



Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World

Nicholas Ostler

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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 remarkable work, it demonstrates how the language history of the world eloquently reveals the real character of our planet's diverse peoples and prepares us for a linguistic future full of surprises.

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

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Author : Nicholas Ostler

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Koliko je ova knjiga zabavno govori ?injenica da mi je, u dan, trebalo ta?no godinu da je pro?itam. Iako na momente beskrajno dosadna (sem ako vas u detalje ne zanima zašto je od svih domoroda?kih jezika na prostoru Amerika u ve?oj mjeri opstao jedio paragvajski gvarani ili zašto se holandski od svih kolonija u jednoj svojoj varijantni zadržao samo u Južnoafri?koj republici) ali za svakoga ko se bavi lingvistikom, istorijom jezika ili istorijom uopšte, ovo je Biblija.

Ako ekstremno detaljisanje i istorijske dubioze ne mogu da se uzmu kao minus, na negativnu stranu blaga apologetika kolonijalizacije od strane zapadnih sila i svojevrnog lingvicida koji su u?inile.

Ako imate vremena, volje i snage za 700 sitno kucanih strana suve istorije, bavite se jezikom ili ste entuzijasta, pro?itajte. Ako ne, lagano možete da je presko?ite.

Pete says

Not a fun book, nor an easy book, and not well edited. But maybe the most illuminating world history book that I have ever read. A hell of a lot more credible than Guns Germs and Steel. You get used to learning the history of the world through the lens of empire. It makes more sense when you understand what kinds of languages people were speaking.

All the same family: Akkadian (Sumerian), Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. 3500 years with surprisingly gradual change.

Kurdish is a Persian language, part of the Indo-European language group.

Sanskrit, Persian (Farsi), and Arabic are all admired for being poetic.

The Turkic language group is spoken by a group that extends today in broad, straight path from Turkey to the border or Mongolia.

Romance languages include all of the obvious countries, plus (duh!): Romania.

Finnish is related to Hungarian, and nothing else.

The Greek language continued to thrive for more than 1000 years largely because it was held in esteem by learned Romans.

The Germanic languages don't have a good success rate.

English seems strong today, but in historic terms, it probably won't last too long on top.

So, a painful book, but here I am, reading it again already.

Mike says

If you read only one book on diachronic sociolinguistics, make it this one. Ambitious in scope, it organizes history into successions of language groups rather than the more usual empires and nations.

I enjoyed a short tangent the book took into a comparison of Greek and Chinese conceptions of the 'barbarian'. They were similar in that barbarian was essentially used to describe those not of the civilized

center; different in that the Greek version didn't waste much time categorizing barbarian qualities, whereas the Chinese had a more nuanced typography of barbaric attributes.

I have a Greek friend who calls me a barbarian. One day he'll stop, but I may have to clout him over the head with something fierce to help him see reason.

Wanda says

Wow, this book covers a lot of ground and a lot of history. I learned a few things that I'd been curious about for a long time, like why did Ancient Egyptian cease to be spoken? Turns out that when the pharaoh was gone, the heart went out of old Egyptian religion and the language was adopted as a Christian language. Who knew that it does survive, but in the liturgy of the Coptic Christian church in Egypt?

Of course in a book of this scope--nothing less than world wide--there is no way to discuss all the many languages of mankind. It focuses on the top 20 languages, kind of a greatest hits album. There are obviously many fascinating languages that don't appear or get short shrift. If you are academically inclined, there are oodles of footnotes which should provide plenty of future research opportunities.

For me, this was probably not a good book to choose as a summer read--it is very academic in tone and is definitely not light as summertime reading usually is. In fact, some evenings it acted as a sleep-aid, and next evening I would have to re-read some pages that my dozy brain just hadn't absorbed the previous day.

That said, the book was also an excellent overview of world history and I think I have a better sense of the order of certain events than before. And because I am fascinated with language and linguistics, I'm very glad I persevered and finished the book.

Jeff says

This is an absolutely fascinating, dreadfully boring book.

If you're at all interested in how dominant languages have spread and evolved, and how they impacted the linguistic development of all other languages in their regions, then stay away. If you're REALLY interested in small details of this subject, then this might be a good book for you.

Nick Ostler has this tendency, also, to latch on to small bits of evidence and make much of it. He's usually clear that he's doing this; he says, "We don't really know, but this is the way that I think makes the story most interesting, and there is some evidence for it, so I'm going to choose to believe it was this way." That's fine, and he's clear about it; and it's not like the book is poorly researched (there's hundreds and hundreds of footnotes). But he does recognize that the needs of a coherent story/worldview require that we take a few things on less evidence than we'd like.

Finally, the book is peppered throughout with lots of source-language citations for pretty much every language that he talks about. It opens up with an extensive passage in romanized Quechua, for instance. I thought this was awesome; although I wasn't entirely convinced that his (or his advisors) had written everything precisely right, and trying to get one's head around the numerous different romanization systems (to get a sense of what the languages actually sounded like and how they worked, his stated point in including these quotes) got really difficult. It's an admirable goal, but I don't think that it really worked as

intended.

All that said, this was a dry book about a totally fascinating subject, and if you're interested enough in the subject, you'll put up with reading the book.

Mohammad Rameez says

“Our language places us in a cultural continuum, linking us to the past, and showing our meanings also to future fellow-speakers.”

? Nicholas Ostler, Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World

An excellent reading. Specifically the section about native indian is very informative. Provides a clear picture why a language becomes widely used.

Aaron Arnold says

Easily one of the most intensely researched popular science books I've ever read (it's right up there with Jared Diamond's works in terms of endless footnotes and works cited), this is an impressively sweeping overview of the history of a dozen of the world's major languages and language families that manages to be interesting even when he's talking about stuff like the developmental similarities between Chinese and ancient Egyptian, or how people decided to use ancient languages like Akkadian and Sanskrit as lingua francas, or why Dutch didn't catch on as a colonial language. I personally find language history and usage fascinating (nerd alert), so maybe not everyone will find this book as cool as I did, but this was one of those books where I learned something new on basically every page and enjoyed doing it. Ostler's ability to synthesize vast amounts of research is awe-inspiring, and his obvious love for certain languages (he has a real crush on Sanskrit, in particular) carries over to the subject material in ways that only the best authors manage. He has some really interesting insights on all sorts of things, like why Germanic tribes managed to conquer half the Roman Empire but didn't impose their languages anywhere whereas the Arab conquests only a few hundred years later led to permanent linguistic change across almost all of their territories, and his ending discussion of the evolution and future of English is probably worth the price of the book right there.

ka?yap says

History is a lot more fascinating when viewed through the spread of various languages and cultures.

The author here presents his case for the importance of languages in the human history. The distinctive traits of various languages and how they are central to the formation of societies and their role in defining their cultures.

After a brief introduction on the nature of language history, the first half of the book deals with the language spread by land. Starting with the mesopotamian languages of Sumerian, Akkadian, Aramaic and Arabic. It then goes on to the rise and fall of Sanskrit in India, of Latin and Greek in Europe and the spread of Chinese and Egyptian.

Second half of the book deals with the spread of the European languages by the sea, starting with Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French and then English.

Πολιτισμὸν τοῦ Μπροντελ, τὸ ἑπλά, Μικροβία κ Ατσῶλι τοῦ Νταρμοντ, τὴν ἱστορῶα τοῦ Πολῶμου τοῦ Κηγκαν, τὴν ἱστορῶα τοῦ Θουκυδῶδη, τὴν Θεωρῶα τῆς Δικαιοσῶνης τοῦ Ρῶλς κ.π.α.
"Οἱ Αυτοκρατορῶες τῆς λῶξης" ἑπως εῶναι ὁ ἀγγλικῶς τῶτλος εῶναι μῶια ἱστορῶα τῆς δυναμικῶς τῆς γλῶσσας τοῦ ἀνθρῶπου. Δεν εῶναι μῶια ἀπλῶ ἱστορικῶ ἀναζῶτηση, ἀλλῶ μῶια ἱστορικοκοινωνιολογικῶ προσῶγγισῶ τῆς ἀνῶδου καὶ τῆς πτῶσης τῶν γλῶσσῶν καὶ τῶν πολιτισμῶν καὶ τῆς κουλτορῶας πῶυ αὐτῶς κοῦβῶλησαν στῶς προθυμῶς πλῶτες τῶς. Μῶια πανανθρῶπινῶ ἱστορῶα πολιτισμῶν, ἀφῶ ἡ γλῶσσα εῶναι πολιτισμῶς, μῶια ἱστορῶα κατακτησεῶν καὶ ἠτῶν, ἀφῶ ἡ μῶια γλῶσσα ἑσῶησε τὴν ἑλλη, μῶια ἱστορῶα ἐμπῶρων καὶ πλοῶτου, ἀρχιτεκῶνων καὶ ἀνθρῶπων τοῦ πνεῶματος, ἀνθρῶπῶνων ἐπιτευγῶμων καὶ ἀπανθρῶπων καταστροφῶν, θρησκευτικῶν ἀλλαγῶν καὶ προσμῶξεῶν, μῶια παγκῶσμῶια ἱστορῶα.
Εῶναι ἑσῶς καὶ κῶτι παραπῶνω, εῶναι ἡ περιγραφῶ τῆς ἐξῶλιξῶς τῆς ἀνθρῶπινῶς ἱστορῶας καὶ πολῶιτισμῶ, ἑχι σῶν στεγῶ καὶ μονοκῶμματῶ ἀφῶγησῶ ἀλλῶ σῶν ταξῶδι μῶσα στῶς αῶινῶες. Ἐκκινῶντας ἀπῶ τὴν Μῶση Ἀνατολῶ καὶ τὴν Μεσῶγειο, ἀπῶ τὴν Σουμερικῶ καὶ Ἀκκαδικῶ καὶ τὴν Ἀραμαικῶ, περνῶς στὴν Φοινικικῶ καὶ Ἐλληνικῶ καὶ Λατινικῶ. Ἀνακαλῶπτῶς τὴν Κῶνα τῶν ἰδεογραμμάτων πῶυ διαβῶζῶεις εῶδῶ καὶ χιλῶιῶτες, συλλαβῶζῶεις τῶ Σανσκρικῶ τοῦ μεγαλειῶδου πολῶιτισμῶ τῶν Ἰνδῶν, τὴν ἐκτῶναξῶ τῆς Ἀραβικῶς καὶ τὴν σῶγκρῶυση τῶν θρησκῶιν τῶν γλῶσσῶν, παρῶα με τῶ φῶλα τῶν Μογγολικῶν καὶ Τουρανικῶν κατακτητῶν. Καὶ διασχῶζῶεις τῶς ὠκεανῶς πῶνω στῶ πλοῶα τῶν κληρονῶμων τῆς Λατινικῶς γῶια νῶ γῶνωρῶσεις τὴν Νῶουατλ καὶ τὴν Κετσουα καὶ ξῶνα ἀνακαλυπῶεις τὸν κῶσμο μῶζῶ με τῶ ἀγγλικῶ καὶ γῶλλικῶ καὶ πορτογαλικῶ καὶ ὀλλανδικῶ ἐμπορικῶ πλοῶα, ἀπῶ τὸν Εῶιρηνικῶ ὠς τὸν Ἰνδικῶ μῶσα ἀπῶ τὴν ἰμπεριαλιστικῶ κατῶκτησῶ καὶ ἐπικρῶτησῶ, πῶυ ἑδῶσε νῶες γλῶσσῶες καὶ ἑφτιαξῶ ἑθῶν καὶ λαῶς!
Εῶναι ἑνα ταξῶιδῶκι πῶυ δεν σε κοῦρῶζει, γῶιατῶ ἀντιμετωπῶζει τῶς γλῶσσῶες ὠς ὀχῶματα τῶν ἀνθρῶπων καὶ ἑχι ὠς στῶσεις. Κῶι ἀν σῶμερῶ ἡ παγκῶσμῶιοποιῶσῶ τῶν ΜΜΕ καὶ τῆς τεχνολογῶας ὀδηγῶ στὴν πρῶτοκαθεδρῶια τῆς μῶιας γλῶσσῶας, τῆς Ἀγγλικῶς, ἡ ἱστορῶα τῶν γλῶσσῶν ἀποκαλῶπτῶ ἑτι ἡ γλῶσσα εῶναι πρῶτῶστῶς ἑνα ἑχημῶ ἐπικῶινωνῶας!
Στὴν ἀνθρῶπινῶ ἱστορῶα ἡ γλῶσσα ὀμιλεῶται ἀλλῶ δεν γρῶφεται πῶντα. Ἰπῶρχῶουν γλῶσσῶες πῶυ κυριῶρχῶσαν ἀλλῶ δεν μῶιλῶνται πῶια, ἑλλῶες πῶυ διασχῶζῶουν τῶς αῶινῶες ἀνῶγιχτες ἀλλῶ μικρῶς, πῶυ γρῶφῶνται καὶ μῶιλῶνται διαφορετικῶ πλῶον, μῶξῶεις γλῶσσῶν, ἀπῶγονοῖ μῶακρινῶν διῶλεκτῶν καὶ γλῶσσῶες πῶυ ἐπιβῶσαν παρῶλες τῆς ἀντιξῶοσῶτες χῶρη σε ἑνα περιστατικῶ τῆς τῶχῶς.
Ἡ ἱστορῶα τῶν γλῶσσῶν εῶναι ἡ ἱστορῶα τοῦ Ἀνθρῶπου!!!

Victor Sonkin says

This is a learned book. In books of such scope, one is always wary that the author cheats a little here, a little there, making small mistakes where his competence might fail (and in a work covering the complete history of language spread of the whole human race, such instances are inevitable, even if the author possesses a working knowledge of 26 languages, as the back cover rather preposterously claims). Phew.

This said, I could not catch Dr. Ostler by the hand in those instances where I generally could (his review of the Russian language's imperial thrust, for instance). Not in anything major enough, anyway. Which makes me pretty sure he's got the rest right, too.

Here's an outline of the book's structure.

Part I: The Nature of Language History.

1. Themistocles' Carpet: the chapter begins with a story from Herodotus about Themistocles' refusal to talk to the Persian king through an interpreter and taking his time (a year) to learn the language. One of the few instances of a Greek's attention to barbarian matters!
2. What It Takes To Be a World Language; or, You Never Can Tell.

Part II: Languages by Land

3. The Desert Blooms: Language Innovation in the Middle East.
Sumerian as the first classical language (i.e. the language used in prestige contexts when it's no longer used in everyday life). Akkadian and its model of literacy. Aramaic: Interlingua of western Asia. Here, I was fascinated to read a passage from the Old Testament about an enemy force speaking Hebrew to the Jewish commanders, and the Jews asking them to switch to Aramaic so that rank and file wouldn't understand.
Turkic and Persian, outriders of Islam.
4. Triumphs of Fertility: Egyptian and Chinese. A long and a bit over-laborious comparison between the 'careers' of Egyptian and Chinese: dissemination by land, hieroglyphic script, long-term continuity.
5. Charming Like a Creeper: The Cultured Career of Sanskrit. Sanskrit as one of the few 'world' languages mostly spread through scholarship and education rather than by sword.
6. Three Thousand Years of Solipsism: The Adventures of Greek. Greeks' indifference towards other languages. Three waves of Greek spreading: colonization, war (Hellenistic), culture (Roman). Decline and reversal.
7. Contesting Europe: Celt, Roman, German and Slav. The curious tenacity of Latin in the West and its relative failure in the East.
8. The First Death of Latin: the transition from Latin to vernaculars.

Part III: Languages by Sea. This is about post-Columbian exploration of the new worlds in Asia and America.

9. The Second Death of Latin.
10. Usurpers of Greatness: Spanish in the New World. Here, it was a surprise for me to read to what extent the indigenous languages of (especially South) America were used, even by the Spanish, as *linguas francas* of the New World; the complete reliance on Spanish came only relatively late; Ostler traces the spread of Nahuatl, Quechua, Chibcha, Guarani, Mapudungun (*linguas generales*).
11. In the Train of Empire: Europe's Languages Abroad.
Portuguese pioneers, Dutch interlopers, La francophonie, The Third Rome and the Russias.
Portuguese was widely used but soon abandoned; Dutch had even less success and today is virtually unknown outside Netherlands and Belgium; the French also lost a lot of ground, and the Russians were usually disliked by the people they were subduing; this makes Ostler wary about Russian's perspectives. Russian managed to stamp out the indigenous languages of Asian Russia (behind the Urals, Siberia, etc.); and I'd correct his claim by pointing out that a lot of technical writing, correspondence and business in Central Asia is still conducted in Russian (and there's a special situation in Ukraine and especially in Belarus).
"Curiously ineffective" in spreading their language were the Germans.
12. Microcosm or Distorting Mirror? The Career of English.
Seeing off Norman French; Stabilising the language; Westward Ho! Changing perspective: English in India (an experiment rooted very much in elitism and education; a successful one, if the picture painted by "Slumdog Millionaire" is anywhere near the truth). The world taken by storm. Ostler claims that today's mega-status of English (to the extent when knowing the language is in itself a commodity) is less due to America's dominant position in the world than is usually thought, and most of the groundwork had been done by the British (indeed, apart from the US, the largest English-language countries - India, Australia, NZ, South Africa - are still mostly within the British linguistic sphere).

Part IV: Languages Today and Tomorrow. Here, Ostler reviews

13. The Current Top Twenty
and gives some predictions about their future distribution. His outlook for Russian and other European

languages is rather grim (he even foresees a future bilingualism in UK, English plus one of the Asian languages); he advises English speakers not to become dizzy with success, which can be easily overturned; and even the Chinese with its billion speakers may face a decline).

The fascinating story of the world's languages and their imperial history is somewhat submerged under all the details, but the author certainly avoids the Euro-centrism typical of this kind of discussion. It is probably a little longer and more loaded with details than necessary (and it's almost impossible to gloss over the non-essentials: the book's structure does not lend itself to such treatment). But a stunning achievement nonetheless.
