

IMPERIAL MARCH OF THE SPOKEN WORD

European languages have taken over the world. But not all have taken the same route, says **PETER TRUDGILL**



Three western European colonial languages are notable for having more mother-tongue speakers outside Europe than in their own native continent.

The language with the biggest difference between the number of speakers in its homeland and speakers overseas is Portuguese: this language has about 10 million speakers in Portugal, but there are about 20 times that, more than 200 million, in Brazil.

Portuguese is also the mother tongue of the Atlantic island of Madeira, and further out into the Atlantic in the Azores. It is widely spoken, too, in Angola and Mozambique, as well as on the Cape Verde islands, in Guinea-Bissau, and in São Tomé & Príncipe.

Spanish provides the next largest mismatch between European and diaspora speakers. There are around 35 million native speakers of Spanish in Spain – remembering that there are also some millions of speakers of other languages such as Basque, Catalan and Galician.

But the Americas have around 420 million speakers of Spanish, so about 12 times more than in the European homeland. Spanish is the major language in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico.

There are also about 40 million native Spanish speakers in the USA. Spanish has actually been spoken in North America for longer than English: Santa Fe, New Mexico, was settled by Spanish speakers in 1598, while Jamestown, Virginia, was settled by English speakers in 1607. And although Spanish is a minority language in America, it still has more native speakers in the USA than in Spain.

English also comes into the category of languages whose European speakers are

heavily outnumbered by those elsewhere. It has around 60 million native speakers in its homeland, Britain, while overseas there are about five times more than that – 300 million or so – in the USA, Canada, the Bahamas, Bermuda, the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tristan da Cunha, and the Falkland Islands. English has also become the native language for many people in India and Singapore. It is so widely used as a second language that it is in the unusual position of having more non-native speakers than native speakers.

There are, of course, a number of other major European colonial languages, but a majority of their speakers still live in their native continent.

French has about 65 million native speakers in Europe – in France, Belgium and Switzerland – while it has about 16 million elsewhere, including about seven million mother-tongue French speakers in Canada, and 70,000 in New Caledonia in the Pacific, plus some thousands in Guyane (French Guyana) in South America. French is also widely spoken as a second language over large areas of Africa and in the South Pacific.

Similarly, there are 21 million Dutch speakers in Holland, Belgium and the

Dunkirk area of France. But there are another million in Suriname, a few thousand in the Dutch Caribbean – the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao and Sint Maarten – plus more than seven million native speakers of Afrikaans (historically a variety of Dutch) in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

Russian is also interesting in this respect. There are something like 144 million Russian native speakers in Russia and neighbouring European countries such as Latvia and Ukraine. But around 30 million of those native speakers are to be found in those areas of Russia which are situated in Asia.

Russian, like English and French and Spanish and Portuguese, was entirely a language of Europe until the 16th century. But then Russian colonial expansion took off, not overseas as with the western European languages, but overland, both northwards to the Arctic Ocean and eastwards to Siberia and the Pacific Far East.

By 1650 the Russian language had reached Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean, 4,000 miles east of Moscow.

By comparison, Jamestown, Virginia, is only about 3,700 miles from London.



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