

Nicholas Ostler: *The Last Lingua Franca. English Until the Return of Babel*

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This book builds on profound familiarity with the rise and fall of many languages throughout history. Ostler's goal is to document causal factors that explain how dominant international languages have fared, so as to explore whether the current supremacy of English will last, or whether, like earlier imperial languages, its time will soon be up. Ostler writes for the general reader and has no academic affiliation. His erudition is amazing, building on proficiency in 26 languages. He also chairs a Foundation for Endangered Languages that produces an informative newsletter and organizes annual conferences.

There is detailed coverage of the interlocking of languages of empire—Greek, Latin, Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese and many others—with commerce and a variety of major religions. Ostler presents a rich, varied and fascinating narrative of a different world from European ideals of state monolingualism. His strengths are as a descriptive linguist and historian, but history is not an objective science, and Ostler's value judgements surface throughout the book. My enthusiasm is severely curtailed by serious misrepresentation and many factual errors in the analysis of the position of English. My review will mainly critique his coverage of English.

The book is in four parts: a short survey of present-day English worldwide, lingua francas in the past, their varied outcomes, and an assessment of the global language scene. Dominant languages are classified as lingua francas, which he sees as 'languages of convenience,' a definition that neglects the power dimension, and fits poorly with, for instance, Persian when it was the language in which several states and empires were administered for centuries. Coercive military force is occasionally mentioned, but there is not a word on the global militarism of the USA of the past century.

Ostler chooses not to sum up the scholarship on the aetiology and varied uses of 'lingua francas' past and present, preferring a loose term that suggests interactional

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neutrality. He distances himself from writers on 'global' English, such as Crystal and Graddol (a 'business analyst' for British promotion of English, p. xvii), but uncritically considers English as 'the world's lingua franca' and 'the world's language of choice' (p. xix), profoundly classist, ethnocentric claims that are common in politicians' special pleading for English. Such claims are contradicted by demographic facts. Analysis of English as a *lingua economica*, *lingua academica*, *lingua cultura*, *lingua bellica*, etc. would lead to more conceptual rigour (see the Forum 'Lingua franca or lingua frankensteinia?' in Phillipson 2009).

Despite Ostler wishing to escape 'anglophone assumptions', he falsely claims that 'anyone who wants to participate beyond the nation will have to use it [English] or come to terms with it' (p. 8). It is true that English is useful and necessary in myriad contexts, but 'the world' is not nearly as anglophone as Ostler assumes. Many languages are used in international politics, business, media products, tourism, scholarship, etc., as anyone living in continental Europe, Latin America, Asia, or Africa is aware.

Ostler states that 'the concept of a "trade lingua-franca" needs refinement' (p. 115), rightly noting the interlocking of supply/push and demand/pull factors, but he is wrong in asserting that the role of Christian missionaries in relation to the spread of English is 'not often emphasized' (p. 141). It is central to the history of British colonial education, figuring prominently in the multi-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire* (Etherington 2005). Religion is in fact currently a hot topic in the global English teaching business, which confirms the continued interlocking of faith with secular goals (Wong and Canagarajah 2009).

When summarizing postcolonial language policy in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Tanzania, the idea that English plays a 'convenient, almost natural role as a neutral lingua-franca for the whole country' (p. 10) ignores the fact that most people in such countries have minimal if any proficiency in English. In each country, English is at the pinnacle of the linguistic hierarchy, serving purposes of elite formation and mass exclusion. Omoniyi (2003) describes the neglect of local languages in Nigeria as a 'rape on democracy' that perpetuates the injustices of colonial times (p. 23). For Rubagumya of Tanzania (2004: 136) 'The market has indeed replaced imperial armies, but one wonders whether the effect is any different.' Likewise, Mohanty (2006: 268) documents how in India, '[w]ith the globalized economy, English education widens the discrepancy between the social classes'.

Ostler's coverage of Singapore is also false: as a result of the policy of English being the sole medium of instruction, English was by 2005 the 'most frequently spoken language at home' of over 50% of Singaporean families (Pakir 2007: 197). This disproves Ostler's claim that there are 'emphatically' no mother tongue speakers of English 'in any British or American ex-colonies' and the 'failure of International English to penetrate as a mother tongue' outside native-speaker countries (p. 276). An increasing number of Indians have mother-tongue competence in English developed locally, which the many eminent academics and novelists in English exemplify. Similarly, some African elites are moving out of local languages into English, with English-only schooling (promoted by the World Bank) facilitating this development. The imposition of English by US colonial forces in the Philippines was neither 'natural' nor that of a 'kindly schoolmaster' (p. 20) but a brutal replacement of local

cultural norms and languages by American ones (Martin 2002). Choice of language is not a matter of 'neutrality' or 'convenience' but of top-down control.

Ostler's coverage of Europe is also biased. He seems to argue that in the Netherlands maintaining Dutch as an academic language is a 'needless cost' as compared with switching to English because Dutch 'sets a bound on communication' (p. 277). But national languages, for all residents—first and second language speakers—are vital for national cohesion, for democratic participation, for education and scientific understanding. The promulgation of all EU laws in 23 languages confirms vital sociopolitical needs.

Other errors include stating that Swedish in Finland has been 'dispossessed... discontinued... discouraged' (p. 275). Quite the opposite is true, in law and in practice in all domains. The claim that 'Everywhere in the English-speaking world discrimination continues in favor of employing native speakers where possible as teachers and models' (p. 274) does not hold for schools and universities in any continental European country, nor in many countries worldwide, except in the private adult education market. Ostler's selectivity is salient when Italy is singled out for criticism of its 'messy imperialism' in Africa (p. 230), and the Algerian war of colonial liberation is falsely described as a 'civil war' (p. 239). Such errors, and many others, are not isolated slips but symptoms of a world-view that interprets the expansion of English in purely positive terms.

Ostler summarizes the efforts of several countries to promote their languages internationally, which he sees as non-coercive public diplomacy. He concludes that this promotes language learning but does not induce support for the countries in question. This is a puzzling conclusion, no evidence is cited, and contradicts the rationale for the substantial efforts of the Chinese, French, Germans and others. In ultra-brief coverage of the British Council (p. 242), Ostler's claim that it has not been concerned with promoting English worldwide contradicts the unambiguous evidence of 70 years of activity (Edge 2006; Mühlhäusler 1996; Pennycook 1994; Phillipson 1992, 2009). Massive US investment in English worldwide is not mentioned. The expansion of English, according to the then Director of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC was 'greatly abetted by the expenditure of large amounts of government and private foundation funds in the period 1950–1970, perhaps the most ever spent in history in support of the propagation of a language' (Troike 1977, cited in Phillipson 1992: 7). Ostler has simply chosen to ignore the evidence of linguistic imperialism, and the impact, particularly in postcolonial countries and increasingly in Europe, of policies that have strengthened English and weakened other languages. He does not relate to the link between English and the global political, economic, financial, military, and educational systems that have been in place since 1945. This is the reality of 'the convenience-based use of English.' English can only be seen as 'neutral' (a recurrent label) by ignoring the considerable literature on American empire and its impacts worldwide. This undermines Ostler's analysis and predictions. He may have wished to counteract anglophone bias, but his discourse remains securely within it.

Ostler has structured his analysis of the decline of lingua francas around three concepts—ruin, relegation, and resignation—rightly generalising that 'a lingua-franca requires a coordinated structure of official bodies and educational institutions

to survive' (p. 212). The concluding section crystal-ball gazes so as to anticipate whether historical evidence and technological developments signal a major change from a world of English dominance to one in which English will retreat to national homelands, vacating space to a plethora of languages. Machine translation and speech technology will develop to the point where learning foreign languages will no longer be necessary. The title of the book signals that Ostler believes English is already on the way down and out. The Babel notion in the sense of absence of understanding will be replaced by a technological fix.

Ostler's historical scholarship dazzles but neither the general reader nor specialists are given a valid basis for speculation about how long the dominance of English will continue. Babel is already here.

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Robert Phillipson (www.cbs.dk/staff/phillipson) worked for the British Council in four countries before emigrating to Denmark, where he is a Professor Emeritus at Copenhagen Business School. His books on language policy, language learning and language rights have been published in 11 countries.