
Opening Extract from...

The Story of English

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Contents

A Universal Language?

Myths and rumours of a universal language go back to the earliest days of mankind, and seem to reflect some fundamental human aspiration. Research, beginning in the 18th century, indicates that there was once a proto-language called Indo-European, from which sprang the great diversity of tongues that spread across the northern hemisphere. Artificial attempts to create a new universal language were in fashion towards the end of the 19th century, although the speakers of even the most successful – Esperanto – amount to only a tiny fraction of those who speak the two most widely used languages in the world, Mandarin (the official language of China) and English. But the myth or ideal of a universal tongue persists.

Early in the Book of Genesis the descendants of Noah set about building a tower in Mesopotamia, an area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq. It was a time, we are told, when 'the whole Earth was of one language and of one speech'. The motive of the tower-builders seems to have been the Donald Trump-like one of spreading their fame by building higher and bigger than anyone else. But the attempt to create an edifice whose top would reach up to heaven served only to bring down on their heads the wrath of God. In punishment, God 'confound[ed] their language' and the descendants of Noah were scattered 'abroad upon the face of the Earth'. After

speaking one language they found themselves talking in many tongues. People could no longer plan or work together, as they were unable to understand each other. Everything was confusion or 'Babel', the name given to the abandoned tower.

Whether treated as an outright fable or as having some grounding in reality, the story of the Tower of Babel is usually interpreted as a warning against what the ancient Greeks would later call *hubris*, overweening arrogance. But a less noticed feature of the tale is that it refers to a period in human history – or prehistory – when humankind used 'one language'. It was a period when a multiplicity of tongues was regarded as a curse, resulting in confusion and dispersal. In other words, the monolingual era was one of simplicity, even innocence. You could understand not only the woman next door but the stranger at your gate. Nothing would get lost in translation, for the simple reason that there was nothing that needed translating.

Could such an era have any basis in history? Was there a time when the world's inhabitants used the same tongue? The answer to that will probably never be known. But if we narrow the question so that it applies to a great swathe of the northern hemisphere there is a better chance of an answer. For there was most likely a single source for the majority of languages which took root across western Asia, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and Europe in a process that began several thousand years ago. The majority of these languages have died out while all of those that survived have been transformed almost out of recognition from their starting-points. The survivors are still being transformed, since no living language is fixed and constant. And, of all the languages which had their

probable origins in 'one language … one speech' many millennia ago, the most successful and the most widely spoken – up to the present day – is English.

The Asiatick Society

The discovery of this early or proto-language really begins with the researches of Sir William Jones (1746–94). Jones was appointed a judge in Calcutta's supreme court during the early days of British rule in India. Before taking up the law he had been an enthusiastic scholar of languages, with a particular interest in the East, whose civilizations he regarded as superior to the traditional cultures of Greece and Rome. Towards the end of his life Jones brought together these two academic disciplines by publishing books on both Mohammedan and Hindu law.

Once established in Calcutta at the age of 37, Jones set himself to learn Sanskrit, an Indian language surviving only in ancient texts. His attention was caught by the way in which certain Sanskrit words were echoed in later languages, both living and dead. For example, the Sanskrit for 'three' is *trayas* while the equivalent Latin word is *tres* and the Greek *trias*. These similarities occur with other numbers between one and ten. When it comes to family members – always a marker for linguistic connection – we find that the Sanskrit for 'brother' is *bhrata* (compare with German *Bruder*) while the word for 'father' is *pitar* (compare with Latin *pater* and German *Vater*).

Although not the first scholar to notice similarities between words in Sanskrit and terms in Greek and Latin and elsewhere, Sir William Jones was the first to make an extended study of

these linguistic echoes. Only six months after he had started to learn Sanskrit he confidently announced his conclusions at a meeting of the Asiatick Society in Calcutta:

> *The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which perhaps no longer exists.*

The second of February 1786, the date of Sir William Jones's speech to the learned society of which he was the founding president, is a red-letter day in the history of language studies. His extraordinary perception that peoples, cultures and civilizations separated both in time and space have a common linguistic root has been supported by all subsequent research. The language spoken by Julius Caesar is related not only to modern Italian but to the language once used on the banks of the Ganges. Or, as Jones put it, 'Pythagoras and Plato derived their sublime theories from the same fountain with the sages of India.'

This original language, called Indo-European, no longer exists. It is buried under thousands of years and the dispersed lives of millions of speakers. There is, of course, nothing written down in Indo-European. But language historians have been able to reconstruct the probable forms of words in Indo-European by working backwards from languages that have left written traces. By examining the shared elements in words of similar sound or

meaning, and applying the rules of word change and formation, it has been possible to build – or rebuild – sounds and meanings from thousands of years ago. A couple of examples: in almost all the languages of Europe and western Asia the word for 'mother' begins with an 'm-' sound, which tells us that in the original language it would have started with the same sound. In modern German 'water' is *Wasser* while in French it is *eau* and in 2000-year-old Latin it was *aqua*. The words look different enough on the page but they have a similarity of sound that indicates a common linguistic source.

Indeed, research at the University of Reading using supercomputers has pushed back the boundaries beyond Indo-European to an even older tongue that might have been used in the Neolithic period more than 10,000 years ago. People in the Stone Age may have pronounced basic terms like pronouns (*I, who, we*) and numbers (*two, three, five*) in ways that have not changed greatly over subsequent millennia. This is because such words, being in constant use and having a precise meaning, have evolved more slowly than terms that are rarely found. The personal pronouns that enable us to connect to each other and the numbers that we can count off on our fingers are, literally, too important to be permitted the luxury of much change.

Reconstructing the probable sound and shape of very old words is like recreating what someone would have looked like on the evidence of a skull or, given the delicate nature of the linguistic evidence, tiny fragments of a skull. The process may sound tentative but it is also highly persuasive in its findings. When we discover that there are similarities in, say, the words for 'plough' in old Norse and Middle English, in Latin and Armenian, it suggests that those who tilled the land many

centuries ago were themselves descended from speakers of a single tongue many thousands of years before that. Also, by looking at the range of vocabulary in this proto-language it is possible to come to conclusions about the kind of society our linguistic ancestors inhabited. Terms for domestic animals or ways of making fabric for clothes, references to 'house' or 'door', to say nothing of that original 'plough', indicate a relatively settled society of farmers and animal-keepers.

Examination of their re-created vocabulary also tells researchers that these early speakers were unfamiliar both with the tropical areas of the world (no words for 'lion' or 'camel') and the far north, which would in any case have been an unlikely place for extensive settlements. The origins of the speakers of Indo-European have been placed at various sites in what is now central Europe or western Asia. The most plausible area lies north of the Black Sea, a steppe region once inhabited by the Yamnaya culture. At some point, or rather at several points about 4500 or more years ago, the occupants of this area began to spread out in all directions, presumably in search of new territory for hunting and farming. They and their descendants took their luggage of words with them, westwards into the heart of Europe and south towards the Mediterranean. Some must have moved into Asia towards the Indian subcontinent and a few even reached as far as China.

It may be a cliché to describe the spread of language(s) as being like the growth of a tree but the image is a vivid one and mostly right. As languages develop on the spot or are carried from place to place they sprout fresh limbs and branches, and those branches in turn put out new growths. In the end, the tip of one twig will be many yards distant from the tip of another

twig on the opposite side of the tree. Yet they grew originally from the same trunk.

The Indo-European trunk, from which came ancestral languages as various and forgotten as Hittite, Tocharian and Gothic, is also the ultimate source of modern Spanish and German and English. The tree analogy falls down only in one respect: languages, unlike the branches of trees, can survive the death of the trunk or limb from which they grew. In fact, change and development are inevitable and necessary parts of language history. A language that doesn't develop is dead, fit for study but not likely to be used for speech except in special circumstances.

In the attempt to go back to the beginning, before Babel, there have been several attempts to artificially create a new universal language. The most famous and successful is Esperanto, created in 1887 by Dr Ludovic Zamenhoff, a Polish eye specialist living in Bialystock, then under Russian control. Zamenhoff was familiar with the tensions caused by the linguistic divisions of the city among four languages (Russian, Polish, German and Yiddish) and his creation of an artificial language seems to have sprung from the philanthropic desire to foster harmony and understanding – in every sense – between people. The name of the language was Zamenhoff's pseudonym for his first textbook, with the literal meaning of 'the hoping one'.

Although an estimated million and a half people scattered round the world have a working knowledge of Esperanto and despite being on the school curriculum of countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria, the heyday of Esperanto was in the early part of the 20th century. It was perceived as enough of a threat by totalitarian regimes for its use to be regarded with suspicion

in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. Esperanto is reputedly less difficult for English speakers to learn than French or Spanish, although it has something of a 'Spanish' feel to it, as indicated by the opening lines of the Lord's Prayer: 'Patro nia, kiu estas en la chielo, sankta estu via nomo; venu regeco via; estu volo via, tiel en la chielo, tiel ankau sur la tero.'

Though not motivated by the same philanthropic energy as Esperanto, no language has developed further and more dynamically than English. Some of the reasons for that global success are examined in this book.

The World's Most Popular Languages?

But first we might ask what underlies the claim that English is the closest thing to a world language yet achieved. What criteria are to be used in assessing the popularity of any language?

The ranking of the world's languages – the top tongues, the most significant ones – is not as straightforward as it might at first appear. Does 'top' or 'most significant' apply to the languages that are most widely used around the world or to those with the greatest number of speakers? To what extent ought secondary speakers to be included (secondary speakers are those making regular or even primary use of a language which is not their own)? What weighting should be given to the economic power and cultural status of particular countries, since these factors will obviously have a marked effect on the spread, accessibility and popularity of a language? A complicating element is the unreliability of the statistics, especially those for secondary speakers.

The problem was tackled in the 1990s by linguistic expert George Weber, who compiled figures and drew up tables in which the relative positions of the 'ten most influential languages' varied according to the criteria used. Although the overall number of speakers of all of these languages will have increased since then, this does not affect their positions vis-à-vis each other.

In simple numbers of primary users, Chinese comes out on top with well over a billion speakers. English is in second place, with roughly half a billion, followed by Hindi/Urdu, Spanish and Russian. This ranking is based on the most generous estimates of speakers for each language. However, when secondary speakers are added, the list changes slightly. Although Chinese and English remain first and second, Spanish, Russian and French now occupy third, fourth and fifth places respectively.

The explanation for this shift lies largely in the expansionist histories of Spain, Russia and France. All three were countries with 'empires', whether or not they were officially acknowledged as such, and so they had a significant impact in areas of the world sometimes far removed from their own territories. The French language, for example, survives in countries like Vietnam or Algeria because of its colonial past, while for the same reason Spanish is dominant in South America (and Portuguese in Brazil). By contrast, the related forms of Hindi and Urdu are spoken in densely populated India and Pakistan but do not have much of a linguistic role in the world outside their borders, leaving aside their scattered immigrant communities.

Using a different criterion, based on the number of countries in which a language is used, English comes out comfortably

ahead with a figure of 115 countries, more than three times that of the next language, French (at 35). Arabic, Spanish and Russian occupy places three to five, respectively. The use of English in the majority of the world's countries does not mean that it is widely understood by a majority in any country, apart from those that are Anglophone. Rather, it means that English will be spoken by a substantial minority and be important as a language of commerce and tourism. Any traveller will be able to confirm that.

Taking other factors into account, such as economic power and 'socio-literary prestige', George Weber came up with the following ranking for the top ten most influential languages: 1. English; 2. French; 3. Arabic; 4. Spanish; 5. Russian; 6. German; 7. Mandarin (Chinese); 8. Portuguese; 9. Hindi/Urdu; 10. Bengali.

Recent evidence for the global dominance of English can be found in many disparate places. The linguistic breakdown of articles on Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopaedia created by users, shows that there are three times as many articles in English as in the next most popular language, which is German. French comes third, with Japanese, Italian and Polish users contributing a lesser but roughly equal number. Users from the United States provide more than half of all contributions in English.

Although other languages are sometimes used, English is the default choice of worldwide aviation. Internal flights may employ the language of that particular country but it is obviously vital for pilots and air-traffic controllers handling international journeys to be on the same linguistic wavelength. At least three major crashes have been blamed partly on poor

communication and misunderstanding. Conditions in an emergency are aggravated by the fact that non-English speakers may have only a limited repertoire of English terms which breaks down under pressure, while English speakers easily fall back on slang or colloquial usages. Speaking some English is not enough. It has to be the right kind of English, one agreed on by all flying nations.

In 2001 the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) accepted proposals to standardize the English used for aviation communication. Some countries were happy to comply. Japan – accustomed to English as a lingua franca – has a single-language policy for all its air-traffic control. But others saw it as an attempt to impose a monoglot solution. France, always sensitive over encroachments on the primacy of the French language, protested at the ICAO proposals. It was not the first time. In 2000 French pilots had been vocal in their opposition to the order that, when approaching Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, they should talk in English to the controllers whom they gracefully termed *les aiguilleurs du ciel* ('the signalmen of the sky'). In the 1970s there were protests in Canada over the same issue, since that country is officially bilingual.

KEYWORD
OK

English is the closest the world has yet come to a universal language, at least in the sense that even

those who cannot speak it – admittedly, the large majority of the world's population – are likely to be familiar with the odd English expression. One term that is genuinely global as well as genuinely odd is *OK* (or *O.K.* or *okay*), originating in America in the 19th century. An astonishingly adaptable word, it works as almost any part of speech from noun to verb, adjective to adverb, though often just as a conversation-filler – 'OK, what are we going to do now?' Depending on the tone of voice, *OK* can convey anything from fervent agreement to basic accquiescence. It may be appropriate that such a truly universal term has no generally agreed source. Attempts to explain where it came from don't so much show variety as a high degree of imaginative curiosity. So, *OK* is created from the initials of a deliberate misspelling, *oll korreket*, or from a campaign slogan for a would-be US president in the 1840s who was known as Old Kinderhook because he came from Kinderhook in New York State. Or it is a version of a word imported from Finland or Haiti, or possibly one borrowed from the Choctaw Indians. Or it is older than originally thought and derives from West African expressions like *o-ke* or *waw-ke*. Enough explanations, OK?

The Celts and the Romans

The original inhabitants of the British Isles before the arrival of the Romans were Celtic-speaking tribes. Celtic itself was one of the many offshoots of the earlier Indo-European language. The Roman invasion – prepared by Julius Caesar's short-lived military expeditions of 55 and 54 BC but only beginning in earnest when the legions of Emperor Claudius landed in AD 43 – subdued large areas of Britain. Together with their laws, customs and roads, the conquerors imported the imperial language of Latin.

The first people who can properly be called British were part of the Celtic migration that spread westwards from central and southern Europe thousands of years ago. By the 5th century BC they were established in tribal groupings across the British Isles. They had their own religion and a language that would inevitably have proliferated into different dialects in different parts of the country. It is from Celtic that various later and related tongues developed. These include Breton (in the Brittany region of France), Cornish, Manx (in the Isle of Man), the forms of Gaelic connected to Scotland and Ireland, and Welsh. These are now minority languages, if they have survived at all.

The Celts should not be regarded as a unified people, let alone a nation living within defined borders. Although the term was applied by Greek and Roman writers to groups in western

Europe, it is not recorded in English until the early 17th century. The following years saw an awakening of interest in the Celtic past of Britain, significantly in regions – or countries – which wanted to assert their own identity and preserve their indigenous languages. The so-called Celtic Revival was especially strong in pre-20th-century Scotland and Ireland.

In England, however, there was not much left to preserve or rediscover. Successive invasions, particularly the incursions and settlements of the various Germanic tribes known collectively as the Anglo-Saxons, had erased most Celtic traces from England, and it was once thought that this extended to the Celts themselves. It now seems that they enjoyed – or endured – a form of co-existence with the Anglo-Saxons from the fifth century AD onwards, either living among them or establishing themselves in separate pockets of territory. Long before that, however, the Celts had of necessity learned to live with the Roman *imperium* which controlled most of the known world.

The Romans in Britain

The Roman conquest of most of Britain was rapid and overwhelming. The emperor Claudius (r.41–54)took part in the landing of an estimated 40,000 men in AD 43 – or at any rate arrived by the time his army reached the Thames – and led the triumphal entry into Colchester, the tribal capital of the region. Within four years, the Romans had consolidated their power as far as the Fosse Way, a road that they themselves built in the west of England and which was eventually to run diagonally across the country on a southwest–northeast course from Topsham (Devon) to Lincoln. It took a little longer to subdue

the Welsh tribes but before the end of the first century AD, Wales was dotted with legionary fortresses.

Scotland – or Caledonia – was more of a challenge to the Romans. Despite some early victories, they soon gave up the attempt to control the Highland region. Hadrian's Wall, planned during the emperor's visit to Britain in AD 122 and extending about 74 miles (118 km) from modern Newcastle upon Tyne to the Carlisle area, was intended as much to mark the northern limit of the Roman empire as it was a piece of extended fortification. A slightly later emperor, Antoninus Pius (r.138–161), attempted to extend the bounds of the empire with the building of a 37-mile (59-km) wall further north between the Forth and Clyde rivers. The Antonine Wall was abandoned in little more than 20 years and the Lowlands were largely left to themselves, despite frequent raids south by the Picts (literally the 'painted ones' in Latin) as well as Roman punitive expeditions that crossed Hadrian's Wall in the opposite direction.

The Romans, seemingly concerned mostly with pacification and tax revenues, allowed their subject peoples a fairly high degree of autonomy as long as they behaved themselves. The invaders did not seek to impose their language, at least by force. They didn't have to. They taught tacitly and by example, backed up with overwhelming military and civil power. Many native Britons, or at least the more ambitious ones, would naturally have chosen to learn Latin in the early years following the AD 43 invasion. Some would have grown up in Latin-speaking households, as the Celts were assimilated into the world of the conquerors, whether through involvement with the colonial administration or through commerce or by intermarriage.