

The Rise of English: Global Politics and the Power of Language
Rosemary Salomone.
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Review by Geoffrey K. Pullum

English seems so undeserving. No rational language planning committee would ever have put it forward as a candidate for world lingua franca. Its maddeningly chaotic spelling system alone would be enough to disqualify it. The verb morphology is also painful (around 200 irregularly inflected verbs), and its phonological and phonetic system is atypically complex (a much larger vowel system than is typical for human languages, and heavy consonant clusters too – it is not hard to construct an English sentence with four times as many phonetic consonants as syllables).

The sheer size of the vocabulary is another problem. This may seem an odd thing to say, in a world where laypeople so often think that a language is a big bag of words and the more you have the more you can say. But there's no real benefit to what has resulted from the history: an Anglo-Saxon substrate; some Norse influence early on; additions from French after the Norman conquest; massive augmentation from Latin and Greek in the Renaissance; loanwords from all over the globe. Does anybody think we need four different roots meaning 'five'? (*Fivefold* has Anglo-Saxon origin, *cinquain* comes from French, *quintet* from Latin, and *pentangle* from Greek.) To be fully fluent in manipulating the massive word stock of English and comprehending its new coinings you need some familiarity with the morphophonemic quirks of three or four different European languages.

Even setting aside the linguistic complexities, one might argue that English has bad political associations with unpopular colonial regimes around the world and the monstrous Atlantic slave trade. English could not have beaten Esperanto or even Swahili if the decision on world language had been made by a fair-minded and linguistically informed committee, looking for a language that nobody hated and that most of the world's population could easily learn and pronounce.

But of course wise planning committees on topics like this are always ignored. People choose for themselves which language they will use for which purpose. English, implausibly, has become unstoppable language. Deserving or not, it is fast becoming the only language that extraterrestrial visitors to Earth would ever need to learn.

One regrettable consequence for linguists is that indigenous languages with histories known to go back tens of thousands of years are becoming extinct at a rapid rate, for reasons intimately related to the spread of English. But another consequence affects the native speakers of English itself, ever more complacently satisfied in their monolingualism. So little acquainted with foreign languages and linguistics that they barely know what languages there are (do you speak African?), they fondly imagine that the translation built

into their iPhones is all they will ever need. English speakers – above all, Americans – increasingly isolate and disadvantage themselves, more than they realize.

Rosemary Salomone's book examines in detail various historical, legal, and geopolitical aspects of the ascent of English to its present position, concentrating mostly on the last half-century. A professor of law at St John's University School of Law in New York, she is clear-eyed about the enormous natural groundswell that has given the language the status it has, but also chronicles signs of a gathering backlash against it in many countries.

English has unquestionably spread like no other in world history. But when Salomone says English is 'the language in which the Brazilians speak to the Dutch and the Japanese speak to the Italians' (p.5), I feel one should add 'maybe, if you're lucky'. I have discovered to my cost in various situations that in both Brazil and Japan you can encounter businesses – restaurants, shops, railway stations, hotels – where no one speaks or understands a word of English (notwithstanding the obligatory lessons in English they endured at school), and transactions have to be simply abandoned. I don't know how the Brazilians or the Japanese would deal with the Dutch or the Italians, but I found English was no passport to mutual comprehension in Maceió or Kyoto. It was valuable and interesting for me to discover this: I learned what it was like to be a foreigner in a country with a sense of its own culture that was strong enough (and linguistic education unsuccessful enough) that if I didn't speak their language it was just too bad, they would do without my business. It made me reflect on what must it be like to arrive in America direct from Mongolia or Ukraine with scant knowledge of English.

Salomone's book has three parts: Part I, 'Multilingual Europe,' deals with internationalization, English medium instruction, and language-use legislation in the European Union. Part II, 'Shadows of Colonialism,' is mainly about the choice of medium of instruction in the postcolonial countries of Africa and Asia. And Part III, 'Defying the Monolingual Mindset,' deals with the resolute monolingualism of the United States and the disadvantages it has for both America and the rest of the world.

Citing de Swaan (2013:142), Salomone (p. 9) identifies four processes that have conspired to enhance the spread English: conquest, conversion, commerce, and collusion. The last of these should not be overlooked. Certainly, the conquest and colonization of India was vastly important in anglicizing South Asia. Likewise the efforts of missionaries in Africa. And trade has had a massive effect on the importance of English in countries that are otherwise not very outward-looking, like China and Japan. But it has not all depended on English-speaking countries using their military, evangelical, or economic power to foist English upon other nations. Populations around the world have been collaborating in their own anglicization by lapping up anglophone-dominated radio, TV, video, film, pop music, books, magazines, newspapers, websites, software, fashion, and social media. The English may have colonized half of Africa and all of South Asia, but they didn't coerce Japanese teenagers into watching Hollywood superhero films or putting those random English words on their T-shirts.

Salomone tells some interesting tales of the back and forth between advocates and enemies of English in European higher education. As long ago as the 1980s, dissertations

submitted to Dutch universities could be written in English. It was a plus for the degree candidates: why limit the potential readership of your work to just the world's Dutch users? Do the math: by publishing in English you can probably increase the likely upper bound on your readership by two orders of magnitude.

But things developed apace in the last 30 years, and Salomone's Chapter 5 deals with the resultant situation. The case of the Netherlands is largely paralleled in France and Italy, and to some extent in the Nordic countries. In each case, similar forces have led to similar scenarios.

First, universities recognize that by teaching English-medium courses they can not only provide their students with an enhanced level of international outlook and competence, and also make use of visiting faculty who cannot teach in the local language, but – much more important – they can get large numbers of full tuition-paying foreign students to enroll, especially in year-long master's courses. Students from countries with huge populations like China and India, and from other countries eager to access European education (Egypt, Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia) might not enroll if they had to face lectures and assignment and exams in Dutch or French or Italian, but they would be eager to sign up if everything was in English. The implications for universities' gross incomes are huge.

But as courses in English are introduced, various kinds of backlash begin. Older professors complain about being shut out of the big new courses with all the foreign students unless they lecture in English. Nativist elements of the population at large demand to know if this means the language of their own country is starting to be downgraded or pushed out by universities that are supported on their taxes to educate foreigners. (The fears of those worrying about their language falling out of use, incidentally, are exaggerated. One way to see whether Dutch is disappearing from the Netherlands is to step into any bookshop; even in cosmopolitan Amsterdam, near the university, the dominance of Dutch is almost total there.)

Once enough objections have been voiced, politicians take note, and start drafting legislation to defend the national language and protect it from being displaced or downgraded. (No one ever lost votes by standing up for their national language.) But the universities then push back and lobby for the freedom to use whatever language of instruction they deem suited to the task at hand. And as the battle goes on, English gradually becomes more and more entrenched as the one language that will simultaneously boost a university's international prestige and its gross tuition income.

In the Netherlands, numerous taught master's-level degree programs were converted to instruction entirely in English at quite an early stage, and sure enough, large numbers of foreign students were attracted. By 2018, Salomone states, *all* bachelor's degree courses in psychology at the universities of Maastricht and Twente were taught solely in English. Far from seeing this internationalism as praiseworthy, the Dutch Association for Better Education sued the education ministry for failing to prevent this erosion of Dutchness. Yet the court ruled against the association on several technical grounds. The Higher Education and Research Act had been written in such a way as to allow exceptions to the principle of

promoting the Dutch language: it could be set aside if necessitated by foreign instructors, foreign language subject matter, 'the nature, organization or quality of teaching' in the course, or 'the nationality of the students.' Together these made a hole in the protectionist law aimed at defending Dutch that you could drive an anglophone truck through. Much the same sort of back and forth between internationalist advocates and enemies of anglicization has taken place in France, Italy, and other countries.

Part II of Salomone's book deals with language issues in what is often called the Third World. She deals with the energetic attempts by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (and Emmanuel Macron's government) to ensure that French continues to be an important language in Africa and southern Oceania. She discusses the 'awakening giant' of China, the push by the Chinese to gain a foothold in francophone as well as anglophone Africa, and the growing suspicion in the USA and other countries of China's efforts to spread Chinese language and culture (the role of the Confucius Institutes is familiar, but it is not so well known that in 2019 the Beijing Foreign Studies University started teaching Kinyarwanda). Chapter 7 is headed 'Adieu to French', and covers the decision by Rwanda to break off diplomatic relations with France after the French role in the genocide became clear, and (in 2008) to drop French as an official language, and the battles in Morocco over whether to lean toward Arabic, French, or English. Chapter 8 deals with the very complicated language situation in post-apartheid South Africa, and Chapter 9 with the effects of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India to push for Hindi rather than English as the country's lingua franca.

Finally, Part III of the book ('Defying the Monolingual Mindset', a substantial 28% of the book) is a spirited defense of bilingualism as a desirable goal rather than an unfortunate fact, a solution rather than a problem. Salomone is clear about her own view: that we would be far better off (especially those of us in the USA) if we could converse in at least one major language other than English.

Salomone conveys all her information through connected prose. This book is very much born of the humanities: not a single graph or table of numerical data appears anywhere in its 468 pages of text and notes, and even indented quotations are very rare. She devotes very little discussion of what we mean by 'English' – whether speakers of Scots, Jamaican Creole, Nigerian Pidgin, or basilectal African American vernacular are to be counted as speaking it. Her focus is on recent history, especially legal history, and geopolitics. She has done a great deal of research on the historical and legal aspects of the language situations in many different countries, stressing in particular France, India, Italy, Morocco, the Netherlands, Rwanda, and South Africa.

One criticism I must make is that despite this book's copious documentation, using it as a reference work has been made fiendishly difficult. The author could have helped a bit with better chapter and section titles: chapter headings like 'Myth or Reality?', 'Redress and Transformation', or 'Reframing the Narrative' are useless – they could be about almost anything. Likewise section headers such as 'Problems Left Unspoken', 'Seeds of Ambiguity', or 'The Debate Takes Focus': they seem more like what journalists call cross-heads (those column-interrupting short headers placed at random points throughout a newspaper or magazine feature to break up the page and keep you interested). But Oxford University

Press bears most of the blame, for making access to names and references painfully difficult.

Bibliographical citations are given solely in tiny-print endnotes – 75 unindexed pages of them – possibly in order to make the pages of the main text look readable (rather than footnote-heavy like law-review articles). Discovering what the book says about specific lines of work can be very difficult. Suppose you wondered whether Salomone ever cites David Crystal, Joshua Fishman, Kenji Hakuta, Robert McCrum, Geoffrey Nunberg, or her own work. I think the answers are yes, no, yes, no, no, and yes, respectively, but I cannot be completely sure about the negative answers, because none of these names are in the index, and there is no alphabetical bibliography. The only way to be certain is through exhaustive searching of every author name in the 1,483 endnotes, to verify absence of an author name. I believe it is the case that Salomone makes no mention at all of two competing books that preceded hers: McCrum's *Globish* (2010) and Crystal's *English as a Global Language* (in its second edition by 2012). This surprised me. And I was also surprised to see no mention of the noxious English Only movement in the USA. But maybe I was insufficiently vigilant and missed an endnote or two somewhere.

OUP's page design and header decisions make even the simple matter of going from a text reference to an endnote (or back the other way) needlessly difficult. Only chapter titles, not numbers, appear in main-text recto running heads; yet only chapter numbers, not titles, identify the endnote blocks. The running heads in the notes section just say 'NOTES', so you can leaf through half a dozen pages of notes without having any clue about which chapter's endnote block you're in. You really need distinctively colored Post-It notes to mark (i) current page, (ii) first page of current chapter, (iii) first page of current chapter's endnote block, and (iv) page location of current page endnotes. I have met with book design of this malign sort before. I wish academic presses could be persuaded to stop creating books so seemingly hostile to the needs of researchers.

But these criticisms will be mainly relevant to someone dipping into the book as a reference source. Those reading straight through will find it a highly informative account of what is clearly the greatest and most important international spread of any language in human history.

References

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