

Section A: English in the world

Question 1

Read the following text, which is an extract from an article posted on the BBC World Service website in 2018.

Discuss what you feel are the most important issues raised in the text relating to the present and future status of English in an international context. You should refer to specific details from the text as well as to ideas and examples from your wider study of English in the world. [25]

Can English remain the 'world's favourite' language?

English is spoken by hundreds of millions of people worldwide, but does the development of translation technology threaten its status?

Which country boasts the most English speakers, or people learning to speak English?

The answer is China.

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According to a study published by Cambridge University Press, up to 350 million people there have at least some knowledge of English – and at least another 100 million in India.

There are probably more people in China who speak English as a second language than there are Americans who speak it as their first. A fifth of Americans speak a language other than English in their own homes.

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But for how much longer will English qualify as the 'world's favourite language'? The World Economic Forum estimates about 1.5 billion people around the world speak it – but fewer than 400 million have it as their first language.

English is the world's favourite lingua franca – the language people are most likely to turn to when they don't share a first language. Imagine, for example, a Chinese speaker who speaks no French in conversation with a French speaker who speaks no Chinese. The chances are that they would use English.

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Five years ago, perhaps. But not anymore. Thanks to advances in computer translation and voice-recognition technology, they can each speak their own language, and hear what their interlocutor is saying, machine-translated in real time.

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So English's days as the world's top global language may be numbered. To put it at its most dramatic: the computers are coming, and they are winning.

You are probably reading this in English, the language in which I wrote it. But with a couple of clicks on your computer, or taps on your tablet, you could just as easily be reading it in German or Japanese. So why bother to learn English if computers can now do all the hard work for you?

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At present, if you want to do business internationally, or play the latest video games, or listen to the latest popular music, you're going to have a difficult time if you don't speak any English. But things are changing fast.

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In California, Wonkyum Lee, a South Korean computer scientist for Gridspace, is helping to develop translation and voice-recognition technology that will be so good that when

you call a customer service helpline, you won't know whether you're talking to a human or a computer.

Christopher Manning, professor of machine learning, linguistics and computer science at Stanford University, insists there is no reason why, in the very near future, computer translation technology can't be as good as, or better than, human translators.

Section B: Language and the self

Question 2

Read the following text, which is taken from the Stanford University online magazine.

Discuss what you feel are the most important issues raised in the text relating to the relationship between language and thought. You should refer to specific details from the text as well as to ideas and examples from your wider study of Language and the self. [25]

Can language shape how we think? A Stanford researcher says yes, and her work speaks volumes about what makes people tick.

Lera Boroditsky's journey to answer one of psychology's most intriguing and fractious questions has been a curious one. She's spent hours showing Spanish-speakers videos of balloons popping, eggs cracking and paper ripping. She's scoured Stanford and MIT's math and computer science departments for Russian speakers willing to spend an hour sorting shades of blue. She's even traipsed to a remote aboriginal village in Australia where small children shook their heads at what they considered her pitiable sense of direction and took her hand to show her how to avoid being gobbled by a crocodile. Yet she needs little more than a teacup on her office coffee table to explain the essence of her research. 5

'In English,' she says, moving her hand toward the cup, 'if I knock this cup off the table, even accidentally, you would likely say, "She broke the cup."' However, in Japanese or Spanish, she explains, intent matters. If one deliberately knocks the cup, there is a verb form to indicate as much. But if the act were an accident, Boroditsky explains, the speaker would essentially say, 'The cup broke itself.' 15

The question is: Does the fact that one language tends to play the blame game while the other does not mean speakers of those languages think differently about what happened?

Boroditsky focuses on linguistic features that may inform more fundamental differences in how cultures convey their relationship to concepts such as space, time or gender. 'What I'm really interested in are the ingredients of meaning. I don't believe we can explain how we construct meaning without understanding patterns in metaphor and language.' 20

Consider time. Some languages require their speakers to include temporal information in every utterance. In the Yagua language of Peru, there are five distinct grammatical forms of the past tense, for example, to describe when an event occurred: a few hours prior; the day before; roughly one week to a month ago; roughly two months to two years ago; and the distant or legendary past. English is not that precise, but it is true that every time you use a verb in English, you are conveying information about time. Depending on whether something has happened already (I made dinner), is happening now (I am making dinner), or will happen in the future (I will make dinner), the speaker must pick different verb forms. Without the temporal information, the utterance would feel incomplete, ungrammatical. You couldn't just say, 'I make dinner' in all three cases. 25

Not so in Indonesian. Unlike English, Indonesian verbs never change to express time: Make is always just 'make'. Although Indonesian speakers can add words like already or soon, this is optional. It doesn't feel incomplete or ungrammatical to just say, 'I make dinner'. 35

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