

Will English Become the World Language?

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English, spoken by millions of people as their first language, is the largest of occidental languages. However, the importance of a language is associated with their contribution to the material and spiritual progress in the world. And, there is the practical fact that a language may be important as a *lingua franca* in a country or region whose diverse populations would otherwise be unable to communicate.

Language policy is a highly emotional issue, the language of a country often symbolizing its independence and nationalism. The official languages of the United Nations are English, French, Russian, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic. Since it is not to be expected that the speakers of any of these six languages will be willing to subordinate their own language to any of the other, the question is rather which language will likely gain ascendancy in the course of events. The revolution in communications during the past century has contributed to the spread of several languages, but especially of English because the major broadcasting and motion picture industries are in the U.S. and Great Britain. It will be the combined effect of economic and cultural forces such as these rather than explicit legislation and national and international bodies that will determine the world languages of the future.

Since the Second World War, English as an official language has claimed progressively less territory among the former colonies of the Empire while its actual importance and number of speakers have increased rapidly. As the colonies gained independence, English continued alongside with the vernaculars. In many of these countries English is either the primary language or a necessary second language in schools, the courts, and business. It is nowhere a question of substituting English for the native speech. The question simply concerns the use of English, or some other widely known idiom, for international communication.

Since English seems likely to occupy an increasingly prominent place in international communication, it is worth inquiring into its qualifications for so important a mission. It shares with other languages the ability to express the multiplicity of ideas and the refinements of thought that demand expression in our modern civilization. The question is rather one of simplicity. How readily can it be learned by the foreigner? Does it possess characteristics of vocabulary and grammar that render it easy or difficult of acquirement?

Prominent among the assets of the English language must be considered the cosmopolitan character of its vocabulary. English is a Germanic language, i.e., it shares with the other Germanic languages grammatical structures and many common words. On the other hand, more than half of its vocabulary is derived from Latin. Some of these borrowings have

been direct, a great many through French, some through the other Romance languages. As a result, English shares a great number of words with those languages which arrived from Latin, notably French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. All this means that English presents a familiar appearance to anyone who speaks either a Germanic or a Romance language. There are parts of the language they feel they do not have to learn, or learn with little effort. To a lesser extent the English vocabulary contains borrowings from many other languages. Instead of making new words chiefly by the combination of existing elements, English has shown a marked tendency to go outside its own linguistic resources and borrow from other languages.

Until the coming of the Romans no written record of the influxes of population had been made. Gradually, the Romans occupied the greater part of the country, but soon they came up against an obstacle that had no doubt held up earlier invaders and was to hold up later ones in the mountains of Wales and Scotland. Among them, the Britons took refuge and there the invader was forced to come to a stop. Outside the camp and beyond the Wall, Roman influence was rarely felt, the old Celtic language was spoken and Latin never became a spoken language there as it did in England.

In 410 the Romans left Britain to defend Rome. It was then that the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes came and seized undefended Britain. Once more the Britons of England were driven to the mountains of Wales and Scotland, Western Ireland and the Isle of Man. If an Englishman heard a speech in any of the languages spoken there, he would not understand a word of it, for the English he speaks comes from the Angles who made England *Angle-land*, and English took practically nothing from the old Celtic language. The words *ass*, *bannock* (in a loaf of home made bread), and *bin* (= a manger) are probably survivals of British words, and there have been importations into English at a later date: from Welsh: *druid*, *flannel*, *gull*, *bard* ; from Scotch Gaelic: *cairn*, *clan*, *plaid*, *whisky*; and from Irish: *brogue*, *shamrock*, *galore*. But something of Celtic has been fossilized in numerous place names. Ten rivers still have the beautiful name of *Avon*, from the Celtic word for river. The Celtic *Dun* (a protected place) can be seen in *Dundee*, *Dunbar* and in the old name for Edinburgh, *Dunedin*. *Kill* (a church) in *Kildare*, *Kilkenny*, *-combe* (a hollow) in *Ilfracombe*, *Combemartin*. *Caer* (a castle) in *Caerleon*, *Carlisle*, *Cardiff*; and *-llan* (holy) in *Llangollen*, *Llandudno*. The names *London*, *Dover*, *York*, *Glasgow* are British, and so is the first part of *Dorchester*, *Gloucester*, *Manchester*, *Winchester*, *Salisbury*, to which has been added the old English *ceaster* (from the Latin *castra*, a camp) or *-burgh* (a fort).

The story of English in England therefore begins in the first half of the C V when the new invaders came: the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes.

Each of these three tribes spoke a different form of their common language, Anglo Saxon (a West Germanic member of the Indo-European languages). Anglo-Saxon or Old English was an inflected language, there were five cases of nouns (Nominative, Vocative, Accusative, Genitive, Dative), *strong* and *weak* declensions for adjectives (each with five cases); there was a full conjugation of verbs –complete with subjunctive– and there was a system of grammatical gender. So in Old English *hand* was feminine, but *heafod* (head) was neutral; *wif* (wife) was neutral but *wifmann* (woman) was masculine; *dog* (day) was masculine but *niht* (night) was feminine. Most of that has changed as the result of two other invasions of England.

The first of these was that of the Danes, whose language was not unlike the language of England –words like *mother* and *father*, *man* and *wife*, *summer* and *winter*, *house*, *town*, *tree*, *land*, *grass*, *come*, *ride*, *see*, *think*, *will* and others, were common to both languages. As the roots of the words were the same but the endings were different, Saxon and Dane found they could understand each other better if the inflectional endings tended to be levelled to the same form and, ultimately, to be dropped altogether.

- There were, too, some positive gains in vocabulary and grammar. The word *law* is Danish, so are *leg*, *skin*, *skull*, *knife*, *sky* and *Thursday*.
- The old English plural pronouns *hi*, *hiera*, *hem* were very likely the singular forms *he*, *hiere*, *him* so it was a great advantage when the Danish plural forms *they*, *their*, *them* ousted them.
- Among adjectives from Danish there are *flat*, *happy*, *low*, *ugly*, *weak* and *wrong*;
- Among verbs *want*, *call*, *cut*, *die*, *lift* and *take*.
- The Danish *are* replaced the Anglo-Saxon *sindon*.

There was still one other invasion which was to play a major part in the shaping of the English language, that of the Normans, whose influence had appeared before 1066. The Normans adopted French as their language, embraced Christianity and became renowned for their learning, their military prowess and their organizing ability. After defeating King Harold at Hastings in 1066, William the Conqueror organized England on the Norman pattern. For the next three centuries all the kings of England spoke French, all the power in Court and castle and church was in the hands of the Normans. Two languages were spoken side by side in England. The *official* language was French; English was spoken only by the common people.

Ultimately Norman and Saxon united to form one nation, the turning point was marked in 1362 when for the first time Edward III opened Parliament in English. When English emerged as the language of England, it had been greatly modified. The gradual simplifications had been accelerated by the fact that English had for three centuries been a

spoken language, no longer restrained from change by literary models. The language had now got rid of grammatical gender. Case endings of nouns had been reduced to one, the Genitive, prepositions had taken the place of inflectional endings. Plural forms had been made much fewer, verb forms had been simplified, and the whole language had been made much more flexible and expressive.

The language emerged with its essential structure still Germanic, but an examination of the vocabulary of Modern English will show that approximately fifty per cent of its words are of French or Latin origin, and half of these were adopted between 1250 and 1400. Despite this tremendous French element, English remains fundamentally Anglo-Saxon, for though it is easy enough to make sentences on ordinary subjects without using a single word of French or Latin origin, it is practically impossible to make even a short sentence without using Saxon words.

If all other sources of knowledge about the Normans were lost, we could re-construct the times from an examination of the language of today. We should know that the Normans were the ruling race for almost all the words expressing government (including *government* itself) are of French origin. It is true that the Normans left the Saxon words *king* and *queen*, *earl* and *lady*;

- but *prince*, *sovereign*, *throne*, *crown*, *royal*, *country*, *people*, *nation*, *parliament*, *duke*, *count*, *chancellor*, *minister*, *council* and many other such words are all Norman.
- So are such words as *honour*, *glory*, *courteous*, *duty*, *polite*, *conscience*, *noble*, *pity*, *fine*, *cruel*, words expressing the new ideas of chivalry and refinement
- From their activity in building and architecture came: *arch*, *pillar*, *palace*, *tower*, *castle*, etc.
- From their interest in warfare we got: *war*, *peace*, *battle*, *armour*, *officer*, *soldier*, *navy*, *captain*, *enemy*, *danger*, *march*, *company* to mention but a few.
- The Normans were great law-givers, and though *law* itself is Scandinavian, the words *justice*, *judge*, *jury*, *court*, *cause*, *crime*, *traitor*, *assize*, *prism*, *tax*, *money*, *rent*, *property*, *injury* are all of French origin.

By the C XIII in making translations of the Scriptures and of sermons from Latin into English and Norman, it was easier to adopt Latin words, in French guise, than to hunt around for the Saxon equivalent.

So a large number of French words connected with religion came into the language: *religion*, *service*, *saviour*, *prophet*, *saint*, *sacrifice*, *miracle*, *preach*, *pray*.

- The names of nearly all articles of luxury and pleasure are Norman (*castle* and *city*): the simpler things are English: *town*, *hamlet*, *house* and *home*.
- The Normans had their *relations*, *ancestors* and *descendants*; but the English words are *father* and *mother*, *sister*, *brother*, *son* and *daughter*.
- The names of the great things of nature, if not of art, are English: the *sun*, the *moon*, the *stars*, *winds*, *morning* and *evening*, the *plough*, the *spade*, *wheat*, *rats*, *grass*; the Normans had *fruit* and *flowers*, *art*, *beauty*, *design*, *ornament*.
- The English worker was a *shoemaker*, *shepherd*, *mill*, *fisherman*, *smith* or *baker*; the men who came in contact with the rulers were *tailors*, *barbers*, *painters*, *carpenters*.
- The Normans used *chairs*, *tables* and *furniture*; the English, only the *stool*.
- The Normans ate the big *dinner*, *feast*, *supper*, at which food could be *boiled*, *fried*, *roasted*; the Englishman had the simpler *breakfast*.

The whole situation is given in a passage in Scott's *Ivanhoe*, we see that the poor Saxon had all the work and trouble of looking after animals while they were alive; but when there was the pleasure of eating them, the Englishman's *cow*, *bull* or *ox* became French *beef*; his *sheep* and *lamb* became French *mutton*; his *swine* or *pig* became *pork* or *bacon*; his *calf* turned to *veal* and the *deer* went to the Norman tables as *venison*.

The close relationship that England and France have always had has resulted in a constant influx of French words into the language. Words that came early into the language became fully anglicised both in accent and pronunciation. Later importations failed to achieve this complete incorporation into the language. A feature of Old English was that in words of more than one syllable the accent is on the first syllable. And we have that accentuation in early borrowings from French such as

- *virtue*, *nature*, *honour*, *favour*, *courage*, *reason*, *captain*

Words like

- *campaign*, *connoisseur*, *façade*, *menage* have not yet acquired this accentuation.

Again words like

- *table*, *chair*, *castle*, *grocer*, *beauty* are so completely "English" that it gives us almost a shock of surprise to realize that they have not always been native words. But with
- *amateur*, *soufflé*, *valet*, *chef* we do not have that feeling.
- The word *garage* is in a half-way stage. We are not quite sure whether it ought to be pronounced / gæ'ra: ʒ /, / g ə'ra: ʒ / or / 'gær id ʒ /.

Compare again the words of early borrowings

- *chief, chore, chapel, cherish, chimney, Charles* (where the *ch* is pronounced / tʃ /).

With the later ones

- *chef, chaperon, champagne, chauffeur, Charlotte* (where the *ch* is / ʃ /).

Similarly, the *g* pronounced / ʒ / in

- *rage, siege, age, judge* dates from as old borrowings that have become anglicised,
- whereas the *g* pronounced / ɡ / in
- *rouge, mirage, sabotage, camouflage* shows that these are more recent borrowings.

In almost every century since Norman times French words have entered the language. In the C XVI it took, among many others: *pilot, rendez-vous, volley, vase, moustache, machine*; in the C XVII: *reprimand, ballet, burlesque, champagne, naïve, muslin, soup, group, quart*; in the C XVIII: *émigré, guillotine, corps, espionage, depot, bureau, canteen, rouge, rissole, brunette, picnic, police*; in the C XIX: *barrage, chassis, parquet, baton, rosette, profile, suede, cretonne, restaurant, menu, chauffeur, fiancée, prestige, debacle*; and in the C XX: *garage, camouflage, hangar, revue*.

An interesting effect of the French, particularly the Norman element has been to give the language a sort of bilingual quality, with two words, one of Saxon and one of French origin, to express roughly the same meaning. Thus we have: *foe* and *enemy*; *friendship* and *amity*; *freedom* and *liberty*; *happiness* and *felicity*; *love* and *charity*, and a host of others. (The first word in each pair is Saxon, the second French). Almost always there is a difference of association or emotional atmosphere, and the Saxon word has generally the deeper emotional content: *Brotherly love* is deeper than *fraternal affection*; *help* expresses deeper need than *aid*; a *hearty welcome* is warmer than a *cordial reception*.

Since Norman times no other invader has come to England to impose an alien tongue on the country. But the stream of words has never ceased to flow. Latin and Greek words have come in French form via French or some other language. Some Latin words were taken into the language of the Angles and the Saxons before these peoples came to England, e.g., *wine, cup, butter, cheese, silk, copper, street, pound, mill, plum*.

With the coming of the Christian culture from Rome and Ireland in the C VI and VII numerous others came: *candle, monk, bishop, mass*.

In the Middle English period a number of technical or scientific terms were taken and given a wider application, e.g., *index, simile, pauper, equivalent, legitimate, diocese, tolerance*.

A great flood came with the Revival of Learning in the C XVI, XVII. Many of the words adopted then have lasted, e.g.,

- in the C XVII: *specimen, focus, arena, album, minimum, lens, complex, pendulum*.
- in the C XVIII: *nucleus, alibi, ultimatum, extra, insomnia, via, deficit*.
- in the C XIX: *eco, opus, referendum, bacillus*.

At the time of the Revival of Learning many of the new ideas or branches of learning that the Renaissance brought were expressed by Greek words: *arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, grammar, logic, rhetoric, poetry, comedy, dialogue, prologue*. Of the more general terms that English had gained by the C XV came *bible, academy, atom, tyrant, theatre*. In the C XVI came *alphabet, drama, chorus, theory*. The C XVII contributed *orchestra, museum, hyphen, clinic*.

Since then science, medicine, physics, chemistry, and other sciences and arts have gone to Greek for their nomenclature, coining from Greek words that the Greeks never knew: *dynamo, psychology, zoology, telephone, photograph, bicycle, aeroplane, nitrogen, cosmetic and antiseptic*.

In addition to this, there are a great number of words formed from Greek prefixes tacked on to words of English or other languages, like

HYPER- (= beyond) *hypercritical, hyperbole*

ARCH- (= chief) *archbishop*

DIA- (= through) *diameter, diagonal*

PAN- (= all) *pantheist*

SYN- / SYM- (= with) *sympathy, synthesis*

From suffixes, like

-ISM, we get *bolshevism, vegetarianism*

-OLOGY, *sociology, radiology* and numerous others.

From almost every country in the world words have come into English. Italy has given words to the English vocabulary of music, architecture and poetry: *piano, piccolo, soprano, finale, solo, sonata, opera, palette, cameo, fresco, miniature, studio, model, vista, balcony, corridor, parapet, stucco, sonnet, stanza, canto*. But there have been common place words, too, from Italy *alarm, brigand, florin, pilgrim*, (all before 1500), *umbrella, influenza, muslin, duel, milliner and monkey*.

From Spanish we have *cargo, cigar, cigarette, cork*. English seamen clashed with

Spanish ones in the C XVI and C XVII and we see the evidence of this in *ambuscade, desperado, dispatch, grandee, renegade*. *Alligator* is really the English for *el lagarto* (the lizard). *Sherry* gets its name from the Spanish port of Jerez.

From the voyages from Mexico came *chocolate, cocoa, tomato*.

Cannibal is said to have been brought to Europe by Collumbus, and *hammock, hurricane, maize* are Caribbean words.

Portugal gave us *port* (wine from Oporto), *marmalade, tank, buffalo, verandah, parasol*, and, from Portuguese exploration in Africa, *banana, negro*.

We are reminded of the fame of Holland as a maritime nation by *yatch, buoy, freight, hull, dock, skipper, cruise* and *smuggle* and of the rich school of Dutch and Flemish painting by *landscape, easel, sketch*.

From India we have *pyjamas, shampoo, bangle, chutney, khaki, teak, bungalow, army, ginger* and *chintz*.

From Persian we get *bazaar, caravan, divan, jackal, jasmine, lilac* and *checkmate* (in chess, *shāh māt* = the king is dead).

From Arabian comes *admiral, alkali, lemon, alcohol, algebra, coffee, cotton, crimson* and *assassin*.

Tea is from Chinese.

Bamboo, bantam, gong and *sago* from Malaya.

From Polynesia and Australasia we have *taboo, cockatoo, boomerang, kangaroo*.

No language seems to be so ready as English to absorb foreign words, perhaps because there never has been any self-conscious worship of *pure English* that opposed the *debasement* of the language and the introduction of new words. English has assimilated these heterogeneous elements so successfully that only the professional student of language is aware of their origin. So cosmopolitan a vocabulary is an undoubted asset to any language that seeks to attain international use.

A second asset which English possesses to a pre-eminent degree is inflectional simplicity. The evolution of language is a story of progressive simplification. Inflection in the noun has been reduced to a sign of the plural and a form for the possessive case. The elaborate inflection of the adjective has been eliminated except for the indication of the comparative and superlative degrees. The verb has been simplified by the loss of distinction between the singular and the plural, and the gradual discard of the subjunctive mood.

English enjoys an exceptional advantage in having adopted natural in place of grammatical gender. In Romance languages, for example, there are only two genders, and all nouns which would be neutral in English are either masculine or feminine there. The distinction must be constantly kept in mind, since it not only affects the reference of pronouns but

determines the form of inflection and the agreement of adjectives. In the English language all this was stripped away during the Middle English period, and today the gender of every noun in English is determined by meaning. All nouns naming living creatures are masculine or feminine, *sun* and *moon* as masculine or feminine is personification and a matter of rhetoric, not grammar.

A main liability of English to become a world language is the difficulty of expressing not only logically but also idiomatically. An idiom is a form of expression peculiar to one language, the Spanish say *hace frío*, the French *il fait froid* (= it makes cold), where the English say *it is cold*. The visitor who had learned the English idiom *to press a person to do something* was making a natural mistake when he said “*Can we not squeeze the young lady to sing?*” His substitution was in a way logical but not idiomatic.

The chaotic character of spelling and the frequent lack of correlation between spelling and pronunciation is yet another drawback. An ideal system would be the one in which the same sound was regularly represented by the same character and a given character always represented the same sound. In English / i : / can be realised in *believe, receive, leave, machine, be, see*; conversely the symbol *a* in *father, hate, hat*, and many other words has nearly a score of values. The situation is even more confusing in our treatment of consonants. There are fourteen spellings for the sound / ʃ /: *shoe, sugar, mansion, mission, nation, suspicion, ocean, nauseous, conscious, chaperon, schist, fuchsia, pshaw*. One cannot tell how to spell an English word by its pronunciation or how to pronounce it by its spelling. Its defenders say that the spelling of an English word often indicates its etymology.