The Stories of English

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Languages are no discrete units, they vary continuously (more or less) not only with time but also with location. While Dutch and German are admittedly two very distinct languages, with their own lexica, grammars and orthographies, this is due to prescriptive standardization; if you look at the facts on the ground, so to speak, there is supposedly a continuous deformation of local dialects that link one to the other. Standard languages are as natural as nations, they are of course not without some inescapable basis, but as to the details of their borders, the choices are more or less arbitrary.

English is a tongue of immense importance having become the lingua franca of the modern globalized world. This contemporary importance imbues retrospectively its past history with a general interest it would not otherwise have deserved. Until the end of the Second World War, when American influence for good and worse became paramount, English did not loom particularly prominent in the mind of an educated European. French and German were definitely more important languages, and in fact until the 1980's or so, traveling in Eastern Europe German often turned out to be more useful than English. And as to world-wide travel outside the English colonial empire, Spanish or Dutch, at least in the 19th century (to say nothing of previous) would carry you further.

Now the prominence of English has of course a very obvious political and economic basis, which has enabled Native speakers to become monolingual. This does not preclude a desire to learn other tongues (and of course exceptional individuals do so successfully) but this is less out of compelling necessity than curiosity for the quaint. In fact, just as many Americans find it hard not to say impossible to imagine that anyone would seriously consider living somewhere else than the States, so many Native English speakers find it hard to fathom that there can be a serious alternative to English in which to conduct thought. The state of affairs makes for a serious asymmetry. Foreigners need to learn English, not the other way around, and this naturally suggests the idea that English is somehow superior to other languages, and that its present dominance ultimately is a reflection of that superiority. This is an illusion that many writers on English succumb to. They speak about the wonderful suppleness of the language (tacitly implying that its full reach is not within the grasp of foreign users) forgetting, or perhaps not even being able to realize, that the expressive quality of English is something that is shared with all living and thriving human languages. Being monolingual they have no points of reference from which to distinguish between what is particular pertinent to English and what is universally shared. David Crystal who is an inveterate lover of English and has produced over the years a long string of voluminous books on the subject aimed for a popular audience, does not, at least not explicitly, in any way endorse such parochial views, his stated agenda is to dethrone what he refers to as Standardized English and instead lift up, to (almost) equal status all variants of the language. To do so properly is to take an historical approach, hence the title, in which to emphasize both the variability of the English tongue as well as its fluidity.

Now there is nothing controversial about this, in fact this is the established view among specialists as well as reflective educated people. The straw men against whom Crystal turns are those who write letters to the editors about regrettable decline in language use, not seldom sinning themselves against the strictures they seek to uphold. Now language is admittedly special, it is both an intimate part of our own identity as well as being publicly owned. Thus it certainly engenders a wide interest and concomitant strong feelings. So while the elite as a matter of course shares Crystals views, it is quite possible that the men of straw I alluded to may have many of their prejudices shared by a larger unreflective public. A book like this may reach out to many of them, but few may be really susceptible to the message, but this may be as it is, just as a single swallow does not herald the onset of summer[1] a single book will not turn the tide, but rather be part of it.

Language use has two aspects working against each other. On one hand there is the urge to express yourself, on the other the desire to be understood. This creates a tension, a creative tension so to speak, because your imagination is only really stirred into action when encountering severe constraints. Freedom of stricture does not lead to freedom of thought, on the contrary, with nothing to oppose there is nothing on which to get purchase; instead the thoughts of the mind are left to flutter to and fro without purpose or penetration. Thus as a speaker you are constrained to a vocabulary and to a syntax without which your expressions would be unintelligible (maybe even to yourself?). Now there is admittedly strong social cohesion even when there is no language present, as is illustrated by packs of wolves[2], but nevertheless language provides among humans the main social binding. Thus language is, like many other social institutions, subjective as far as the collective is concerned and objective from the point of view of the individual. The individual has no real say in matters of language, he or she has simply to comply to the opinion of the majority[3]. The subjectivity of the collective, otherwise known as fashion, means for an arbitrariness as to the actual manifestation of language, in which there is in general no particular connection between the word (sign) and what it signifies, it all being based on shared convention. Thus the historical study of language is basically a documentation of seemingly random motions, showing no rhyme nor any reason. Yet apart from the haphazard way languages do change and evolve, some linguists, notably the pioneers such as the Grimm brothers, have identified regularities of such universality and sustainability that they have been designed laws; I am of course thinking of the various regular shifts in vowels and consonants in the development of the Germanic tongues. Thanks to those perceived laws, linguistics can make claims not only to be a descriptive science, but also to allow deductions, permitting not only interpolations in the historical record but also extrapolations and reconstructions. This points to another very intriguing idea, namely that language has a supra-human basis, that it is not just a matter of arbitrary fashion, but that it is genetically grounded, in fact to a some extent hard-wired in the brain.. This is

[1] A translation of a Swedish saying, that may or may not exist in English

[2] Anyone who has a dog as a pet should be struck by the ability of a dog through no intermediation of language to sense moods (such as anger and disapproval) and act accordingly

[3] This is paradoxical in a sense, as a collective is an abstraction that consists of individuals. It is similar with voting, no single individual vote makes any difference, but that does not mean that taken en masse they do not.

of course a reference to Chomsky and his followers, who hypothesize a universal grammar, of which individual grammars are just projections, and a neurological basis. As far as I understand the structure of the universal grammar has so far only been sketched, and much of the inspiration for it is based on subjective feelings of what appears natural, mostly in an English setting; and that so far no neurological basis has been identified. The latter is no real objection, thanks to the primitive stage neuroscience still remains at. The basis for this speculation of Chomsky is the ease with which all children learn to talk at an early age, and furthermore that this learning has to take place within a rather short time window, just as the case with learning to walk, with which language acquisition seems to have more in common than one would think. There are of course trials and errors, but those are of very short duration. Unlike other human skills, such as mathematics, every child (unless pathological) gets the underlying point of language automatically. One should also keep in mind that language as a natural evolutionary phenomenon is purely oral, an obvious fact often forgotten in an age of extended literacy. Thus with very few exceptions, an individual not exposed to a language from a very early age, will never acquire total mastery of it, as to accent and pronunciation, but forever be branded as a foreigner. But it is not obvious, although many people tend to draw the conclusion automatically, whether this also applies to language as an expressive vehicle, especially as to written literary ability.

To encode the language in written form is a late cultural phenomenon, which has been solved in two radically different ways, each with its advantages and disadvantages. Most western people are familiar with the phonetic approach, in which words are identified[4] and analyzed into phonetic constituencies. Now phonetic representation is problematic, sounds vary continuously, while letters are discrete entities. It is thus just not a question of having enough letters, such as in the ambitions of a modern phonetic alphabet, the spelling of a word, no matter how intricately it combines a finite number of basic units, will never fully do justice to the spoken word. Still of course, the phonetic representation, no matter that it can be seriously garbled as in English, provides a systematic approach both as to the encoding by the scribe and the decoding by the reader. So pervasive is that advantage, that to us who have been brought up with it, it makes us blind to the advantages of the alternative, which we tend to see as obsolete and ready for the proverbial dust-pin of history, namely that employed by the Chinese. By using characters rather than letters, the encoding bypasses articulated speech and goes directly to thought. Thus the encoding is language independent, we could all in principle learn to write and read Chinese characters without being able to speak and understand spoken Chinese. In fact in that sense Chinese as a universal written language would have many advantages. Characters do not really correspond to words, as is usually understood, but to concepts (although at times the distinction might be fine). Characters also combine, just as more complicated concepts are made out of simpler concepts[5]. And at times characters may also carry phonetic interpretation, and in this way to combine to concepts attached to articulated speech just

[4] In natural speech there are no interludes between words, and in fact in early encoding letters are stringed together without spaces making the text incomprehensible to the eye, but not to the ear, when it is read out 'aloud'.

[5] I still remember the sense of pride I had in a Chinese bookstore in Shanghai. I knew the characters for water and for mountain, and seeing them combined I drew the conclusion that the combination stood

as we do in the phonetic alpahbet. This is of course cheating and distorts the idealized vision of the Chinese character system I previously sketched. The problem with Chinese characters is of course that they are so heard to learn. It takes Chinese school-children years of study to learn just a few thousand necessary for reading. Literacy in Chinese is a true achievement, which of course appeals to intellectuals. Also, it could be true that once you have mastered Chinese characters, the reading proceeds faster that it would do in an alphabetic setting. While in India you may encounter a multitude of different ornate scripts, they do not tend to intrigue as much as do Chinese characters. Being surrounded by them and not being able to read them, makes you feel a real illiterate[6].

Now Crystal set out the story of English (never mind that the title refers to a plural) which has three distinguished periods merging imperceptibly in each other. First, if hardly foremost, is Old English. This is of course a amalgam of Germanic tongues, which is far more unintelligible to a Native speaker than to say a Scandinavian. Germanic tongues are rustic tongues with little of the refinement to be had in more advanced languages such as Latin and Greek. Reflecting primitive civilizations they have limited vocabularies, but as with all tongues with limited lexica each word has to carry a lot of meaning. Anyway among those warring tribes, later infused with invading Vikings, an Anglo-Saxon basis for English was provided, giving it not only the basic vocabulary of the most frequent words, but also a Germanic grammar. Those Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes (one may take those names with a grain of salt, Saxon may refer to anyone joining with a special axe) partly dispelled the original Celtic population in the 5th and 6th centuries. In spite of the prolonged contact between the two groups few if any Celtic loanwords have survived in the English language. This is presented as a puzzle, even the American colonists who expelled the Native Indian population picked up a few Indian words. But is it so much of a puzzle? I suspect that the phenomenon is rather common. Take the example of Finnish. Finnish was once wide spread all over northeastern Europe, including I suspect most of Scandinavia. it was gradually concentrated to modern day Finland, being replaced by Russian and Swedish in retrospective domain, without it leaving any traces in those languages[7]. Anyway the study of Old English is severely hampered by the lack of texts. This of course does not prevent people from drawing a lot of conclusions, but such are by necessity a bit shaky. There is enough to present lexica and derive the basic grammatical principles, as to the inflection of verbs and nouns. But of course with a data base less

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for landscape. However, this insight did not in one sweep unlock the key of Chinese, as I had as a child learned to read by realizing that the letters 'i' and 's' made up the word 'is' (ice in Swedish)

[6] 'analphabet' being the standard non-English term for illiteracy, would not be so appropriate in this context.

[7] Had it not been for the Russian seizure of Finland in 1808-09, the Finnish language might have died out. Finland had been part of Sweden since the 13th century, and the official language was of course Swedish, and a large part of the population was ethnically Swedish. But after the catastrophic loss, the Swedish elite famously pronounced, that Swedes we are not allowed to be, Russians we do not want to be, so let us be Finns. And there was a national Finnish revival complete with a 'rediscovery' of old Finnish myths and sagas, very much in tenor of the times. Many Swedes changed into Finnish names, and now of course the ethnic Swedes make up a minority, and their language, still along Finnish an official one, an even more threatened one, eventually doomed to disappear.

than that of a modern normally productive writer, our familiarity with the tongue must remain very fragmentary. As to literary interest there is only Beowulf, but compared to what remains of Old Norse texts [8] this is significant. Anyway the amount of text is too small to do justice to the richness of the language as spoken, in particular as the author points out as to dialectic diversity. One notable feature is that few Scandinavian loanwords are recorded in the texts, although the interaction was intimate and intense; the majority of those only show up in later texts from the Middle period. This reflects, as Crystal rightly remarks, the limitation of the sampling. There simply were not enough texts to catch it at the time, only later. And besides words take time to diffuse, what may have been seeded at the end of the Danelaw may have taken a generation or two to trickle down. The important thing to know about the Scandinavian influence on early English is that although the actual borrowings might have been relatively few, they are nevertheless very apparent as they often concern grammatical core words, something which is rather unusual[9].

Middle English on the other hand has an embarrassing riches of material to draw on. And here Crystal is at home, delighted by the sheer multitude of variety. There was not one Middle English, there were many varieties, none really taking precedence over the other. What basically distinguishes Middle-English from its older progeny is the large influx of Norman words (to be distinguished from later French ones) as well as a simplification of the Germanic inflective grammar[10], the result of which is that while Old English is a Foreign tongue, Middle English can be read, admittedly with some effort, even without prior study. The great literary name in the period is of course Chaucer who is almost as dominant in the period as Shakespeare is to become in the Early Modern. Chaucer is a creative writer, with an urge to express, thus inevitable extending the possibility of the language. An opposite effect would be that of the various translations of the Bible during the 15th and 16th century culminating in the King James version of 1611. Those translations, invariably reaching a large public, in fact more or less everyone, were crucial in stabilizing and standardizing the language, although of course those were not their express purposes. In a similar way Luther is supposed to have created the Modern German language through his translations of the Bible[11].

The Early Modern period is characterized by the conservative power of the King James Bible and the innovative Elizabethan authors especially the playwrights of whom Shakespeare naturally towers in the public imagination. Much has been made of the contributions to the English language by Shakespeare, especially when it comes to new

[8] The Icelandic Sagas and the Norse Mythology was of course written down several centuries later by the Icelandic scribe Snorre Sturlasson, who was an educated man.

[9] There is of course a principal difficulty in delineating precisely the Scandinavian influence of the ninth and tenth centuries from a common Germanic background, especially as the source texts are scanty.

[10] Written language is of course very different from spoken language, formal grammatical forms may not be present in the spoken version, just as logically structured sentences are the hallmarks of encoding. It is hard to dispel the suspicion that the scribes who wrote down Old English were not influenced by Latin.

[11] And to a lesser extent the same may be said for translations into Swedish and Danish at about the same time.

coined words. Crystal, who has a fondness for statistical analysis, debunks much of the hype. This leads us to the interesting question of the largeness of a language vocabulary and how much of it a single person is expected to master, a question well worth a lengthy digression.

First it is not really well-posed. What is a word? Should one count all the variations of a word due to grammatical context, meaning inflections of nouns and adjectives and conjugations of verbs? Of course not and one introduces the notion of lexemes on which dictionaries are based [12]. Then there is the trickier question of compound words. In German you may form those quite freely, while in English they tend to be spelled out separately and only in exceptional cases been allowed to be written as one[13]. Then given a word say 'obedient' you can make a variety by simply adding prefixes and suffixes, such as 'disobedient, obediently, disobediently' as well as natural neologisms such as 'preobedient, obedientful, obedientwise' which a spell-checker would oppose. Should all those not be included as one, after all knowing the core word, you will know the meaning of the derivatives? To list all words you know would be a tedious process, so a natural thing is to check samples of a standard dictionary and see how many you recognize. As to your active vocabulary you may be asked to give synonyms or produce words in association to a particular phenomenon. In this case it would be harder to come up with definite numbers. Anyway it is safe to say that an educated person may know 50'000 entries from a dictionary, more than was ever exhibited in all the plays by Shakespeare. Now as to the word treasure of a language, should you enclose all the long compounds referring to chemical elements, there might easily be half a million of such, of which you may only know a dozen at most. A more illuminative method of counting, which is not discussed by the author, would be to have frequency tables. I can easily produce texts on file I have written involving say twenty-five million keystrokes, and many millions of words. What would frequency tables show? Not all of the words I know have of course been written down, but even not all of those that I actively know, so this would not give me a very accurate estimate of my word count, on the other hand the frequency table would give me a much more accurate picture of the variability of my word use. Let us say that we list the thousand most frequent words in my output, of what percentage of all the words in my output would they constitute, the lower the percentage, the more varied obviously my use of vocabulary. Of course by taking different cut-offs one can get a better and better idea of variability, which need not be encoded in a single number, although of course it is always satisfying to do so. In this way the actual variability of use could be compared among different individuals, and even languages as wholes. English may be the language with most words in its dictionaries, but how many of those words are actually used routinely by the populace? There is the notion of Basic English which I believe is restricted to a vocabulary of 850 words. The idea being that mastering those words would make you minimally competent to read newspapers. Would 850 words also suffice for German, French or Russian? The question is not very well posed, but it is at least a beginning[14]. Shakespeare did indeed bequest a lot of words

[12] Which incidentally means that you need to have some basic competence as regards to a foreign language before you can even start to look up words!

[13] and there is always he solution of the hyphen, especially if you want to appease the spell-checker!

[14] When you learn a foreign language the glossaries are usually rather haphazard involving learning

to the English language, but as Crystal points out, many of his coinages never survived into the Modern idiom. In fact why certain words survive and others sink into oblivion is a mystery. The very word 'oblivionize' coined by Nashe never made it. Why not it instead of 'obliterate'? Were there more of a need for the latter? What would be an obvious synonym for 'oblivionize'? Maybe the time is ready for deoblivionize it? In fact the real contribution of the Bible and Shakespeare may not be so much in the invention of new words as in the dissemination of stock phrases, thanks to efforts of priests in pulpits and teachers in classrooms. A writer cannot expect to enrich the language with words, only with combinations thereof. To invent a new word is easy, it is disparagingly known as a neologism, to make it stick is another matter. As Crystal remarks, the great challenge is instead to put old words to new uses.

The 18th century was after all the century that was concerned above all with standardization. Literary figures such as Swift and Defoe (known to all children) lamented the decline of the English language. Johnson sought to stem the tide by his dictionary, only to realize that it was a futile quest. Of course it is a futile quest, language which is being used is constantly changing, there is no way to stem the tide, only to be part of it (to recycle a metaphor). On the other hand the stability of the English language since the end of the 17th century is remarkable. To read Gibbon, Hume of Smith from the second half of the 18th century is a pure pleasure. As of the early 19th century the language has hardly changed at all. Of course this really only applies to literature, but as good literature can be read centuries after its inception, this is the kind of stability that counts. I can only compare with the case of Swedish. Any Swedish literature before the 18th century is almost unreadable. And the literature from the 19th century would be felt to be dated unless changed into modern Swedish orthography which was changed in the early 20th century (this is one of the dangers of well.intended reform). The Swedish translation of the BIble most used is from 1917, while in England King James can still do duty. Standardization while in principle impossible can in practice conserve and keep the past alive. The virtues of standardization, especially when it comes to orthography (never mind that words have marginally different spellings, the eye usually does not notice) should not be disparaged. English written phonetically is almost incomprehensible unless read out aloud. In similar ways spelling which is altered in order to convey dialectical variation becomes very tedious on the page (grotesque in the words of Hardy), thus the sensible author never tries to do this consistently, only giving the touch to engender the illusion of it. Another matter is of you convey dialect through a subtle change in grammar and word order, as the delightful Irish example of Maria Edgeworth shows. One can reading it sense the sing-song of the Irish accent. The point is that we are sensitive to the discrete form that orthography represent, we are far more tolerant when it comes to changes of font (just

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rather esoteric words. Would it not be more efficient to base those glossaries on frequent words. As soon as you acquire enough to read with some speed, you automatically learn new words by osmosis. Similarly a Swede who wants to read Norwegian fluently, may only need to be instructed on say twenty words differing unpredictably from the Swedish, and than he or she would be set. A Swede knowing English and German likewise would need rather minimal instruction, maybe fifty to a hundred, to read Dutch with no sweat. Reading Dutch without that previous instruction would be somewhat more difficult than for the untutored to read Middle English.

as when it comes to variation of pronunciation both being continuous phenomena).

Now there is a difference between descriptive and prescriptive linguistics, of which the scientific version is concerned with the former and the instructive manual with the latter. It is easy to make fun of the latter, forgetting that language is as far as the individual objective and present constraints on expression he or she can only ignore at their peril. It is true that most of the constraining strictures have actually never been identified and formulated, providing feed to the mill of the linguistic philosopher, but there are also some easily formulated rules the learning of which provides the beginner with a short-cut. In principle all grammatical rules can be learned by osmosis, but to do so takes time, unless you are a toddler. What has given prescriptive grammars such a bad name is that their authors have confused grammatical necessity with stylistic consideration, in what other way can we explain the peculiar injunctions against the split infinitive and letting a preposition end a sentence? Typically those who inveigh against such practices not seldom find themselves sinning against them (not necessarily being aware of it). Language is about expression, and how would you express *to really understand* without splitting the infinitive? The suggested usage of *really to understand* seems to convey a slightly different meaning. In the first there is a note of at least urgency mixed with some exasperation, not to say desperation; while the latter seems a bit more controlled. Of course if your sense of style involves moderation and control, avoiding split infinitives may have a similar effect as to strike out exclamation marks. The grammarian Murray, the father of all subsequent English grammars, writes *so convenient is it to have one acknowledged standard to recur to.* How do you change that sentence as to have no preposition at the end? Maybe by making a split infinitive of the last verb, getting the slightly awkward *to to recur*? Those excesses are of course easy to laugh at, but they should not make us blind to other virtues.

I was rather old before I came into contact with English. I probably never heard the language spoken until we got a TV set when I was well over eight years old. Instruction at school started at eleven at that time, and by then I hardly knew any vocabulary at all, in fact probably less than the average pupil, as I always had a distaste for popular songs. English was an easy language to learn though, and the much toted difficulties to do with its spellings turned out to be trivial. Of course even after several years of instruction I could not follow what was going on the TV and I was fourteen before I even started reading on my own some short simplified texts in English. By fifteen I read my first real book in English, some detective story by Agatha Christie which did not engage me at all, but soon thereafter I started to read English books regularly, even when I did not get much of it. I also then found that during examinations I did not need to follow grammatical rules I had been taught but could trust my ear. At sixteen I went to England with my family and after that I started reading in earnest, in fact during my high-school years I kept a list of the English books I read, those included many by Dickens, who was my favorite author at the time. I also started to write in English. When I left for the States in the fall of 1971, being 21, I found out to my dismay that I could not follow the movie that was being shown on the airplane, but I had no problem understanding and talking to people. In fact for the first years of my stay in the State I so thoroughly immersed myself in English that I almost forgot my Native tongue. Two years later I had achieved a mastery beyond which I would never really progress. I know consider my powers of expression in English to be superior

to those in my Native tongue, at least when it comes to intellectual matters. Most of the books I read are in English, most of the things I write is in English, and a large part of my interior monologue is in English, although I have been living in Sweden for more than twenty years straight. Often I am at a loss for a Swedish word only finding the English. The acquisition of English has been without an effort, I have only vague memories in my early years of memorizing vocabulary, as soon as my reading became systematic the need for any conscious effort was obliterated (not to say oblivionized) vocabulary grew quickly with osmosis.

My experience with German is very different. I came into contact with German before English, in fact my mother even arranged for a German tutor. I was eight. I did it maybe for a year or so. I must have learned some German, I might even have spoken it with little of an accent, but a few years later when we went to Germany nothing whatsoever remained with me. My formal studies started at thirteen. I had German for five years, of which the first three I studied it rather hard, at least compared to other subjects at school. It did not come easily at all. Unlike English German has some threshold, you need to learn some tedious grammar. There was a lot of emphasis on the analysis of sentences. German, with its strict rules, were of course not considered on the same level as Latin, but still it was thought of as an intellectual challenge. I resisted that. The idea of analyzing a sentence before you could open your mouth was abhorrent to me. I found the exercises of translating Swedish into German and not falling into the traps that had been arranged for you distasteful. I never acquired the confidence of my ear, I never started to read German books as I read English. Still I do recall that I did try to write some short story in German. The urge to express myself in writing has always been very strong. I soon forgot my German after graduating from high-school. The effect of the failed attempt to learn German was to provide a blockage against further acquisitions of languages. (French, which I only studied for two years, was an attempt of a fresh start, of bypassing the German hurdle, but the time I spent on it was far too short to have any impact.) In my mid-twenties I started to read some German books. It was a kind of rebellion in being submerged in an English environment. I kept on the practice into my early thirties, much inspired by a semester in Bonn in the fall of 1981. I read through a fair amount of German books, and have kept on the habit ever since, maybe reading a two or three books a year on he average. Still I have not reached the stage where I dare to trust my ear. Writing in German is an exhausting business, and I rarely manage to write more than a page or two at a sitting. Conversation goes better, and I am amazed at the flow with which I can keep it up. However, it is so bad, that I often elicit praise for my good German as soon as I open my mouth. Although I can maintain some flow, I cannot consistently maintain it, I often find myself repeating in my mind what I will say, rather than just saying it, and afterwards listening to what you are saying. In spite of future efforts I doubt that I will be able to much improve. German is closer to Swedish than is English, and as pupils we were told that while German was initially hard, it would get easier and easier as you got along, while it would be the other way with English. This has not been my experience. English has always gotten easier, while with German, even when think I master it, I am checked and humiliated by getting stuck on something rather elementary.

To learn your Native tongue does not require any special talent, in principle anyone can do it. To learn a second language, provided it is absolutely necessary, is something most people can manage. However to g beyond that you apparently need some special gift. Most people are monolingual, meaning that their full power of expression can only be exercised through their mother tongue. True bilinguality also is not too uncommon, but of course far more rare than is normally appreciated. Only exceptional people may attain tri-linguality and beyond. Some people speak ten to fifteen languages. Those are feats comparable to juggling, however it is doubtful whether they keep any intimacy with more than two or three. A language you truly master also creates its own personality. There are psychological limits to how many separate personalities you can maintain.

Crystal is tolerant and he obviously cherish all the varieties of English that is being spoken and written. His attitude is that English belongs to everyone not only Native speakers. Everyone is invited to make their marks. He even explicitly looks forward to the time when a Swede would choose to write a novel in English, thereby putting a special Swedish touch to the language. Should I feel called upon me to do it? After all I am not innocent of such experiments, two of them already residing in the proverbial drawer, the first (and best?) already since 1974. But would such an experiment be worthwhile? Would it involve putting a special Swedish touch on it? I doubt it.

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