

English



The Global Language?

Who speaks English?.....3

Are all the words in OED in use?6

Is English the best common language?.....7

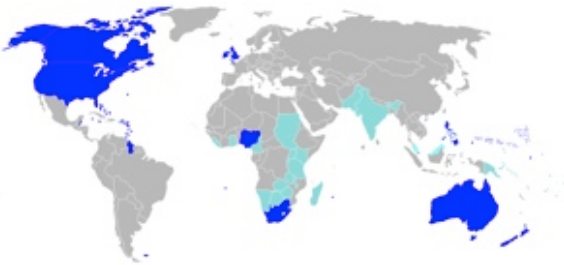
How many words do English speakers use?7

<http://englishlanguage.eslreading.org/>

Who speaks English?

Estimated numbers of regular speakers:

Language	1st	2nd/3rd	Total:
English	375 million	1.4 billion	1.7 billion +
Chinese	845 million	200 million	1.045 billion
Spanish	329 million	100 million	429 million
Hindi/Urdu	180 million	120 million	disputed



Areas in dark blue

Countries where English is the primary language.

Areas in light blue

Countries where English is widely used.

Who speaks English?



By one measure English is not the world's leading language. In terms of native speakers it is probably only third after Chinese and Spanish. Fewer people grow up speaking English in their homes than these other languages.

Nonetheless English does have a good claim to be the world's most spoken language. This is because so many people use English to communicate with speakers of other language.

In many areas of business and culture, English is the official 'lingua franca' or working language. All air traffic control, for example, is in English. And a Japanese businessman will probably communicate with his German, Indian and Chinese customer in English.

How did English become so important?

A key factor in the success of English as an international language is economic. English speaking have played key roles in the development of modern capitalism.

◆ Britain was the first country to industrialise

- ◆ the USA is the largest and most successful economy in the world.
- ◆ Former British colonies like Canada, Australia and Hong Kong are economically successful.

English speaking countries have unusually productive economies as this chart shows. English has an historical association with economic growth because

How many English words are there?

'June 9, 2009 is the day when the English language reaches one million words!'

This claim by an American media company came from a computer analysis of various dictionaries. It was immediately described by the English linguist, [David Crystal](#) as the 'biggest load of rubbish I've heard in years.'

Professor Crystal is perhaps the leading expert on the English language and wrote the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (2003). 'The English language passed a million words years ago,' he insists. Crystal suggests that the problem is that computers count words rather than lexemes.

So how many words are there in English? How do we count them? And how does the English lexicon compare with other languages?

Which language has the most words?

There is no certain answer to this because we often define 'language' and 'word' in different ways. Chinese, for example, is a single language in terms of its written form. In the spoken form, however, it is a family of languages or dialects.

Spoken Mandarin is as distinct from Cantonese as Spanish is from Portuguese.

Writing

Different languages also use different writing systems. English is alphabetic; Chinese is logographic.

- ◆ An alphabetic language has letters, which help guide pronunciation.
- ◆ A logographic language separates the written and spoken forms. Chinese characters do not guide pronunciation.

Despite these differences, we can get a sense of differences in language size by comparing dictionaries.

Dictionary Size

The OED defines 615,100 words. Similar dictionaries in other languages offer the following

- ◆ German - 180,000 words.
- ◆ Russian - 160,000 words
- ◆ French - less than 150,000.

This suggests English probably has the biggest vocabulary of all the European languages.

What is a word?

This is a surprisingly complex question. For example the *OED* distinguishes 430 senses for the verb *set*. Is each form of *set* a separate word? Linguists make the distinction between words and lexemes. The lexeme 'run', for example, includes all its forms: *run*, *running*, *ran* etc

And what about numbers? If you count to a million, do you have a million words?

Are all the words in OED in use?

- ◆ 41,700 OED words are obsolete. This means that you are unlikely to use them.

- ◆ 240 are ghost words. A ghost word has never existed outside dictionaries.



Is English the best common language?

Many argue that English is a 'difficult' language. They point to its heavy use of phrasal verbs and its odd phonological quirks.

For over a century there have been attempts to promote an alternatives - Esperanto, for example. But the linguist Richard Lederer describes English as the most 'democratic' language in history. It's democratic in that the users of English help change and improve it. This is possible because of "the relative simplicity of its grammar and syntax." English has other advantages in that it:

- ◆ easily imports words from other languages, cultures and traditions.
- ◆ has no academy to decide which words are acceptable.

How many words do English speakers use?

There are different opinions on this question.

- ◆ Lederer has suggested that a typical English speaker has a vocabulary of between 10,000 and 20,000 words.
- ◆ Steven Pinker talks of 60,000 'by high school'.

We also need to distinguish between our passive and active language. Passive language consists of those words we recognise but perhaps do not say or write. Our active vocabulary is those word we use in speech and writing.