

Headline	English is the winningest tongue		
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Description	The closing speech at the Beijing Olympics was spoken to a global audience by Jacques Rogge, the Belgian-born, French-speaking IOC president, in English.		

English is the winningest tongue



WHAT concerns Americans most – that Korean women outscore them on their golf courses, or that not all of them know how to say “thank you” in the American language?

There will, trust me, be an almighty civil-rights battle through the American courts and its constitution before the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) makes good its threat to suspend players who are not conversant in English by next year’s Tour.

Some simple arithmetic, or as Americans say, the math, is required to understand the problem.

The LPGA is, like sports everywhere, sponsor and television driven. There are 121 international players from 26 countries on the Tour, and 45 of them are from South Korea.

Those Koreans have begun to outnumber and outdrive the home-bred players to the effect that there are seven Koreans and only two Americans in the top 20 rankings.

The bulk of the money is American generated, but the listing is topped by Lorena Ochoa, a Mexican.

There are also three Swedes, two Japanese, and one player each from Australia, Brazil, Norway and Taiwan on the leaderboard.

“We live in a sports entertainment environment,” said Libba Galloway, the LPGA deputy commissioner. “For an athlete to be successful today, they need to be great performers on and off the course, and being able to communicate effectively with sponsors and fans is a big part of this.”

You know what? I agree with her. Looking at it from Galloway’s perspective, Americans are the pay masters, and if those who pay for the tour can’t understand the gratitude of those who play on it, there is a problem.

The same problem as the Americans who play in Japan’s baseball league without offering the basic courtesies in return. The same problem that the English colonisers left around the world when they ran their empire and expected everyone to adapt.

Galloway says that her organisation just wants to help its athletes succeed off the golf course as well as on it.

“When a player wins the championship,” she reasons, “you want to expose her to the media. But if she can’t speak English well, it limits the publicity effects of the organisers.”

There is indignation in Seoul. They fear their players are being discriminated against, punished for their success.

America’s other sports, baseball, ice hockey, basketball are flush with foreigners. All offer language tuition, but none makes speaking English a condition of employment.

That is because the language of sports is body language. In effect, talent is the lingua franca.

However, golf is based on the individual rather than the team, and

sponsors like the extra bang to their buck of being able to rub shoulders with the star players at pro-am tournaments.

The dollar is, even in times of deflation, the prize.

Nowadays, there is more of it to be gained off the court or the course by associating with some product. So, to that extent, speaking the host language is in the interests of the player.

“I know it’s important to speak English,” said Nikolay Davydenko, the Russian tennis player this week. “But if you’re pressured to say something, you need to speak Russia, or speak China. What can you do?”

“Sometimes, I don’t understand some questions, I need also translator and then, maybe, I can speak English to you.”

It is increasingly the way of the world. English is the dominant language, and not even the English and Americans speak it with the same meaning.

But in football, the EPL is today so full of foreigners that some clubs might be more conversant in another tongue,

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say Spanish for Liverpool, French for Arsenal, Russian for Chelsea.

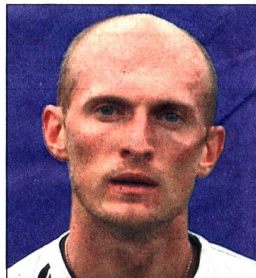
Park Ji Sung, the most successful Asian footballer abroad, dutifully learnt Dutch when he played in Eindhoven and now speaks English at Manchester United. And though Arsenal have often lined up without a native English speaker in the side, Arsene Wenger conducts every training session in English.

Even the bosses have to do it. Fifa was founded in France, but Michel Platini, once its finest export who let his talent do the talking, converted to English to win the presidency of Uefa.

And the closing speech at the Beijing Olympics was spoken to a global audience by Jacques Rogge, the Belgian-born, French-speaking IOC president, in English.

English, the Americans will tell you, is the winningest language out there.

stsports@sph.com.sg



Russian tennis player Nikolay Davydenko, who needs a translator now and then, says it is important to speak English. PHOTO: REUTERS