

# Looking at Language

## Doing a Number on English

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

**R**ecently, some organizations in Germany joined forces to compile a list of the hundred words that best reflect the twentieth century. AIDS, beat, bikini, camping, comics, computer, design, Holocaust, image, jeans, pop, single, sex, star, stress—English words that became part of the German language during the past hundred years—are featured in the list. That's just one piece of evidence that English has become the closest thing that humankind has ever had to a universal language.

"I think that language is a mirror of history, and these words reflect that," said Karin Frank-Cyrus, head of the Society for German Language. "The English language has become a lingua franca, a language that the whole world understands."

It is said again and again these days that there are lies, damnable lies, and statistics. Nonetheless, Americans are fascinated with and by statistics and take a special interest in facts that can be quantified. Here are some essential facts about our English tongue, expressed statistically:

Number of languages in the world: Approximately 6,800, 50 to 90% of which will be extinct in a hundred years.

Number of people around the world who can be reached by English in some form: 1.5 billion.

Percentage of those people who learned English as a second (or third or fourth) language: 51.5. China and India each have more English speakers than the United States.

Number of countries or territories in which English has official status: 87.

Percentage of the world's English speakers who live in the largest English-speaking country, the United States: 20.

Percentage of world English that is American English: 66.

Percentage of world English that is British English: 16.

Percentage of students in the European Union studying English: 83.

Percentage of people in the European Union who are fluent in English: 75.

Percentage of non-native speakers around the world who are fluent in English: 25.

Percentage of all books in the world printed in English: 50.

Percentage of international telephone calls made in English: 52.

Percentage of radio programs worldwide broadcast in English: 60.

Percentage of global box office from films in English: 63.

Percentage of global e-mail in English: 68.

Percentage of international mail and telexes written and addressed in English: 70.

Percentage of global computer text stored in English: 80.

Percentage of the 12,500 international organizations in the world that make use of the English language: 85.

Percentage of those international organizations that use English exclusively: 33.

Percentage of all English words throughout history that no longer exist: 85.

Number of words listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, not counting its supplements: 616,500.

Average number of words added to English each year: 1,000.

Number of words in the largest dictionaries of German, the world's second largest language: 185,000.

Number of words in the largest dictionaries of Russian, the world's third largest language: 130,000.

Number of words in the largest dictionaries for French and Spanish, tied for the world's fourth largest language: 100,000.

Borrowed words in English versus native (Anglo Saxon) words, expressed as a ratio: 3:1.

Number of borrowed languages in the English vocabulary: 300.

Percentage of English words made from Latin word parts: 50.

Number of words the average English speaker actually recognizes: 10,000-20,000.

Percentage of the average English speaker's conversation made up of the most frequently used 737 words: 96.

*See next page for a list of Lederer's books and ordering information.*

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