

SPECTRUM

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English: Not a *Kaduwa* any more

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In Sri Lanka, where a majority of people speak either Sinhala or Tamil (the two vernacular languages), a sound knowledge of another language opens many doors that would otherwise remain closed. That language is English, also called a link language in Sri Lanka and many other countries where other languages dominate. But English can transcend those barriers and facilitate communications between speakers of other native languages.

English also has a bit of an 'elitist' image here in Sri Lanka and in fact, many university students call it the *Kaduwa* (sword), as people who are fluent in *Kaduwa* can cut the others down in job interviews etc. But this need not be the case. There are plenty of free resources that help even total novices learn and speak English in a short period of time, gaining moderate fluency. Most countries including Sri Lanka teach it to all students from the primary grades. There is no reason at all why someone cannot learn English in today's Internet-connected world.

History

We pen these words to mark the United Nations' English Language Day, which fell yesterday. English has a very interesting history. It is a West Germanic language of the Indo-European language family that is closely related to the Frisian, German, and Dutch (in Belgium called Flemish) languages. English originated in England and is the dominant language of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and various island nations in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. It is also an official language of India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Singapore, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa.

English is also influenced by French, Latin, and many other languages. Some have estimated that English has 15,000 French words and phrases. While English is the most spoken language in the world, it is the native tongue for only one-quarter of those who speak it (Source: Statista 2017). Or more impressively, for three-quarters of those who speak English, it is at least their second language if not a third or fourth. In fact, English is widely spoken in countries such as Germany where the native language dominates.

Global lingua franca

English is the first choice of foreign language in most other countries, and it is that status that has given it the position of a global lingua franca. It is estimated that about a third of the world's population, some two billion people, now use English in some form every day.

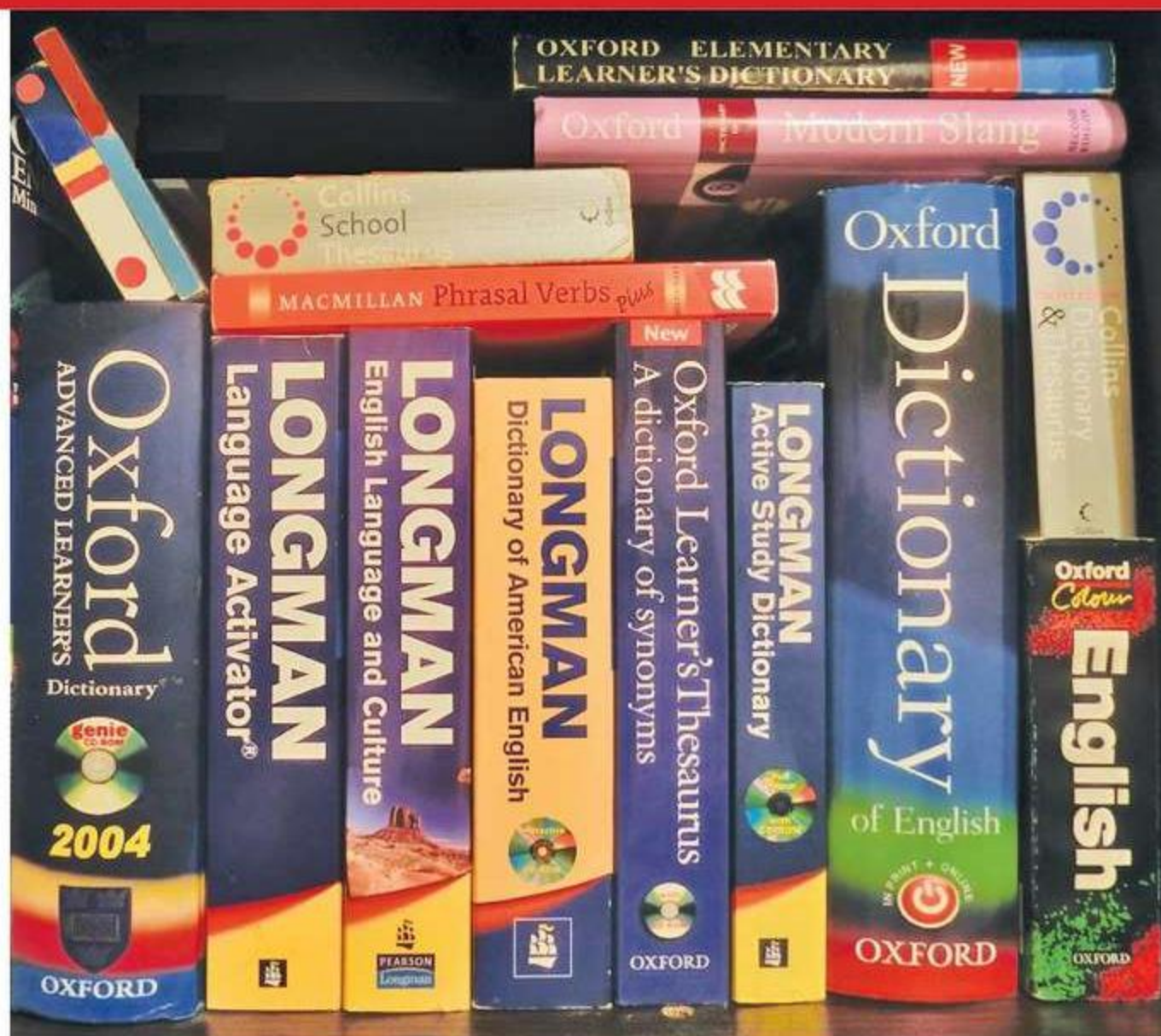
The English Language Day at the UN is celebrated on April 23, the date traditionally observed as both the birthday and date of death of William Shakespeare. On April 23, English Language Day explores the development, history, and culture of the English tongue.

Shakespeare has been called the greatest writer in the English language. His plays continue to be published, performed in theatres (including a modified Globe theatre from his era) and seen in films almost 400 years after his death. As

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well as being the English language's most famous playwright, Shakespeare also had a huge impact on modern-day English. At the time he was writing, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the English language was going through a lot of changes and Shakespeare's creativity with language meant he contributed hundreds of new words and phrases that are still used today.

For example, the words 'gossip', 'fashionable' and 'lonely' were all first used by Shakespeare. He also invented phrases like 'break the ice', 'all our yesterdays', 'faint-hearted' and 'love is blind'. We use them all the time,



without even thinking how they came to be.

Wide usage

Many people consider English as the unofficial "world language" because it is so widely used. English is the main language of business and aviation. It is the most widely used language on the Internet and social media. In fact, you can find many free, interactive English courses on the Internet to learn at your own pace. You can also connect with and share your lessons with others learning English around the world.

The English Language Day is the result of a 2010 initiative by the United Nations Department of Global Communications, establishing language days for each of the Organization's six official languages. The purpose of the UN's language days is to celebrate multilingualism and cultural diversity as well as to promote equal use of all six official languages throughout the Organisation.

Under the initiative, UN duty stations around the world celebrate six separate days, each dedicated to one of the Organization's six official languages. The six days recognized include French Language Day on March 20, Chinese Language Day on April 20, English Language Day on April 23, Spanish Language Day

also on April 23, Russian Language Day on June 6, and Arabic Language Day on December 18. The U.N. also celebrates International Mother Language Day on February 21 and International Translation Day on September 30. After all, translations and interpretations help us to understand another language easily.

English in grammatical structure

English belongs to the Indo-European family of languages and is therefore related to most other languages spoken in Europe and western Asia from Iceland to India. In fact, there are many similar words in both Sinhala and English, examples being Wathura/Water and Paha/Five.

The parent tongue, called Proto-Indo-European, was spoken about 5,000 years ago by nomads believed to have roamed the southeast European plains. Germanic, one of the language groups descended from this ancestral speech, is usually divided by scholars into three regional groups: East (Burgundian, Vandal, and Gothic,

all extinct), North (Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish), and West (German, Dutch [and Flemish], Frisian, and English).

Though closely related to English, German remains far more conservative than English in its retention of a fairly elaborate system of inflections. Frisian, spoken by the inhabitants of the Dutch province of Friesland and the islands off the west coast of Schleswig, is the language most nearly related to Modern English. Icelandic, which has changed little over the last thousand years, is the living language most nearly resembling Old English in grammatical structure.

The story of the English language began in the Fifth Century when Germanic tribes invaded Celtic-speaking Britain and brought their languages with them. Later, Scandinavian Vikings invaded and settled with their languages too. In 1066 William I, from modern-day France, became king, and Norman-French became the language of the courts and official activity.

People couldn't understand each other at first, because the lower classes continued to use English while the upper classes spoke French, but gradually French began to influence English. An estimated 45 per cent of all English words have a French origin. By Shakespeare's time, Modern English had developed, printing had been invented and people had to start to agree on 'correct' spelling and vocabulary.

The spread of English all over the world has an ugly history but a rich and vibrant present. During the European colonial period, several European countries, including England, competed to expand their empires. They stole land, labour and resources from people across Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania.

By the time former British colonies began to gain independence in the mid-20th century, English had become established in their institutions.

Many brilliant writers from diverse places across Africa, the Caribbean and Asia had started writing in English, telling their stories of oppression. People from all over the world were using English to talk and write about justice, equality, freedom and identity from their own perspectives. The different varieties of English created through this history of migration and colonisation are known as World Englishes.

More than 1.75 billion people speak English worldwide - that's around 1 in 4 people around the world. English is being used more and more as a way for two speakers with different first languages to communicate with each other, as a 'lingua franca'. For many people, the need to communicate is much more important than the need to sound like a native speaker. As a result, language use is starting to change. For example, speakers might not use 'a' or 'the' in front of nouns, or they might make uncountable nouns plural and say 'informations', 'furnitures' or 'co-operations'.

Variations and views

Are these variations mistakes? Or part of the natural evolution of different Englishes? 'International English' refers to the English that is used and developed by everyone in the world, and does not just belong to native speakers. There is a lot of debate about whether International English should be standardised and, if so, how. Right now, the spellings of American and British English are different - it is colour in the UK but color in the US and traveler in the UK but traveller in the US. But these conventions do not impede English. If at all, they add colour (or color) to the language.

One of the best ways of getting to grips with the nuances of English is reading. The most number of books published are in English and almost 90 per cent of the Internet is in English. Naturally, reading in English opens a whole new world - English is literally the gateway to new knowledge and broader horizons. It is no longer the *Kaduwa* it once was.

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