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Learn English online:
How the internet is changing language

Users check Facebook in the Philippines

Online, English has become a common language for users from around the world. In the process, the language itself is changing.

When America emerged from the ashes of a bruising war with Britain in 1814, the nation was far from united. Noah Webster[1] thought that a common language would bring people together and help create a
5   new identity that would make the country truly independent of the British.

Webster's dictionary, now in its 11th edition, adopted the Americanised spellings familiar today, *-er* instead of *-re* in "theatre", dropping the *u* from "colour", and losing the double *l* from words such as "traveller". It also documented new words that were uniquely American such as "skunk", "opossum", "hickory", "squash" and "chowder".

10   An *American Dictionary of the English Language* took 18 years to complete and Webster learned 26 other languages in order to research the etymology of its 70,000 entries.

The internet is creating a similar language evolution, but at a much faster pace.

There are now thought to be some 4.5 billion web pages worldwide. And with half the population of China now online, many of them are written in Chinese.

15   Still, some linguists predict that within 10 years English will dominate the internet – but in forms very different to what we accept and recognise as English today.

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[1] *Noah Webster* (1758-1843)

That's because people who speak English as a second language already outnumber native speakers. And increasingly they use it to communicate with other non-native speakers, particularly on the internet where less attention is paid to grammar and spelling and users don't have to worry about their accent.

20 English remains the single most commonly used language on the web. But in 2010, for the first time ever, the majority of the world's data was in non-English text.

That's because new computer technology has made it easier to read and write in non-Roman languages[2].

"Much technology was initially unreliable in languages other than those using Roman script," says computational linguist[3] Robert Munro. "But the broader adoption of standards like Unicode means that this
25 is changing."

Unicode enables a message generated in Chinese characters in Shanghai to appear the same when it's read on a computer or mobile device in San Francisco.

"The internet enfranchises[4] people who are not native speakers to use English in significant and meaningful ways," says Naomi Baron, professor of linguistics at American University in Washington DC.

30 Users of Facebook already socialise in a number of different "Englishes" including Indian English, or Hinglish, Spanglish (Spanish English) and Konglish (Korean English). While these variations have long existed within individual cultures, they're now expanding and comingling[5] online.

"On the internet, all that matters is that people can communicate – nobody has a right to tell them what the language should be," says Baron. "If you can talk Facebook into putting up pages, you have a language
35 that has political and social standing even if it doesn't have much in the way of linguistic uniqueness."

Some words are adaptations of traditional English: In Singlish, or Singaporean English, "blur" means "confused" or "slow": "She came into the conversation late and was blur as a result."

Others combine English words to make something new. In Konglish, "skinship" means intimate physical contact: handholding, touching, caressing.

40 Technology companies are tapping into the new English variations with products aimed at enabling users to add words that are not already in the English dictionary.

And most large companies have English websites, while smaller businesses are learning that they need a common language – English – to reach global customers.

"While most people don't speak English as their first language, there is a special commercial and social role
45 for English driven by modern forms of entertainment," says Robert Munro, a computational linguist and head of Idibon, a language technology company in California.

"The prevalence of English movies in regions where there is not much technology other than cell phones and DVDs makes English an aspirational language. People think it's the language of the digital age."

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[2] *in non-Roman languages*: (her) med andre alfabeter end det romerske
[3] *computational linguist*: computer-sprogforsker
[4] giver ret til
[5] blandes

In previous centuries, the convergence of cultures[6] and trade led to the emergence of pidgin – a
50 streamlined system of communication that has simple grammatical structure, says Michael Ullman, director
of research at Georgetown University's Brain and Language Lab.

When the next generation of pidgin speakers begins to add vocabulary and grammar, it becomes a distinct
Creole language[7]. "You get different endings, it's more complex and systematised. Something like that
could be happening to English on the web," he says.

55 Take Hinglish.

Hinglish is a blend of Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and English and is so widespread that it's even being taught to
British diplomats.

Mobile phone companies are also updating their apps to reflect its growing use.

In Hinglish, a "co-brother" is a brother-in-law; "eve-teasing" means sexual harassment; an emergency crew
60 responding to a crisis might be described as "airdashing", and somewhat confusing to football fans, a
"stadium" refers to a bald man with a fringe of hair. There's even a new concept of time – "pre-pone", the
opposite of postpone, meaning "to bring something forward".

The increasing prevalence of the internet in everyday life means that language online is not a zero sum
game[8]. Instead, it allows multiple languages to flourish.

65 "Most people actually speak multiple languages – it's less common to only speak one," says Mr Munro.
"English has taken its place as the world's lingua franca, but it's not pushing out other languages."

Instead, other languages are pushing their way into English, and in the process creating something new.

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[6] *convergence of cultures*: sammensmeltning af kulturer
[7] *Creole language*: selvstændigt, afgrænset sprog, som har rødder i to eller flere sprog
[8] *is not a zero sum game*: går ikke lige op