

The Adventure of English

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Can a language be treated as an organic being? This is the view of Bragg who thus has set himself the task to write its biography. The book is in fact an extension of a BBC series on the development of English and reads in fact like a high-class television series. The subject of your mother-tongue is something most people will identify with, as after all language is one of our most private possessions but at the same time collectively shared, and through a common language we make a spiritual communion with our fellow men and add to our souls a history seemingly as deep as that of the language itself.

The biography is a celebration, not just of the English language, but also of its supposedly superiority. This reminds one of monoglotic English speakers, who cannot really believe that other people really speak in another language except to annoy, and that they surely in their privacy lapse back into English in which they have been thinking all along.

The beginnings were inauspicious, the English just being one Germanic tribe among others, coming into the awareness of history only through their invasion of the British isles. (And still Frisian remains its closest linguistic relative). They drove away the Celts, but not quite, letting them survive at the fringes. More remarkably though, they adopted no Celtic words, the original residential language only surviving in place-names. A few hundred years later they were in turn invaded by another Germanic tribes, the Danish Vikings. The closely related language were more amendable for a fusion, and many Scandinavian words did enter the language replacing, which would never happen later, many of the core-words. 'They, them, their' are words crucial for any communication, but of Scandinavian provenience (*de, dem, deras* in Swedish). Also the grammatical structure changed, leading to a simplification and an abandonment of inflections. Such core changes would never ever happen again, although as we will see, the actual influx of foreign words would later dwarf the infusion of Old Norse. The Danes did not control all of England, and that arbitrary line of demarcation was noticeable until the modern age through dialects, often preserving the archaic; and is still noticeable in terms of place-names and family surnames. Obvious examples of the former are places ending in '-by' and of the latter names ending in 'son'.

The Norman invasion in 1066 brought French and almost killed the original Anglo-Saxon. Ironically though the Norman invaders were actually of Viking stock themselves having been completely francofied in a few generations. For a few centuries French was the language of official life, of the royal as well as legal courts, the idiom in which bureaucracy functioned. But somehow Anglo-Saxon managed to survive in the lower rungs absorbing the new words, but not letting them replace the old original ones. In this way the beginnings of a large vocabulary were being formed, with foreign words carrying a subtle different shade of meaning compared to their indigenious alternates. A less subtle example of this are the words for animals. Anglo-Saxon in the stable, French on the table.

A language attains maturity when being codified and made to extend itself in literary pursuits. This happened to England in late Medieval times, when the court and its

concomitant bureaucracy adopted English in their daily business, when Chaucer wrote his tales, and the Bible was duly translated into the vernacular, a project that was initially not only frowned upon by the Catholic church but compared with heresy and thus mercilessly persecuted. The pinnacle of English coming of age is traditionally associated with the rise of Shakespeare, whose extensive vocabulary has been the source of wonders of scholars.

Modern English has in fact changed very little since then, unlike many other languages, where reforms of orthography and grammar has been legion, a text from the 18th century is fully readable without a strain. The vocabulary has increased tremendously since the olden days, but still most of the words used, and all the most common words are still of Anglo-Saxon origin, and the grammar has in no way been affected by the Romance linguistic influence. When Churchill admonished his countrymen to fight on the beaches, every single word, except symptomatically 'surrender' were Old Anglo-Saxon. Thus the soul remains, and what goes beyond is just fancy garment.

In a way after the 17th century there is not much more to be said about the development of English except to wonder at its recent ubiquity, which did not really become apparent in all walks of life until after the Second World War. The book does not really address this phenomenon but contends itself with listing various geographical versions of English, starting with the most important - the American, which might also be the reason for its recent invasive spread.

So is English a superior language? If so in what sense? Is it because it is easy to learn, providing no real threshold for the beginner, except possibly its idiosyncratic orthography. Or is English the most versatile linguistic tool available to mankind, with a profusion of words to do service? Many people might be willing to concede the first point, however few non-English speakers would concede the second. There is a theory that all mature languages, that is languages that have served as mother-tongues, and creoles are thought to be nascent languages actually constructed by children using the elements of primitive mixtures - pidgins, spoken by their parents; are supposed to be equally sophisticated. In particular all languages allow self-reference, i.e. being their own meta-languages; and evolve by metaphors.

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