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The rise and fall of humanity's civil tongues

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Title: Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World

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In 2000, David Crystal, a pillar of the British linguistic establishment, wrote a hard-hitting book, *Language Death*, in which he carefully laid out the rationale for predicting that at least half the world's 6,000 languages would become extinct in the next century.

This bleak prognosis so captured the public imagination that scholars are now searching for ways to explain linguistic decline. Language death is often compared to species extinction, and the same metaphors of preservation and diversity are invoked to canvass support for both.

Nicholas Ostler, in his *magnum opus* and first book, is also searching for a metaphor, but one to explain the history of the past 5,000 years. Being a linguist by training, and impressively well versed in many fields, it is natural that Ostler should choose language as his vehicle. He understandably confines himself to following the historical ups and downs of literate languages, since the trajectories of unwritten languages are by definition less well documented.

Empires of the Word is timely and well positioned. It capitalises on the contemporary fascination with language and on the current desire to read one story that tells it all: the history of the world from the perspective of a single defining issue, whether it be longitude, cod, salt, glass or tea - to name the subjects of some recent examples of the genre.

The central question that drives Ostler is the rise and fall of languages and of the world civilisations with which they are associated. How and why do some languages flourish against all odds, while others decline and wither? What are the factors that ensure the longevity of a speech form, and what forces destroy stable tongues? To this end, the author deploys a remarkable battery of historical facts to prove his point. "If this book has shown one thing," he suggests in conclusion, "it is that world languages are not exclusively the creatures of world powers. A language does not grow through the assertion of power, but through the creation of a larger human community."

Taking the reader through the linguistic careers of the world's great literate civilisations, Ostler assesses each language in its historical context. Starting with Sumerian and Arabic, he believes that the spread of a language must be distinguished from the spread of any religion with which it is associated. The limited take-up of Arabic, Ostler argues, should be put down to sociolinguistic factors rather than political, religious or cultural events because the situations in which the language was adopted were highly varied. What brings Semites together is that they "never escaped the memory that they had all arisen from desert nomads".

Next, Ostler turns his attention to Egyptian and Chinese, not close cousins at first glance, but the author cleverly interweaves the careers of these two tongues. Both languages, despite their prestige and the political dominance of their speakers, never assumed a major role as a lingua franca outside their homelands. Moreover, these two sophisticated languages both boast impressive, unique writing systems that have pictographic elements and are resistant to change. Ostler demonstrates how the resilience and solid

growth of these languages may have been their own undoing. He concludes the chapter with an antidote to the China fever gripping the media at present: the very fact that Chinese maintains a distinct centre of identity and loyalty within its own language community may have the paradoxical result that the language will fossilise and decline, as Egyptian did, since neither language has aggressively colonised new lands.

The next language to come under scrutiny is Sanskrit, which advanced as a *Verkehrssprache* through trade and cultural promotion rather than through military campaigns. Unlike earlier languages, which travelled by foot with their speakers to colonise the hinterlands, Sanskrit was the first tongue that took to the sea to establish long-distance business networks. Despite this enormous early success, however, Sanskrit began to ossify, and what presently remains of the language outside India is the result only of the wholesale export of the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures written in Sanskrit many centuries ago.

Turning to the Mediterranean, Ostler attributes the fall of Greek to the "self-regarding arrogance" that can afflict a prestige language that survives for thousands of years but that ceases to innovate while the rest of the world is busy catching up. Over the centuries, then, Greek imperial power began to ebb away, "leaving large-scale political units in (its) wake, and Greek speakers as the de facto guardians of a political dispensation not of their making".

One of the most interesting chapters focuses on the successes and failures of European languages over the past 500 years. Of the world's current top ten languages by population, no fewer than six were spread through imperialism and colonialism: English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, German and French. Yet, as Ostler so carefully illustrates, the story is uneven: the present-day numerical strength of Portuguese is thanks to Brazil, where Portugal "found both a significant source of wealth which was attractive to immigrants, and no pre-existing power strong enough to resist its domination". Compare this South American success story with the career of Portuguese as a lingua franca in Asia, where it peaked more than 400 years ago.

And how about Dutch, a language that has left a minimal linguistic wake despite the successful imperial endeavour of its speakers? Ostler explains the absence of Dutch in contemporary Indonesia with an evaluation of the colonial motives of its speakers: "primarily to make money, and secondarily - a long way second - to spread Protestant Christianity". There was a need, he argues, for the Dutch to achieve proficiency in the foreign contact language, Malay, rather than to spread their own European mother tongue.

Malay was the established language of trade, and it continued to gain prominence under Dutch colonial rule. As Ostler wryly concludes, the Dutch had "succeeded in giving a common language to their old colony, but not their own".

At a deeper level, the author attempts something extremely risky: he hopes to find a causal link between the formal features of a speech form, its chances of survival and the historical trajectory of its speakers. As he puts it, "it might actually matter what type of language a community speaks". Ostler is not the first to make a link between the language and the *Weltanschauung* of its speakers - this was proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf some 60 years ago - but he is breaking new ground when he suggests that the structure of a language may determine its chances of survival. While this idea is exciting, I am not entirely convinced.

"Languages frame, analyse and colour our views of the world," Ostler writes, but they are not the only things that do, nor do they do so didactically. Influence, rather than frame, might be a more nuanced way of seeing it.

One of the author's methodological approaches is to locate rare citations from little-known conversations and correspondence and to use them as the opening gambit of a chapter. He opens the prologue with a face-to-face between Hern n Cortes and the Mexican ruler Motecuhzoma (Montezuma) in 1519 that illustrates the cultural confusion emerging from their linguistic miscommunication.

At points, the writer appears to be looking for a pithy peg on which to hang his theory. Ostler variously speaks of the careers of languages, the roots of language prestige and of languages that grow organically versus those that subsume others through "mergers and acquisitions". Military conquest or economic domination will usually spread a language, he concludes, "only if the conquerors come in overwhelming numbers".

In the last section of the book, Ostler offers a gripping distillation of his main points. All the world's top 20 languages have their origins in Asia or Europe. There is not one from the Americas, Oceania or Africa. And

aside from French, the ex-colonies where European languages are spoken now vastly outnumber the speakers in their motherland: the US is more populous than the UK, Mexico more so than Spain, and Brazil has 17 times more Portuguese speakers than Portugal.

Ostler is the kind of linguist you would want to have at a dinner party: erudite, charming and able to tell a good story. He calls his subfield "language dynamics", distinct from the more jargon-prone disciplines of historical linguistics and typology, and makes a compelling case for taking a broad perspective. "All languages have their own histories," he tells the reader, "but few are well enough documented to reveal much about them."

Empires of the Word is grand, sweeping, at times encyclopaedic and invariably rich in detail. Even Ostler's bibliography is charmingly eclectic, dancing back and forth from 1643 to 2004. His book offers a wealth of linguistic facts and anecdotes that compel and intrigue the reader. Through his interwoven narrative of language history he has created a veritable empire of his own words.

But it has to be said that his breadth and depth of knowledge and the sheer enthusiasm he brings to his subject are both his strength and his worst enemy. The text is punctuated with long footnotes, parenthetical asides and a substantial set of endnotes, all combining to make it a somewhat restless read. These days, when time is fiercely guarded by all, some readers may shy away from this substantial book. At 615 pages, I fear that all but the most confirmed language addict will wait for a condensed version, or perhaps a punchy article in a journal. While *Empires of the Word* will certainly make it on to the reading list of my lecture course on language and society, it will do so only after being heavily pruned.

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lorax: "Empires of the Word" is a history of a dozen or so languages shaping history, including Spanish; "The Story of Spanish" is the same idea, less academically and obviously in more detail, focused on Spanish. Both are highly recommended. [Lists. Great Books About Language \(1\)](#). [Will you like it? Loading Sign up for LibraryThing to find out whether you'll like this book.](#) Nicholas Ostler's *Empires of the Word* is the first history of the world's great tongues, gloriously celebrating the wonder of words that binds communities together and makes possible both the living of a common history and the telling of it. From the uncanny resilience of Chinese through twenty centuries of invasions to the engaging self-regard of Greek and to the struggles that gave birth to the languages of modern Europe, these epic achievements and more are brilliantly explored, as are the fascinating failures of once "universal" languages. A splendid, authoritative, and *Empires of the World: A Language History of the World* is a 2011 historical nonfiction book by Nicholas Ostler. The book charts the history of spoken language in its myriad forms across the world. The book also explores the various *lingua francas* that have since seen decline. *Publishers Weekly* called it "ambitious and accessible", and "stimulating". *The Independent* noted that the book's "chief pleasure (...) lies in its detail, and in its hieroglyphs, ideograms and scripts plus translations." Kirkus