

INTRODUCTION

Linguists on the whole are very ready to ask ‘What?’, ‘When?’, ‘Who?’ and ‘How?’, when they explore the history of languages. What evidence do we have for Aramaic, Sanskrit or Old English? When did these languages exist? Who spoke and wrote them? And how did they spread from one part of the world to another? Innumerable studies have explored these questions in relation to languages from all over the globe. But there is one question that linguists have hardly ever asked, and that is: ‘Why?’

This is the question that Nicholas Ostler seeks to answer, and it is the most difficult question of all. Yet, at first sight, a ‘why’-question seems so simple. Why has English become a global language? Why did Spanish take root in South America? The easy answer is that it is all to do with political power. The British empire. The Spanish empire. But if that is so, Ostler points out, then why isn’t Dutch the language of modern Indonesia? The Dutch ruled there for over two centuries, the same sort of period that Britain ruled India. Why is Malay the dominant language in Indonesia today? Or again: Egyptian was the language of Egypt for over three millennia. Why did it collapse, to be replaced by Arabic? Or again: why did Latin make no headway in the countries of the eastern Mediterranean, whereas it made such progress in the west, eventually parenting the Romance family of languages?

Wherever we look, among the languages of the world, we encounter such questions. And the amazing thing is that so few people have tried to answer them—or even bothered to ask them. But when we realise the breadth and depth of historical and linguistic knowledge that is needed in order to offer sensible explanations, perhaps the lack is not so surprising. It requires a profound understanding of the historical, social, political, economic and religious circumstances influencing the way a language grows and declines. If there is one message which comes across loud and clear from *Empires of the Word*, it is that the fortunes of a language are never simple.

Nicholas Ostler is the ideal person to take up the challenge. He studied Greek and Latin at Oxford, following this with a doctorate in linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he focused on Japanese and Sanskrit. His first job was as a university lecturer in Japan. He then led several

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projects in information technology and natural language processing, and it was in relation to one of these computational projects, the development of the British National Corpus, that I first met him. After that, his linguistics horizons broadened. He explored several other languages, became especially fascinated by the ancient Chibchan language of Colombia, and eventually developed a concern about the plight of endangered languages everywhere. When the crisis facing the world's languages became apparent in the early 1990s—half of the six-thousand-plus languages are likely to become extinct in the course of the present century—he established an educational charity in the UK, the Foundation for Endangered Languages, to coordinate and stimulate activism in support of global linguistic diversity. He became its chairman: editing its newsletter for several years, organising international conferences and engaging with the media. As a result, he has become one of the leading figures in the worldwide movement to maintain and revitalise the living languages of small communities. Nobody has done more to keep the issue of linguistic endangerment in the forefront of the public mind. At the same time, he has continued his exploration of the languages of the past. A study of Latin, *Ad Infinitum*, appeared in 2007. If anyone can write a language history of the world, it is him.

It is salutary, then, to read on his very first page, that even with so much background linguistic knowledge, he found the scale of his proposed book daunting. All readers will have the same sensation, as they read these pages. It is indeed a mammoth enterprise—no less than an outline biography of the major languages of the world. Ostler describes his project as just a small selection of the language stories from what could be a linguistic *Thousand and One Nights*. In fact the ideal 'language history of the world' would be *Six Thousand and One Nights*, for every language has a fascinating story to tell. In practice, we are limited to those for which we have some historical documentation—hence his concentration on the major empires in China, the Middle East, India, Europe and the New World.

It is the parallels which are so fascinating. Why did Egyptian and Chinese remain so powerful for so long? Ostler explores a number of reasons: in each country, we need to appreciate the role of a single all-powerful emperor, the high population density of the speech community, the use of a stable writing system, the lack of an active foreign policy, and the maintenance of a distinct centre of identity. Certainly, no single factor can explain everything that happened. Examples throughout the book make it very clear that military conquest, often suggested as the critical factor in language spread, is not enough to keep a language going. The movement of a language is not the result of the emergence of world powers, Ostler concludes, but arises from the social creation of a larger human community.

For English readers, the story of the English language will be a particularly interesting strand. The initial puzzle is why English took hold in Britain at all—the only time a Germanic language has succeeded in establishing itself in an inhabited place outside its original hinterland. Many factors militated against it, such as the strongly established indigenous British languages and a Latin-speaking tradition of several hundred years. Germanic tribes didn't leave a permanent linguistic presence in western Europe otherwise. So why did they succeed in Britain? It is intriguing to consider the likely role of the epidemic of bubonic plague, which may have decimated ancient Britons while leaving the Saxon invaders relatively unscathed. And why did English succeed in North America, when other languages (Spanish, German, French) failed to do so? The explanation, for Ostler, lies in the growth of patterns of settlement there.

Not all historical questions can be answered, but the book makes it very clear what sorts of issues have to be considered when searching for explanations. And the arguments apply to the future as well as the past. English has become a world language. Will it continue to be so? Ostler is of the opinion that the lesson of history suggests it will not. Noting the way the fortunes of major languages have risen and fallen in the past—Egyptian, Aramaic, Akkadian, Latin—it would be a foolish person to predict that English will still be a world language a thousand years from now. I once speculated that English had become so established on the global stage that it would take a huge change in global circumstances to shift it. *Empires of the Word* makes it clear that such changes are not only likely, but actually rather normal. On the other hand, I wonder how far, these days, we can judge the future by the standards of the past. I'm thinking in particular of the unprecedented forces of globalisation, and especially the arrival of the Internet. It is a brave new world that has such technologies in it, and we have yet to develop a clear sense of the impact that electronically mediated communication is going to have on the fortunes of individual languages.

Any broad-based linguistic history needs to address two fundamental questions. Firstly, is there something about the character of the culture, or the people—their 'temper of mind', as Ostler puts it—which can help to explain the facts of linguistic expansion and decline? This is an extraordinarily difficult question to answer. As we learn more about a language and its speakers, we soon develop a feeling about its uniqueness, but it is not easy to put this feeling into words. Yet we must try, if only to suggest hypotheses that explain the facts of language spread. This is how Ostler sees it:

Arabic's austere grandeur and egalitarianism; Chinese and Egyptian's

unshakeable self-regard; Sanskrit's luxuriating classifications and hierarchies; Greek's self-confident innovation leading to self-obsession and pedantry; Latin's civic sense; Spanish rigidity, cupidity and fidelity; French admiration for rationality; and English admiration for business acumen.

Taken in isolation, such statements can only be vague and subjective. But in the context of a detailed historical survey, supported by a wealth of literary and linguistic examples, the characterisations are meaningful and illuminating.

Even more difficult is to address the second question: is there something about the languages themselves which can help to explain why one language spreads and another does not? This is Ostler's answer:

Overall, it seems that—despite the received wisdom of linguists over two centuries and more—there may be circumstances in which the very essence of a language, its structure, can play a role in its viability. Languages, we suggest, are more easily learnt by a new population, and hence spread more easily, when they are structurally similar to the old language of that population.

Note the parenthesis: 'despite the received wisdom'. This is indeed daring new ground. Thanks to generations of naive assertions from amateur language pundits championing the greater beauty, logic and general excellence of their own language and the intrinsic inferiority of others, modern linguistics has been at pains to assert the equality of languages and their comparable learnability—that all are acquired by children within the same time frame. It has not been a fashionable question to ask if the structural properties of a language are relevant to that language's success on the world stage. But Ostler takes the argument to a new level, and through a detailed examination of particular instances (Arabic, Greek, Mongolian, Latin) makes us consider the question in a more sophisticated way.

In writing this book, Ostler says on his last page, he has consciously embarked on a new approach within the field of linguistics. It is a historical approach which he calls 'language dynamics'. It might have been called 'diachronic sociolinguistics', he adds—though that, to my mind, is a mite limiting, for his concern is more broadly social-anthropological. Whatever we call it, he does what linguists do not normally do. He has begun to explore 'how language, in all its evolving variety, organises not just the human mind but also the large groups of human minds that constitute themselves into soci-

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eties, which communicate and interact, as well as think and act'. It is a gap in language study which has long needed to be filled.

At the same time, his concern with the general linguistic trends of humanity does not lead him to disregard the detail of individual human situations. This, to my mind, is the book's major strength. Languages have no existence apart from the people who speak them, and Ostler sprinkles his account with stories of how people behaved and interacted, and reports their words, from the exchanges between Cortés and Motecuhzoma which open his book to the quotation from Kālidāsa which ends it. As a result, *Empires of the Word* contains many delightful anecdotes, and even surprises. Most people know Cleopatra, for example, from her love-affair with Antony, and especially as reported in Shakespeare's play. But how many know of her multilingualism? There is no reference in *Antony and Cleopatra* to her extraordinary linguistic ability, though Plutarch was clear enough about it:

Like a many-stringed instrument, she turned her tongue easily to whatever dialect she would, and few indeed were the foreigners with whom she conversed through an interpreter, since she answered most of them in her own words, whether Ethiopian, Trogodyte, Hebrew, Arab, Syriac, Median or Parthian.

It is this kind of personal perspective which helps to make the generalisations about language temperament meaningful.

Ostler's preface begins with the words: 'If language is what makes us human, it is languages that make us superhuman.' It is a great opening line. And it requires a writer with almost superhuman ability to assimilate the diversity of the whole linguistic globe and to evaluate the underlying forces which have given rise to it. *Empires of the Word* is a remarkable success. It has done what few other linguistics books have been able to do: shown us a new way of thinking about language. I felt the parameters of my linguistic vision shift as I read this book; and I think yours will too.

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