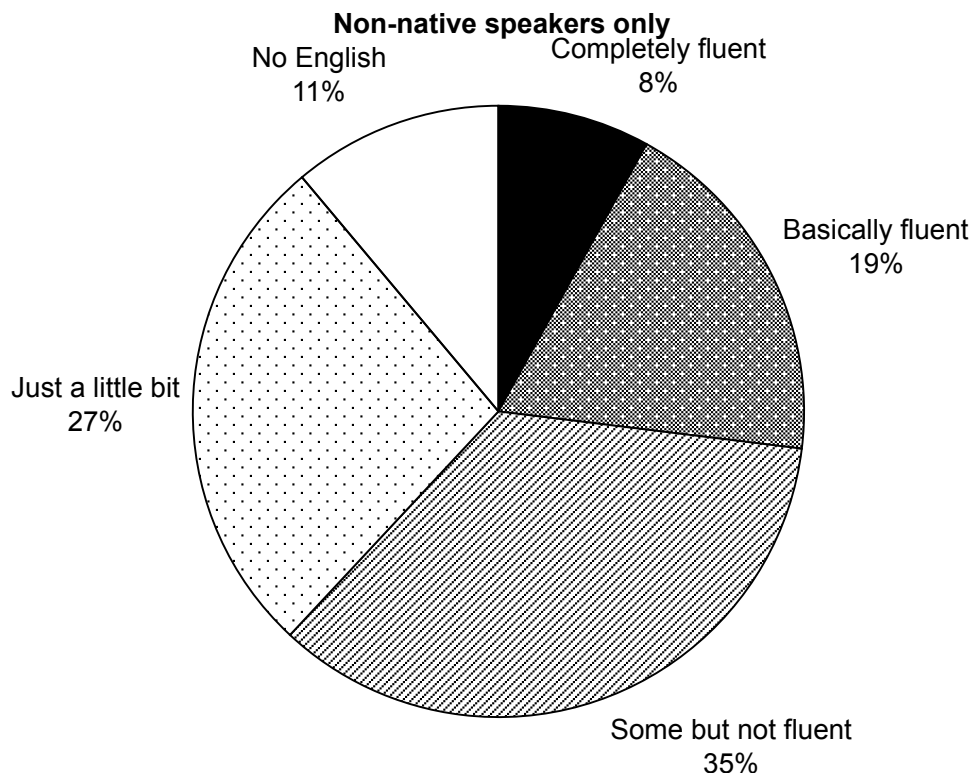
Source: Calculated by Global Reach Inc. and reported with references at [www.glreach.com/globstats/index.php3](http://www.glreach.com/globstats/index.php3) Accessed, 24 December 2004

Drawing information from an English-language website requires an understanding of subject matter as well as language. Understanding an engineering website requires a different vocabulary than a website dealing with sports or with international politics. Knowledge of grammatical forms is less important than knowledge of the relevant technical vocabulary. The limited amount of linguistic competence required to communicate technical understandings has been demonstrated by C.K. Ogden's (1930: 42) Basic (British American Scientific International Commercial) English. It has a vocabulary of 850 English words for general use and it can become a specialist lingua franca by adding about one hundred denotative technical terms. In many subjects, key technical terms are common or readily recognizable in many languages because they have a common root (for example, democracy); are stated in Latin (medicine); or in American (computing). The president of the Foundation for International Education has described the English used to teach third-world students following scientific, technical and business studies in Europe as 'denationalised and decultured'; a means of communication that is culturally 'as neutral as the language of mathematical symbols' (Swain, 2004).

Among Internet users, knowledge of English is widespread yet variable. When a 30-country survey of Internet users asked people who were not native English-speakers

about their language competence, four-fifths fell between the two extremes of declaring complete fluency (8%) and no knowledge at all (11%).<sup>7</sup> The median group (35%) described themselves as having some knowledge of English and an additional 19% said they were basically fluent (Figure 3). Those who reported that they had just a little or no English were in a minority (38%). Unlike a language examination, extracting information from a web site simply requires reading ability in a field that the searcher understands in his or her home language. The survey indicates that three-fifths have sufficient English (that is fluency or some knowledge) to understand Internet materials in a field of their interest, whether it is science or politics.

**Figure 3. Knowledge of English among Internet users**



*Source: Calculated from survey conducted by Ipsos-Reid, 2000, Module 8.29. Aggregated data of all Internet users in past 30 days in 30 countries. N=6889*

### **Introverted, provincial and cosmopolitan users**

The extent to which Internet users are introverted depends on the national population (the bigger the population, the less the incentive to look outside the country); the number of people using the language worldwide (English and Chinese are more widely used than German or French) and the interests of individuals (people wanting information about international affairs have more incentive to be cosmopolitans than do gardeners).

While there are nine languages spoken as home languages by at least 100 million people (Parker, 1997: 4), the United States and Japan are the only countries which have already created very substantial World Wide Web resources to satisfy introverted audiences. As first movers, each may also attract users from other language areas with less domestic web content, but since Japanese is not a lingua franca this uniquely

positions English-language websites to serve a provincial audience of hundreds of millions and similarly great cosmopolitan audience. Among other much used national languages, the possibility of Bengali, Brazilian and Hindi developing a large introverted audience is problematic.

If a language is in use in more than one country, then Internet users can be provincial, communicating in their home language across national boundaries. Among much used languages, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish are developing Internet use at a tempo and scale to have the potential to establish a substantial repertoire of informative web sites in each of these languages, albeit users concerned about political censorship will search web sites in other languages in order to cross-check the accuracy of familiar but potentially distrusted sources.

The fewer the number of Internet users in a given language group, the less the number and variety of websites and the greater the incentive for individuals to become cosmopolitan Internet users. For example, while the proportion of Slovenes who are Internet users is high, 38%, the total number is low, 750,000. Thus, a person who confines use to a Slovene Wide Web will find very little there compared to searching in another language.

As the growth of Internet use outside the developed world increases, more and more users will have incentives to become cosmopolitan in order to make full use of its resources, and thus increase the worldwide total of EFL-users on the Internet. A very rough estimate of the current number can be derived by relating the number of Internet users who are not native English-speakers (65% according to Figure 2) with fluency in English (Figure 3). While accurate surveys are skewed toward the most populous countries and, in some developing countries, to urban areas, this parallels the skewing of Internet use. Among the 450 million Internet users *not* using English as their home language, the 27% who report that they are basically or completely fluent in English constitute a core of 120 million cosmopolitan users. If those who say they have 'some' English can understand technical information of interest to them, this adds another 150 million to create a pool of about 270 million cosmopolitans who can relate what Anglophones are saying to their own national interests.

The incentives for native English-speakers to understand foreign languages and cultures is much less. The Oxford Internet Survey (2003) found that one in five British Internet users reported knowing a foreign language well enough to read a newspaper and thus capable of following international affairs in a cosmopolitan manner.<sup>8</sup> If the British figure is projected onto American Internet users, then approximately 32% of American Internet users are cosmopolitans, understanding a foreign language well enough to read a newspaper and follow political news reported from a non-American perspective, plus some who may turn to British news sources to get a second look at the world from a sympathetic but still different perspective.

Cosmopolitan foreigners who understand enough English to follow American websites from an 'un-American' perspective now outnumber the number of cosmopolitan Americans by a margin of between four to one and eight to one, depending on the standard of English required to be cosmopolitan. Communication with the United States will often be asymmetrical, because cosmopolitans understand national interests not defined by the American government as well as American interests,

whereas introverted American representatives are less likely to do so. This will confer soft power on cosmopolitans while limitations in understanding will increase American reliance on hard power.

#### **IV. Implications of asymmetrical soft power**

The forms and holders of power are not fixed. The history of hard power is a study of changing forms of warfare and shifts in the balance between military and economic power. Soft power changes too; the Internet has rapidly become the most dynamic part of a global information technology revolution.

##### **Internet diffusion is rapidly increasing the soft power of non-American cosmopolitans**

The term digital divide is misleading because it treats current Internet differences between countries as if they were permanent (Norris, 2001). Existing differences are better understood in terms of a diffusion model of innovation, in which some countries, for example, the United States and Korea, are leaders while countries such as Mexico or Russia are laggards in Internet use (Rose, 2005a). A critical feature of a diffusion process is that an initial divide is likely to close rapidly, as late adopters of a new technology increase their use more quickly, while early adopters reach a limit as demand becomes saturated (see Rogers, 1995). This is true of the Internet, for the global total of users is now undergoing a rapid change in size and in composition.

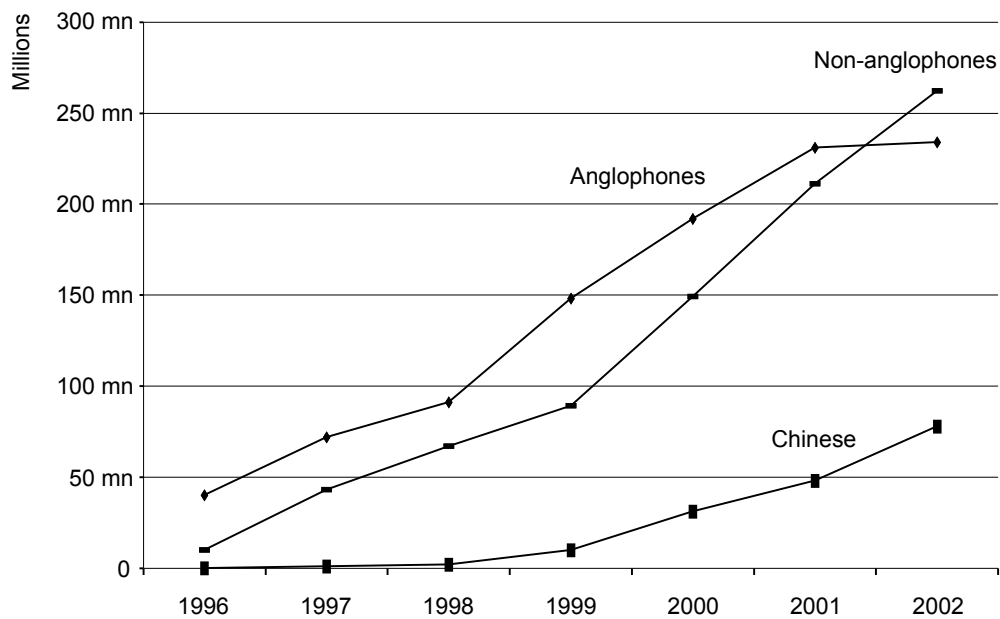
In less than a decade, the number of Internet users has increased by almost 500 million. The number more than doubled between 1996 and 1997 and again between 1998 and 2000. As the numbers of users grows, even a slowdown in the relative rate of growth can lead to very big annual increases in the number of Internet users (ITU, 2003: A 71). The growth in Internet use has produced a radical change in the composition of Internet users. In 1996 four-fifths of Internet users were English-speakers; today, even though Internet use has increased seven-fold in the English-speaking group, it has only one-third of the world's total Internet users. This is because non-Anglophone users have increased by fifty-fold. The biggest increase in Internet use has occurred among Chinese-speakers. While hardly any Chinese were on line in 1996, Chinese-speakers have since become the largest non-Anglophone group using the Internet and the world's second largest linguistic group (Figure 4).

As the level of Internet use in a country rises above 50% of the total population, this tends to impose a ceiling on users due to age (infants and the very elderly and infirm are unlikely to be on line) and due to choice (many current non-users are aware of the Internet but see no utility in signing on). Because of pioneering in Internet use, the United States is much closer to a ceiling in its number of users than are developing countries. The potential for further diffusion of the Internet among Japanese, Korean and Scandinavian users is similarly capped by high current levels of use.

For the foreseeable future, Internet use will grow most among the more educated sections of developing countries. Big increases in numbers can only occur in countries that are populous and where the Internet has begun to diffuse rapidly, or example, among the 250 million people living in the urban areas of the People's Republic of

China. India is the only other country capable of having a similarly large displacement on the global universe of Internet users. While India has a stratum of educated people fluent in English, poverty and illiteracy is much greater than in China and its Internet use has been developing more slowly. Spanish-speaking countries collectively have the population to achieve a major displacement on the Internet, but the current take up of the Internet is still low in most Latin American countries. Since the great bulk of the population of developing countries are not native English-speakers, the diffusion process will incidentally result in a big increase in cosmopolitan users, thus increasing asymmetrical communication too.

Figure 4. Internet use by home language 1996–2002



Source: Global Reach, <http://global-reach.biz/globstats/evol.html>, accessed 24 December 2004

### Implications for soft power

If all policymakers were cosmopolitans understanding each other equally well, the changing composition of the global Internet network would not confer any advantage in soft power. However, equality in hard and soft power is not the norm. Logically, a national government can combine hard and soft power in four different ways.

#### *Brute force*

A country with substantial military and economic resources can threaten or use military or economic pressures without bothering to understand those it seeks to coerce. In Karl Deutsch's (1966: 111) phrase, countries wielding power without bothering to understand subjects are asserting 'the ability to afford not to learn'. Brute power is much more likely to produce A's desired effect in a single interaction than in an ongoing relationship of interdependence between A and B. For example, the follow up to military victory—establishing a stable system of political authority in the loser's territory—requires understanding the subject population.

### *Smart power*

A national government's power is maximized insofar as it combines the exercise of hard and soft power. Joseph Nye (2004: xiii) has described this combination as 'smart power'. For example, Britain ruled an Empire with a population 20 times its own through systems of indirect rule in which a small number of resident Britons used their understanding of local politics to administer colonies through indigenous populations. Nye recommends that the United States develop smart power by paying as much attention to what other countries are thinking and doing as to the introverted cultivation of its military and economic force. Few countries have the option of striving for smart power, because they do not have sufficient hard power.

### *Persuasion and manipulation*

Consistent with liberal theories of international relations, a country with little hard power could try reasoning with other countries. Sweden, for example, actively seeks to persuade other governments and world public opinion of the rightness of the causes it advocates. NGOs subject to authoritarian governments can turn to the Internet in an effort to persuade international organizations to act against the coercive power of their own government. Manipulation can take the form of a country appearing to accept the conditions of international financial assistance while not implementing agreements in the national language. Trans-national anti-globalization movements can manipulate media attention by using the Internet to mobilize street protests at meetings of intergovernmental bodies such as the World Trade Organization and G-8 (della Porta and Mosca, 2005).

### *Bystanders*

A national government must devote significant political resources to understanding other countries if it is to acquire any soft power. Some poorer countries lack the resources to do so and some national governments do not consider it necessary or desirable to do so. They are bystanders in international politics. Even if they voice views in EFL in places such as the United Nations, they are dismissed as irrelevant by policymakers. A few countries that have a substantial understanding of other lands, such as Switzerland, choose to be bystanders rather than to participate in potentially risky international activities.

For the big majority of countries in the world today, the choice is between exercising soft power or no power. For example, a country such as Luxembourg has a very high per capita gross domestic product but its total GDP is less than one-eighth that of a populous but poor country such as Indonesia, and its military potential even less. The typical European country has barely one-twentieth the population of military age or the aggregate GDP of the United States.

Very few populous countries have the potential to combine both hard military and economic power and the soft power of understanding other countries. For example, Japan lacks military power and Russia lacks an understanding of the rest of the world. The People's Republic of China has massive hard military power, and rapid economic growth is increasing its global economic displacement. It also has a large and increasing number of people using the Internet to communicate with a globally

dispersed Chinese diaspora (Cheung, 2004) and a growing number of cosmopolitan speakers of EFL.

The hard power of the United States today limits its choices. Given its global military and economic displacement, it cannot choose to be a bystander in international affairs, as it was in the distant past. Nor, given its hard power, need the United States rely solely upon persuasion and manipulative power. Effectively, American policymakers can rely either on brute force or on smart power. Because English is now the lingua franca of international relations, the American government can use contemporary technology to communicate in English with an attentive public that sees American behaviour as relevant to its own national interests. But Nye (2004: 125) emphasizes that more is required: 'To communicate more effectively, Americans need to listen'. If American policymakers do not understand how foreigners will respond, communication is asymmetrical and it is counterproductive if there is a conflict between what American policymakers project and what foreigners want. Writing before the Iraq War, Nye (2003: 554) noted, 'America can attract (or repel) others by the influence of its example'.

In order to project smart power, A must not only articulate its own position but also understand the position of B. To assume that just because B speaks English it is necessarily attracted to Washington's position is to pursue a foreign policy without foreigners. To shift from an introverted to a cosmopolitan mode of dialogue is a major problem, encapsulated in a Financial Times comment on the appointment of a trusted aide of President Bush, Karen Hughes, to head the public diplomacy programme of the State Department:

It will present a challenge for Ms. Hughes, a Republican political operative from Texas, who now makes the shift from communicating the president's agenda to Middle America to transforming public opinion in the Middle East

(Harding and Dinmore, 2005)

Failure to acquire the understanding that is the basis of soft power subtracts from the effectiveness of hard power. It offers other governments the opportunity to exercise manipulative or persuasive power in opposition to Washington. In asymmetrical exchanges, the more A and B interact, the more B benefits.

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## **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding official acceptance of multi-culturalism in the United States and the United Kingdom, there remain political pressures to maintain the dominance of the English language or to make it official.

<sup>2</sup> In countries that are officially bilingual, politicians usually need to be able to advance their political interests in more than one language.

<sup>3</sup> There are anecdotal reports that Europeans who speak American rather than English English sometimes find this a political liability in the European Union because they are assumed to support positions of President George W. Bush rather than to reflect mainstream European opinions (see Fuller, 2005). Similarly, among American multi-national firms there is a concern, to quote an American advertising agency representing McDonald's and Budweiser, that 'foreigners are transferring anger at the US government to anger at the US and anger at US business' (Roberts, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> In his lengthy review article, Hurrell explicitly differentiates the teaching of foreign policy from the teaching of international relations.

<sup>5</sup> Or 27% if Mexico is included.

<sup>6</sup> Google searches within an hour of each other on 8 March 2005 produced different numbers but relative magnitudes remained unaffected.

<sup>7</sup> These percentages about Internet users should not be mistaken for statistics about knowledge of English in the whole of a society or numbers studying English in school.

<sup>8</sup> This figure is slightly inflated by British Internet users, including a significant proportion of immigrants. The United States has a large pool of bilingual immigrants too. The US Census Bureau (2003) reports that 47 million Americans do not speak English at home; half this group say that they are fluent in English too. Because of their close household connection with their country of origin, this category of the population may be considered bilingual ethnics.