International English

I: Well. Welcome to the studio. We're going to talk about international English here today. And international English is, briefly, everyone who speaks English as a mother tongue or as a second language or as a special language, and that includes almost two billion people or more. What would you… How would you describe the status of English in the world today? What do you think is going to be happening with international English? Why don't we start out with you, Rob.

R: Well, I think the state of English in the world today is very healthy, and it's being used by so many people, as you pointed out in your introduction. But what's going to happen, it's incredibly difficult to say. I think there are two main possibilities. One is it will become more uniform all over the world, under the impact of the Internet and all the modern media. The other, that it will break up into different varieties, under the impact of people travelling, developing their own particular English dialects and English usages. These two possibilities exist, and I don't know which way it's going to go. Maybe in a sense it will go both ways.

A: That's what I reckon. I think you'll have both, and I think it will depend on how you use English, so that people who travel a lot or who use it for work will perhaps end up using some kind of global English which is possibly mid-Atlantic with a touch of…

I: Mid-Atlantic, you mean English from both America and Britain?

A: Yes.

I: I see.

A: And possibly with influence from Spanish, Japanese or Chinese as well.

I: Oh, definitely, definitely.

A: But at the same time, you'll get the local varieties. And as well, I think that local languages will get stronger. I mean, some people abide that small languages will disappear. I don't think they will. I think you'll get two classes of language. You'll get English used internationally and the local language will continue.

I: But people also say that, you know, in the English-speaking world where English is the second language, that is where things are going to be happening. It's not so much that they're going to travel from place to place, but they're going to use it in their own countries and they're going to use it differently. Like there's talk of, I think it was Chinglish and Japlish and…

R: They'll use it in their own countries but also people from those countries travel to towns and cities in America and Britain and so on, and they there develop these combinations of languages.

A: And not least, you have now many transactions going on, say, in the business world, between two sets of people for whom… neither of whom, English is a native language.

I: Yes, but…

A: You don't have native speakers there all the time at all.

I: And… But when they speak to one another, they don't necessarily speak grammatically correct.

A: Not at all.

I: But should this be accepted? Should we accept the fact that grammar no longer belongs to the people who originally started with the language? For example, the British.

R: Well, two things there. On the one hand, I think there will be rules. I mean, the English used by, for example, airline pilots and traffic controllers, air traffic controllers, must be normalized because it's very important obviously that they absolutely clearly understand what each other says. So there's going to be a normalization which will include grammatical correctness to some extent. So that will happen. But on the other hand, I think many local dialects and local languages using English as their basis will develop their own, if you like, their own grammar.

A: My view is the fact that grammar will probably stay pretty much the same as it is. People aren't that bothered about grammar. But it's the words that you use. They will change. You'll get new things which are invented, new names for things, and they will end up having, maybe, something which is called… a word which comes from a mixture of Chinese and English for all we know, and it's accepted.

I: Or they can change the meaning of English words which are already exist. For example, there's a word called "killerlitter." Can you guess what that is?

A: No, I can't.

I: That's garbage which is thrown out of a high building in Singapore.

R: It can hit someone on the head and kill them.

I: Exactly.

A: And kill them.

I: “Killerlitter” they call it.

A: Because “killer” sometimes, at least in England, is used as a word to mean “fantastic.”

I: This is quite… This is literal.

R: Words have been… This has been happening for hundreds of years. Words have been coming in and have been changing.

I: English is very mobile that way, very flexible, I mean.

R: There’s something else which must be pointed out, that there are other languages which are also going to be used on a world basis. The obvious ones are Spanish and Chinese. I’m sure there are others. And in a sense, they will all be competing. I’m sure English will survive, possibly as the most used language in the world, but these other ones are not going to run away.

I: I don’t know, Anne. Do you think someday people will, if they meet from Hungary and Indonesia, are going to speak Spanish or Chinese to one another, in order to communicate?

A: No, but I think they will speak a different kind of English than they use now.

I: But if they’re in… if they’re in a part of the world where Spanish is a language a lot of people learn, then they will, I’m sure, speak Spanish.

R: Uh huh.

I: Well, I think we can conclude anyway that international English has a strong position and a strong future as well, but it’s almost impossible to say what it’s going to turn into.

A: And that’s what makes it fascinating.