

## **“Behemoth, Bully, Thief: How the English Language is Taking over the Planet”**

No language in history has dominated the world quite like English does today. Is there any point in resisting? By [Jacob Mikanowski](#)

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**O**n 16 May, a lawyer named Aaron Schlossberg was in a New York cafe when he heard several members of staff speaking Spanish. He reacted with immediate fury, threatening to call US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and telling one employee: “Your staff is speaking Spanish to customers when they should be speaking English ... This is America.” A video of the incident quickly [went viral](#), drawing widespread scorn. The Yelp page for his law firm was flooded with one-star reviews, and Schlossberg was soon confronted with a “fiesta” protest in front of his Manhattan apartment building, which included a crowd-funded taco truck and mariachi band to serenade him on the way to work.

As the Trump administration intensifies its crackdown on migrants, speaking any language besides English has taken on a certain charge. In some cases, it can even be dangerous. But if something has changed around the politics of English since Donald Trump took office, the anger Schlossberg voiced taps into deeper nativist roots. Elevating English while denigrating all other languages has been a pillar of English and American nationalism for well over a hundred years. It’s a strain of linguistic exclusionism heard in Theodore Roosevelt’s 1919 address to the American Defense Society, in which he proclaimed that “we have room for but one language here, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boardinghouse”.

As it turned out, Roosevelt had things almost perfectly backwards. A century of immigration has done little to dislodge the status of English in North America. If anything, its position is stronger than it was a hundred years ago. Yet from a global perspective, it is not America that is threatened by foreign languages. It is the world that is threatened by English.

Behemoth, bully, loudmouth, thief: English is everywhere, and everywhere, English dominates. From inauspicious beginnings on the edge of a minor European archipelago, it has grown to vast size and astonishing influence. Almost 400m people speak it as their first language; a billion more know it as

a secondary tongue. It is an official language in at least 59 countries, the unofficial lingua franca of dozens more. No language in history has been used by so many people or spanned a greater portion of the globe. It is aspirational: the golden ticket to the worlds of education and international commerce, a parent's dream and a student's misery, winnowing of the haves from the have-nots. It is inescapable: the language of global business, the internet, science, diplomacy, stellar navigation, avian pathology. And everywhere it goes, it leaves behind a trail of dead: dialects crushed, languages forgotten, literatures mangled.

One straightforward way to trace the growing influence of English is in the way its vocabulary has infiltrated so many other languages. For a millennium or more, English was a great importer of words, absorbing vocabulary from Latin, Greek, French, Hindi, Nahuatl and many others. During the 20th century, though, as the US became the dominant superpower and the world grew more connected, English became a net exporter of words. In 2001, Manfred Görlach, a German scholar who studies the dizzying number of regional variants of English – he is the author of the collections *Englishes*, *More Englishes*, *Still More Englishes*, and *Even More Englishes* – published the *Dictionary of European Anglicisms*, which gathers together English terms found in 16 European languages. A few of the most prevalent include “last-minute”, “fitness”, “group sex”, and a number of terms related to seagoing and train travel.

In some countries, such as France and Israel, special linguistic commissions have been working for decades to stem the English tide by creating new coinages of their own – to little avail, for the most part. (As the journalist Lauren Collins has wryly noted: “Does anyone really think that French teenagers, per the academy's diktat, are going to trade out ‘sexting’ for *texto pornographique*?”) Thanks to the internet, the spread of English has almost certainly sped up.

The gravitational pull that English now exerts on other languages can also be seen in the world of fiction. The writer and translator [Tim Parks has argued](#) that European novels are increasingly being written in a kind of denatured, international vernacular, shorn of country-specific references and difficult-to-translate wordplay or grammar. Novels in this mode – whether written in Dutch, Italian or Swiss German – have not only assimilated the style of English, but perhaps more insidiously limit themselves to describing subjects in a way that would be easily digestible in an anglophone context.

Yet the influence of English now goes beyond simple lexical borrowing or literary influence. Researchers at the IULM University in Milan have noticed that, in the past 50 years, Italian syntax has shifted towards patterns that mimic English models, for instance in the use of possessives instead of reflexives to indicate body parts and the frequency with which adjectives are placed before nouns. German is also increasingly adopting English grammatical forms, while in Swedish its influence has been changing the rules governing word formation and phonology.

Within the anglophone world, that English should be the key to all the world's knowledge and all the world's places is rarely questioned. The hegemony of English is so natural as to be invisible. Protesting it feels like yelling at the moon. Outside the anglophone world, living with English is like drifting into the proximity of a supermassive black hole, whose gravity warps everything in its reach. Every day English spreads, the world becomes a little more homogenous and a little more bland.

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**U**ntil recently, the story of English was broadly similar to that of other global languages: it spread through a combination of conquest, trade and colonisation. (Some languages, such as Arabic and Sanskrit, also caught on through their status as sacred tongues.) But then, at some point between the end of the second world war and the start of the new millenium, English made a jump in primacy that no amount of talk about it as a “lingua franca” or “global language” truly captures. It transformed from a dominant language to what the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan calls a “hypercentral” one.

De Swaan divides languages into four categories. Lowest on the pyramid are the “peripheral languages”, which make up 98% of all languages, but are spoken by less than 10% of mankind. These are largely oral, and rarely have any kind of official status. Next are the “central languages”, though a more apt term might be “national languages”. These are written, are taught in schools, and each has a territory to call its own: Lithuania for Lithuanian, North and South Korea for Korean, Paraguay for Guarani, and so on.

Following these are the 12 “supercentral languages”: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swahili – each of which (except for Swahili) boast 100 million speakers or more. These are languages you can travel with. They connect people across nations. They are commonly spoken as second languages, often (but not exclusively) as a result of their parent nation's colonial past.

Then, finally, we come to the top of the pyramid, to the languages that connect the supercentral ones. There is only one: English, which De Swaan calls “the hypercentral language that holds the entire world language system together”. The Japanese novelist Minae Mizumura similarly describes English as a “universal language”. For Mizumura, what makes it universal is not that it has many native speakers – Mandarin and Spanish have more – but that it is “used by the greatest number of non-native speakers in the world”. She compares it to a currency used by more and more people until its utility hits a critical mass and it becomes a world currency. The literary critic Jonathan Arac is even more blunt, noting, in a critique of what he calls “Anglo-Globalism”, that “English in culture, like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global.”

In the last few decades, as globalisation has accelerated and the US has remained the world’s most powerful country, the advance of English has taken on a new momentum. In 2008, Rwanda switched its education system from French to English, having already made English an official language in 14 years earlier. Officially, this was part of the government’s effort to make Rwanda the tech hub of Africa. Unofficially, it’s widely believed to be an expression of disgust at France’s role in propping-up the pre-1994 Hutu-dominant government, as well as a reflection that the country’s ruling elite mostly speaks English, having grown up as exiles in anglophone east Africa. When South Sudan became independent in 2011, it made English its official language despite having very few resources or qualified personnel with which to teach it in schools. The Minister of higher education at the time justified the move as being aimed at making the country “different and modern”, while the news director of South Sudan Radio added that with English, South Sudan could “become one nation” and “communicate with the rest of the world” – understandable goals in a country home to more than 50 local languages.

The situation in east Asia is no less dramatic. China currently has more speakers of English as a second language than any other country. Some prominent English teachers have become celebrities, conducting mass lessons in stadiums seating thousands. In South Korea, meanwhile, according to the sociolinguist Joseph Sung-Yul Park, English is a “national religion”. Korean employers expect proficiency in English, even in positions where it offers no obvious advantage.

The quest to master English in Korea is often called the *yeongeo yeolpung* or “English frenzy”. Although mostly confined to a mania for instruction and immersion, occasionally this “frenzy” spills over into medical intervention. As

Sung-Yul Park relates: “An increasing number of parents in South Korea have their children undergo a form of surgery that snips off a thin band of tissue under the tongue ... Most parents pay for this surgery because they believe it will make their children speak English better; the surgery supposedly enables the child to pronounce the English retroflex consonant with ease, a sound that is considered to be particularly difficult for Koreans.”

There is no evidence to suggest that this surgery in any way improves English pronunciation. The willingness to engage in this useless surgical procedure strikes me, though, as a potent metaphor for English’s peculiar status in the modern world. It is no longer simply a tool suited to a particular task or set of tasks, as it was in the days of the Royal Navy or the International Commission for Air Navigation. It is now seen as the access code to the global elite. If you want your children to get ahead, then they better have English in their toolkit.

**I**s the conquest of English really so bad? In the not-too-distant future, thanks to English, the curse of Babel will be undone and the children of men may come together once again, united with the aid of a common tongue. Certainly, that’s what English’s boosters would have you believe. After all, what a work is English, how copious in its vocabulary, how noble in expression, how sinuous in its constructions, and yet how plain in its basic principles. A language, in short, with a word for almost everything, capable of an infinite gradation of meanings, equally suited to describing the essential rights of mankind as to ornamenting a packet of crisps, whose only defect, as far as I know, is that it makes everyone who speaks it sound like a duck.

Well, not really. (OK, maybe a little – English, while not an ugly language, isn’t exactly pretty either). Mostly, I’m speaking out of bitterness – one that is old, and until recently, lay dormant. My first language was Polish. I learned it from my parents at home. English followed shortly, at school in Pennsylvania. I learned to speak it fluently, but with an accent, which took years of teasing – and some speech therapy, kindly provided by the state – to wear away. That, combined with the experience of watching the widespread condescension towards those who take their time learning English, left me a lifelong English-sceptic. (I admit, also, that a strain of linguistic megalomania runs through many Polish speakers, one best summed up by the novelist Joseph Conrad, who, when asked why he didn’t write in his native language, replied: “I value too much our beautiful Polish literature to introduce into it my worthless twaddle. But for Englishmen my capacities are just sufficient.”)

It’s not that English is bad. It’s fine! A perfectly nice language, capable of expressing a great many things – and with scores of fascinating regional

variants, from Scots to Singapore English. But it is so prevalent. And so hard to escape. And so freighted with buffoonish puffery written on its behalf: “our magnificent bastard tongue”; “the language that connects the world”. Please. There is no reason for any particular language to be worshipped around the world like a golden idol. There is a pervasive mismatch between the grand claims made on English’s behalf, and its limitations as means of communication (limitations, to be fair, that it shares with all other languages).

Is English oppressive? When its pervasive influence silences other languages, or discourages parents from passing on their native languages to their children, I think it can be. When you do know another language, it’s merely constricting, like wearing trousers that are too tight. That’s because while English is good for a great many things, it is not good for everything. To me, family intimacies long to be expressed in Polish. So does anything concerning the seasons, forest products and catastrophic sorrows. Poetry naturally sounds better in Polish. I’ve always spoken it to cats and dogs on the assumption that they understand, being simultaneously convinced that raccoons and lesser animals only respond to shouts.

This isn’t quite as idiosyncratic as it sounds. Aneta Pavlenko, an applied linguist at Temple University in Pennsylvania, who has spent her career studying the psychology of bilingual and multilingual speakers, has found that speakers of multiple languages frequently believe that each language conveys a “different self”. Languages, according to her respondents, come in a kaleidoscopic range of emotional tones. “I would inevitably talk to babies and animals in Welsh,” reports a Welsh-speaker. An informant from Finland counters: “Finnish emotions are rarely stated explicitly. Therefore it is easier to tell my children that I love them in English.” Several Japanese speakers say that it’s easier to express anger in English, especially by swearing.

Intuitive though it might be to some, the idea that different languages capture and construct different realities has been a subject of academic controversy for at least 200 years. The German explorer Alexander von Humboldt was among the first to articulate it in a complex form. After studying Amerindian languages in the New World, he came to the conclusion that every language “draws a circle” around its speakers, creating a distinct worldview through its grammar as well as in its vocabulary. In the 20th century, the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf elaborated this idea into a broader vision of how language structures thought. Both drew inspiration for their work from their study of North American languages such as Nootka, Shawnee and Hopi.

This idea – now usually known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, or Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – has had a checkered history in academia. At different times, it has been hailed by its proponents as foundational insight for modern anthropology and literary theory, and blamed by its detractors as the source of the worst excesses of postmodern philosophy. In recent decades, sociolinguists have arrived at a few startlingly suggestive findings concerning the influence of language on colour perception, orientation and verbs of motion – but in general, the more expansive notion that different languages inculcate fundamentally different ways of thinking has not been proven.

Nonetheless, some version of this idea continues to find supporters, not least among writers familiar with shifting between languages. Here is the memoirist Eva Hoffman on the experience of learning English in Vancouver while simultaneously feeling cut off from the Polish she had grown up speaking as a teenager in Kraków: “This radical disjuncting between word and thing is a desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of its colours, striations, nuances – its very existence. It is the loss of a living connection.” The Chinese writer [Xiaolu Guo](#) described something similar in her recent memoir, writing about how uncomfortable she felt, at first, with the way the English language encouraged speakers to use the first-person singular, rather than plural. “After all, how could someone who had grown up in a collective society get used to using the first-person singular all the time? ... But here, in this foreign country, I had to build a world as a first-person singular – urgently.”

In the 1970s, Anna Wierzbicka, a linguist who found herself marooned in Australia after a long career in Polish academia, stood the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on its head. Instead of trying to describe the worldviews of distant hunter-gatherers, she turned her sociolinguistic lens on the surrounding anglophones. For Wierzbicka, English shapes its speakers as powerfully as any other language. It’s just that in an anglophone world, that invisible baggage is harder to discern. In a series of books culminating in 2013’s evocatively named *Imprisoned in English*, she has attempted to analyse various assumptions – social, spatial, emotional and otherwise – latent in English spoken by the middle and upper classes in the US and UK.

Reading Wierzbicka’s work is like peeking through a magic mirror that inverts the old “how natives think” school of anthropology and turns it back on ourselves. Her English-speakers are a pragmatic people, cautious in their pronouncements and prone to downplaying their emotions. They endlessly qualify their remarks according to their stance towards what is being said. Hence their endless use of expressions such as “I think”, “I believe”, “I

suppose”, “I understand”, “I suspect”. They prefer fact over theories, savour “control” and “space”, and cherish autonomy over intimacy. Their moral lives are governed by a tightly interwoven knot of culture-specific concepts called “right” and “wrong”, which they mysteriously believe to be universal.

Wierzbicka’s description of English’s subconscious system of values hardly holds true for the billion or more speakers of this most global of tongues. But it is also a reminder that, despite its influence, English is not truly universal. Its horizons are just as limited as those of any other language, whether Chinese or Hopi or Dalabon.

For if language connects people socially, it also connects them to a place. The linguist Nicholas Evans has described how Kayardild, a language spoken in northern Australia, requires a speaker to continually orient themselves according to the cardinal directions. Where an English speaker would orient things according to their own perception – my left, my right, my front, my back – a speaker of Kayardild thinks in terms of north, south, east and west. As a consequence, speakers of Kayardild (and those of several other languages that share this feature) possess “absolute reckoning”, or a kind of “perfect pitch” for direction. It also means removing one’s self as the main reference point for thinking about space. As Evans writes of his own experiences learning the language, “one aspect of speaking Kayardild, then, is learning that the landscape is more important and objective than you are. Kayardild grammar literally puts everyone in their place.”

Kayardild and its kin are truly local languages, with few speakers, and modes of expression that are hard to separate from the places in which they are spoken. But that should not lead us to think that they are lesser. The world is made up of places, not universals. To speak only English, in spite of its vast vocabulary and countless varieties, is still to dwell in a rather small pool. It draws the same circle Humboldt described around its speakers as each of the other 6,000 human languages. The difference is that we have mistaken that circle for the world.

**B**ecause English is increasingly the currency of the universal, it is difficult to express any opposition to its hegemony that doesn’t appear to be tainted by either nationalism or snobbery. When Minae Mizumura published the Fall of [Language](#) in the Age of English, in 2008, it was a surprise commercial success in Japan. But it provoked a storm of criticism, as Mizumura was accused of elitism, nationalism and being a “hopeless reactionary”. One representative online comment read: “Who does she think she is, a privileged bilingual preaching to the rest of us Japanese!” (Perhaps unsurprisingly,



Mizumura's broader argument, about the gradual erosion of Japanese literature – and especially, the legacy of the Japanese modernist novel – got lost in the scuffle.)

Those of us troubled by the hyperdominance of English should also remember the role it has played in some societies – especially multi-ethnic ones – as a bridge to the wider world and counterweight to other nationalisms. This was especially keenly felt in South Africa, where Afrikaans was widely associated with the policy of apartheid. When the government announced that Afrikaans would be used as a language of instruction in schools on par with English in 1974, the decision led in 1976 to a mass demonstration by black students known as the Soweto uprising. Its brutal suppression resulted in hundreds of deaths, and is considered a turning point in the anti-apartheid struggle. Similar protests have periodically racked southern India since the 1940s over attempts to enforce official use of Hindi in place of English.

In other parts of the world though, English still carries the full weight of its colonialist past. Since the 1960s, the celebrated Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has advocated on behalf of African languages and against the prevalence of English-language education in postcolonial countries. In his landmark 1986 book *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*, he describes the corrosive effect of English language instruction, comparing it to a form of "spiritual subjugation". Colonial education, in which pupils were physically punished for speaking their native languages while at school (something also done to the Welsh into the early 20th century) was necessarily, and deliberately, alienating, "like separating the mind from the body".

Since publishing *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ has worked to put its dictates into practice. He renounced his baptismal name, James, and with it Christianity, and ceased to write fiction in English. Since the 1980s, he has written all his novels and plays in his native Gikuyu, only using English (and occasionally Kiswahili) for essays and polemics. This last decision is one that many people still question. As he said in [a recent interview](#): "If I meet an English person, and he says, 'I write in English,' I don't ask him, 'Why are you writing in English?' If I meet a French writer, I don't ask him, 'Why don't you write in Vietnamese?' But I am asked over and over again, 'Why do you write in Gikuyu?' For Africans, the view is there is something wrong about writing in an African language."

Part of the paradox of Ngũgĩ's situation is that while he may be the world's foremost advocate for writing literature in African languages, his novels have

won acclaim and gained international recognition through the medium of English. The hegemony of English is now such that, in order to be recognised, any opposition to English has to be formulated in English in order to be heard.

**T**oday it is estimated that the world loses a language every two weeks. Linguists have predicted that between 50 and 90% of the world's 6,000 or so languages will go extinct in the coming century. For even a fraction of these to survive, we're going to have to start thinking of smaller languages not as endangered species worth saving, but as equals worth learning.

In most of the world, it's already too late. In California, where I live, most of the languages that were spoken before the arrival of Europeans are already extinct. On America's eastern seaboard, thanks to long proximity to Anglo settlers, the situation is even worse. Most of what we know about many of these vanished languages comes in the form of brief word lists compiled by European settlers and traders before the 19th century. Stadaconan (or Laurentian) survives only from a glossary of 220 words jotted down by Jacques Cartier when he sailed up the St Lawrence River in Canada in 1535. Eastern Atakapa, from Louisiana's Gulf Coast, is known from a list of only 287, gathered in 1802. The last fragments of Nansemond, once spoken in eastern Virginia, were collected from the last living speaker just before his death in 1902, by which time he could only recall six words: one, two, three, four, five and dog.

The great Malian historian and novelist Amadou Hampâté Bâ once said that in Africa, when an elder dies, a library burns. Today, across the world, the libraries are still burning. In his marvellous book, *Searching for Aboriginal Languages: Memoirs of a Field Worker*, the linguist Robert MW Dixon describes travelling across Northern Queensland in the 1960s and 70s to record indigenous languages, many of which had already dwindled to a handful of speakers. It's hard to remain an oral language in an increasingly text-dependent world. All the forces of modernity, globalisation, industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of the nation-state are arrayed against the small and local as opposed to the big and shareable.

In this past century, the Earth has been steadily losing diversity at every level of biology and culture. Few deny this is a bad thing. Too often though, we forget that these crises of diversity depend, to a great extent, on our own decisions. Much of what has been done can also be undone, provided there is the will for it. Hebrew is the most famous case of a language brought back from the dead, but linguistic revitalisation has been proven to be possible elsewhere as well. Czech became a viable national language thanks to the work

of literary activists in the 19th century. On a much smaller scale, endangered languages such as Manx in the Isle of Man and Wampanoag in the US have been successfully pulled back from the brink.

Coming face-to-face with the current onslaught of linguicide, I find myself wanting to venture a modest proposal. What if anglo-globalism wasn't a one-way street? What if the pre-contact languages of the Americas were taught in American high schools? What if British schoolchildren learned some of the languages spoken by the actual residents of the former empire? (This is a utopian project obviously. But how much would it actually cost to add a linguistic elective to larger high schools? One jet fighter? A few cruise missiles?)

Current educational discourse is full of talk about the need to bolster children's cognition. In the culture at large, experts have been trumpeting the cognitive benefits of everything from online brain games to magic mushrooms. Why not try Hopi instead? The point of this education wouldn't necessarily be to acquire fluency in an extinct or smaller language – it would be to open a door.

And think of the vistas it might open up. For generations, a huge percentage of philosophy and social science has been conducted in and about English speakers. Humankind, as imagined by the academy, is mostly anglophone. This has even been true in linguistics. Noam Chomsky's idea of a universal grammar underpinning all languages was based on a rather narrow empirical base. More recent research into dozens of smaller languages, like Kayardild and Pirahã, has been steadily whittling away at his list of supposed universals. We now know there are languages without adverbs, adjectives, prepositions and articles. There seems to be hardly anything that a language "needs" to be – just thousands of natural experiments in how they might be assembled. And most of them are about to be lost.

In some ways, the worst threat may come not from the global onrush of modernity, but from an idea: that a single language should suit every purpose, and that being monolingual is therefore somehow "normal". This is something that's often assumed reflexively by those of us who live most of our lives in English, but historically speaking, monolingualism is something of an aberration.

Before the era of the nation-state, polyglot empires were the rule, rather than the exception. Polyglot individuals abounded, too. For most of history, people lived in small communities. But that did not mean that they were isolated

from one another. Multilingualism must have been common. Today, we see traces of this polyglot past in linguistic hotspots such as the Mandara mountains of Cameroon, where children as young as 10 routinely juggle four or five languages in daily life, and learn several others in school.

Residents of Arnhem Land in northern Australia routinely speak half a dozen or more languages by the time they are adults. Multilingualism, writes Nicholas Evans, “is helped by the fact that you have to marry outside your clan, which likely means your wife or husband speaks a different language from you. It also means that you parents each speak a different language, and your grandparents three or four languages between them.”

A resident of another linguistic hotspot, the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, once told Evans: “It wouldn’t be any good if we talked the same; we like to know where people come from.” It’s a vision of Babel in reverse. Instead of representing a fall from human perfection, as in the biblical story, having many languages is a gift. It’s something to remember before we let English swallow the globe.

*Main illustration by Miguel Montaner*

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/27/english-language-global-dominance> [Accessed December 14, 2019]