

How does the language you speak shape your experience of the internet?

Try to visualise the internet. For me, it is something hazy, suspended somewhere above our heads as we gaze at our screens. It's composed of tiny, moving fragments of information and simultaneous conversations, and it has no defined edges: it is limitless.

This vision of the internet as something infinite, open to be freely explored, is perhaps both naive and arrogant but, as an English speaker, it is not a sense of entitlement that is completely without reason. The first language used on the internet was almost certainly English. By the mid 1990s it was estimated that English made up 80% of the content.

Today, however, English represents just one language in an online linguistic elite. English's relative share of cyberspace has shrunk to around 30%, while French, German, Spanish and Chinese have all pushed into the top 10 languages online. Some of these have ballooned at great speed: Chinese, for example, grew by 1277.4% between 2000 and 2010. Out of a roughly 6,000 languages in use today, this top 10 make up 82% of the total of the content on the internet.

Does the language you speak online matter? How different is your experience if your mother tongue, for example, is Zulu rather than English?

The relationship between language and the internet is a growing area of interest and academic study. Language appears to profoundly affect your experience of the internet. It guides who you speak to on social media and often how you behave in these communities. It determines how much information you can access on Wikipedia. Google searching "restaurants" in a certain language may bring you back 10 times the results of doing so in another. And if your language is endangered, it is possible it will never have a life online. Far from infinite, the internet is only as big as your language.