



Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World

By Nicholas Ostler

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Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World By Nicholas Ostler

An unusual and authoritative 'natural history of languages' that narrates the ways in which one language has superseded or outlasted another at different times in history.

The story of the world in the last five thousand years is above all the story of its languages. Some shared language is what binds any community together, and makes possible both the living of a common history and the telling of it.

Yet the history of the world's great languages has rarely been examined. 'Empires of the Word' is the first to bring together the tales in all their glorious variety: the amazing innovations – in education, culture and diplomacy – devised by speakers in the Middle East; the uncanny resilience of Chinese throughout twenty centuries of invasions; the progress of Sanskrit from north India to Java and Japan; the struggle that gave birth to the languages of modern Europe; and the global spread of English.

Besides these epic achievements, language failures are equally fascinating: why did Germany get left behind? Why did Egyptian, which had survived foreign takeovers for three millennia, succumb to Mohammed's Arabic? Why is Dutch unknown in modern Indonesia, given that the Netherlands had ruled the East Indies for as long as the British ruled India?

As this book engagingly reveals, the language history of the world shows eloquently the real characters of peoples; it also shows that the language of the future will, like the languages of the past, be full of surprises.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Ostler's ambitious and accessible book is not a technical linguistic study—i.e., it's not concerned with language structure—but about the "growth, development and collapse of language communities" and their cultures. Chairman of the Foundation of Endangered Languages, Ostler's as fascinated by extinction as he is by survival. He thus traces the fortunes of Sumerian, Akkadian and Aramaic in the flux of ancient Middle Eastern military empires. Ancient Egyptian's three millennia of stability compares with the longevity of similarly pictographic Chinese—and provides a cautionary example: even a populous, well-defined linguistic community can vanish. In all cases, Ostler stresses the role of culture, commerce and conquest in the rise and fall of languages, whether Spanish, Portuguese and French in the Americas or Dutch in Asia and Africa. The rise of English to global status, Ostler argues, owes much to the economic prestige of the Industrial Revolution, but its future as a lingua franca may falter on demographic trends, such as booming birth rates in China. This stimulating book is a history of the world as seen through the spread and demise of languages. Maps.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Caesar led his legions into battle for the glory of Rome--and the immortality of Greek. In the curious spread of Greek through Roman conquest, Ostler recounts one of the many fascinating episodes in the complex history of languages. The resources of the cultural historian complement those of the comparative linguist in this capacious work, which sets the parameters for a new field of scholarship: "language dynamics." By peering over Ostler's shoulder into this new field, readers learn how languages ancient and modern (Sumerian and Egyptian; Spanish and English) spread and how they dwindle. The raw force of armies counts, of course, in determining language fortunes but for far less than the historically naive might suppose: military might failed to translate into lasting linguistic conquest for the Mongols, Turks, or Russians. Surprisingly, trade likewise proves weak in spreading a language--as the Phoenician and Dutch experiences both show. In contrast, immigration and fertility powerfully affect the fate of languages, as illustrated by the parallel histories of Egyptian and Chinese. Ostler explores the ways modern technologies of travel and communication shape language fortunes, but he also highlights the power of ancient faiths--Christian and Moslem, Buddhist and Hindu--to anchor language traditions against rapid change. Of particular interest will be Ostler's provocative conjectures about a future in which Mandarin or Arabic take the lead or in which English fractures into several tongues. Few books bring more intellectual excitement to the study of language. *Bryce Christensen*

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Review

"[A] wide-ranging history of the world's languages... [Ostler] brilliantly raises questions and supplies answers or theories." (Washington Post)

"Enlightening . . . Always challenging, always instructive--at times, even startling or revolutionary." (Kirkus Reviews)

"Delicious! Ostler's book shows how certain lucky languages joined humankind in its spread across the world." (John McWhorter)

“What an extraordinary odyssey the author of this superb work embarked upon.” (Literary Review)

“Covers more rambunctious territory than any other single volume I’m aware of...A wonderful ear for the project’s poetry.” (John Leonard, Harper’s Magazine)

“Revolutionary... Executed with a giddy depth of scholarship, yet the detail is never too thick to swamp the general reader.” (Boston magazine)

“True scholarship. A marvelous book, learned and instructive.” (National Review)

“[A] monumental new book... Ostler furnishes many fresh insights, useful historical anecdotes and charming linguistic oddities.” (Chicago Tribune)

“A work of immense erudition.” (Christian Science Monitor)

“A story of dramatic reversals and puzzling paradoxes. A rich... text with many piercing observations and startling comparisons.” (Los Angeles Times Book Review)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Edward Tuttle:

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Martha Furman:

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Paul Mackey:

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quicker to share. You can find a lot of sources to get information example: internet, newspaper, book, and soon. You can view that now, a lot of publisher that print many kinds of book. The book that recommended to your account is Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World this e-book consist a lot of the information with the condition of this world now. This kind of book was represented how does the world has grown up. The vocabulary styles that writer require to explain it is easy to understand. Often the writer made some study when he makes this book. This is why this book appropriate all of you.

Patricia Phipps:

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