

## Mother Tongue

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November 25–30, 2008

English is a wonderful language, clearly superior to all other languages. No language has the same flexibility as English, nor a larger vocabulary, inviting the riches of all other tongues under its foil as it does. In short why should people persist in using other tongues? Of course if you are unfortunate not already to possess English as your mother tongue, you may not really have a choice, but surely for future generations this should be rectified. Is this not enough for you to boycott English (even if it would happen to be your native tongue?). Bryson does not put it in those stark terms, he knows intellectually that English is just one tongue among others, and that other people may, however perverse it may be, be tempted to make similar claims for their own. Yet, has that really sunk in for him?

The book is a hodgepodge. part history, part linguistic discussion, and part, in fact not an insignificant part of pure filling and padding, when he discusses various wordplays people may get obsessed with, or the etymology of place names.

But does he have some point, why has English appeared as the lingua franca of the world, the preferred language of science and international corporate business. It clearly was not always so. Britain, in spite of its colonial empire was not able to impose English in the same way it was imposed after the second world war when British influence was in steep decline. Obviously it has to do with the global importance of the U.S. in recent decades and its concomitant dominance when it comes to popular culture. But could there be any other factors that contributes to its popularity or rather which may have been instrumental in generating it, because popularity is almost tautologically self-promoting.

For one thing English is just another Germanic tongue, and in its early stages, say of fifteen hundred years ago, rather indistinguishable from other Germanic languages, sharing with them a vocabulary and a grammatical structure. Certainly there is nothing in it that would have heralded its future glory. Now English has changed a lot from its old roots, to the extent that Old English to the untutored is more accessible (if only marginally so) to a Scandinavian than to an native English speaker. Now languages are pidgins turning into creoles, they grow by external acquisition and internal logic, and although part of human convention and practice, nevertheless beyond the control of individuals, with some noteworthy exceptions. The reason for this rapid change of English is its exposure to two invading languages, the last of which nearly wiped it out altogether. The Viking conquest of England in the 10th century meant a massive influence of Scandinavian words, although of course it is not so easy to distinguish between what were Norse loans or part of a common heritage, to the extent that some of the very basic vocabulary, that is pertaining to pronouns, actually changed<sup>1</sup>, which is supposedly very unusual. However, the real threat to the existence of English was brought about by the Norman Conquest. Ironically the Normans were actually descendants of earlier Norse invaders to Normandy, who had

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<sup>1</sup> they, those, that, them etc are supposedly Norse borrowings

within a span of a few generations lost their tongue and adopted the indigenous one<sup>2</sup>, which had been marginally modified in the process. For a few hundred years Norman and Anglo-Saxon existed side by side, the former the language of power, the latter of the common subject. Supposedly the former was not greatly influenced by the local idiom, while the local idiom eagerly soaked up the more sophisticated vocabulary available to the more elevated one. Eventually the local idiom prevailed, although of course, it could have gone the other way, had the French political dominance continued. Supposedly this infusion of a seemingly redundant vocabulary allowed subtle distinction of meaning to be imposed on parallel synonyms.

A large part of the development of a language is due to social forces beyond the control of the individual, obeying hidden laws, yet an individual can at times make a difference. Languages consist in two versions, first the natural oral one, and secondly the coded written one. The two are quite different, the pronunciation of a word varies along a more or less continuous spectrum, while the spellings of a word is often unique, and if not existing in only a few variants. The encoding of a language is an act of will and involves individual decisions, as apparent in committee work and the authoritative guidelines of appointed bodies or influential dictionary compilers. Thus indeed individuals can codify practice and if given enough authority proclaim by fiat. Such top-bottom imposition on English is however rather rare, and has played no comparable role to the authoritative interventions in countries like France and Spain. But there are also other ways an individual can put his mark. Many modern European languages were brought into shape by Bible translations, often the first extensive literature in the language. A notable example is Luthers translation of the Bible into the vernacular German, an achievement probably of a more lasting importance than those of his famous theses nailed to the door in Wittenberg (although the latter was a crucial prerequisite for the former), and in England such a venture was actually attempted before the reformation (but supposedly inspired by similar sentiments) providing the English language with an extended text, later to be revised and canonized. Texts are read (and a Bible is expected to be read and read out widely) and thus providing a feed-back. Another source for the vitalization of English is Shakespeare, deified by most literary scholars. In what way does a Shakespeare enrich a language? Partly of course through the coining of new words, an activity normally frowned upon and commonly referred to as 'neologisming', but when successful lauded; but more significantly creating phrases and idiomatic expressions and metaphorical potentials. (But of course Shakespeare did not live in a vacuum, significant contributions to the vocabulary of the English language, and examples of its potential use, were given by somewhat lesser, if still luminous lights such as Ben Jonsson and Milton.) Still it is an important question as to how far literary models inform the daily use of ordinary people. English is supposed to have such a large vocabulary, but for the general user, the actual fraction employed, is very modest. In spite of the rich romance word treasure, in actual speech, Anglo-Saxon words are over-represented, and form the overwhelming majority of the suitably weighted vocabulary<sup>3</sup>. Thus in daily use there is no reason to believe that the English speaker uses a more literary and colorful language than other speakers, I would be rather inclined to

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<sup>2</sup> This testifies to the fact that the Vikings must have made up a small part of the population.

<sup>3</sup> words counted according to frequency, i.e. pick a word at random, it is much more likely to be 'T'

expect the opposite. Maybe, and this is a suggestion no doubt currying favor with resentful opponents of the success of English, this very fact may be the secret to its success. English is with its simplified formal grammar an excellent stock for pidgin.

Now to what extent is Bryson aware of this? Obviously he is not innocent of other languages but knows like most educated English speaker a fair amount of French, and even some German. But to acquire multi-linguality is not very easy, and normally it is only done under pressing circumstances, to which most English speakers have been spared. Thus Bryson appears essentially as a monoglot, albeit an informed one. As a monoglot you are really unable to make the distinction between generic properties of human languages, and specific manifestations of the same. Thus the tendency so apparent in the book of inflating the importance of English by conflating the general sophistication of language with the virtues of the former. A tendency that at times is risible.

But how do we learn language? This important aspect is not treated in the book apart from the intermittent flippant remark that this and that quirky nature of English must present almost insurmountable obstacles to the foreign learner. Naively language is a combination of a vocabulary and a grammatical syntax; the first constituting the building blocks, the other the rules as how to legally put them together. This is an attractive, but ultimately misleading conception of language, or at least human language. (The picture has of course inspired the construction of artificial language.) First it is not so obvious what is a word? As Collingwood remarks, idiomatic expressions should count as words too. The child learns not so much words, as entire expressions conveying thoughts, and made intelligible through the contexts in which they are uttered. It is really the codification into written texts which makes the notion of words to look so basic. Then as to grammar, it is not so simple that the Latin grammars that were emulated to describe English were so unsuitable to the task, the very notion of a grammar is highly problematic. There is the obvious grammar having to do with inflections (if any) and conjugations, which the native speaker learns automatically and subconsciously (thus a highly inflected language is not more forbidding and complicated than a simplified one) and to which the foreign learner has to apply himself systematically<sup>4</sup> But in grammar there are many more subtle things of word-order in which speakers automatically do the right thing although unaware of any explicit grammatical rules. It is far from feasible to expect that there would be such a thing as a complete grammar<sup>5</sup>, there are some hidden rules, or more precisely it is conjectured that there are some hidden principles of human language, biologically

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or 'and' or any such other common word normally of Anglo-Saxon stock, rather than 'instrumentally' or 'omniprescient'.

<sup>4</sup> A native speaker learns the gender of its nouns by the context it appears. He knows that in Swedish 'hus' is neuter, as we say 'gult hus' not 'gul hus' those expressions having been picked up concomitantly with the word itself. The learner on the other hand has to memorize that 'hus' is neuter and then we adding the adjective 'gul' he has to remember the rule that a 't' has to be added. The native speaker has encountered 'gult hus' several times, but never 'gul hus'. He may not have encountered say 'rött hus' but by rhythm and analogy he musically settles for it rather than 'röd hus' (although of course 'rödhus' one word exists, but then means something slightly different).

<sup>5</sup> Somewhat fancifully one may remark that texts always influence languages, and would there be a complete grammar, it would also do so, and in the process making itself obsolete.

encoded, that generate, adjusted to externally provided parameters, the guiding syntax of a language.

Bryson does not write so much to provoke and display erudition, maybe not even to educate, but merely to amuse and intermittently instruct. His linguistic naivety has already been commented upon, to that one should add a few howlers (such as according to some study the majority of Swedes have abandoned the classical way of forming plural and instead adopted the simplified English one). The book could have been improved by being referred to by a linguistic expert.

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