One World, One Voice

By ROY BLOUNT Jr. Published: June 18, 2010

I found it a pleasure to read Robert McCrum on the English language’s development in, for instance, the 14th century: “After centuries of repression, the recognition of ‘Everyman’ and the ‘true commons’ was . . . expressed in the simple English words that hold good still.” By the time he reaches the 21st century, however, our connection is shakier.

McCrum is bullish on Globish: the reign of English as the world’s lingua franca or default tongue, “the worldwide dialect of the third millennium,” the language in which China trades with Zambia, the language in which a Greek watching CNN phones a friend from the Middle East to get him off the London bus he’s riding before it explodes. English, the author argues convincingly in “Globish,” will not break up into new languages and die, as Latin did, because it is sustained by the Internet, global marketing, mass consumerism, instant communications, international soccer, texting, and (McCrum is English) cricket and the legacy of [Winston Churchill](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/winston_leonard_spencer_churchill/index.html?inline=nyt-per).

The language has also been sustained by many “a nice irony”:

When the British Empire was drastically reduced by the American Revolution, the potential of the English language was enormously expanded.

As India was suffering under the Raj, it was also absorbing enough linguistic and cultural Anglophilia to give it a big competitive advantage over China today.

When “the British Empire went to war against the kaiser and then against Nazi Germany, dispatched its armies and navy . . . and also evacuated its young ones from the cities,” the mother tongue’s hegemony was bolstered because “the children of empire were prepared. Years of colonial service from Calcutta to Hong Kong had schooled successive generations in ‘maternal deprivation trauma.’ ”

 Cold-war propaganda “sowed the seeds of the world’s English in parts of the world previously unreceptive to British or American cultural colonialism.”

And, as McCrum sees it, the “disdain for international agreements” on the part of [George W. Bush](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/george_w_bush/index.html?inline=nyt-per)’s administration “had the vital effect of decoupling the English language from what cultural conservatives would always see as American imperialism.” Bushian detachment had a positive effect because “a global information network, and a global market, require a global language, but one that is not, overtly, the instrument of empire.”

That last irony’s niceness rests upon considerable spin. “In the absence of an American mission, apart from the almost meaningless ‘war on terror,’ the world was left to get on with its own multi­farious business,” McCrum writes. But if the English phrase in question is almost meaningless, then surely the business of putting vast resources behind it, counter­productively, is no contribution to English’s credibility.

McCrum concentrates on medium more than message. “Globish, a world dialect, will be less a language, more a means to an end.” He quotes the prime minister of Singa­pore: “Speaking good English does not mean using bombastic words or adopting an artificial English or American accent. We can speak in the normal Singa­pore tone, which is neutral and intelligible.” McCrum jumps in: “*Neutral and intelligible*: this is an exact description of Globish.”

In that case, Globish is a pipe dream. The form of Globish that most people in Singapore speak is Singlish, a lively blend that I wish McCrum had provided more than one brief example of. English as it is spoken or written in Japan, China, France or, for that matter, between Britons and Americans is at least as loaded and slippery as words of romance or business or politics between people who went to high school together. Even McCrum says, “Those who want to characterize Globish as a kind of benign virus that has worked its way into every corner of daily life must also acknowledge its imperial and colonial past.”

And yet he calls not only Globish but language in general “intrinsically neutral.” This, I believe, is doctrine passed down to students of linguistics so that they can look beyond words, which resist abstraction, toward notions of universal grammar, which thrive on abstraction. How does McCrum reconcile that tenet with all that he has conveyed (in this book and in his earlier and in some ways better one, “The Story of English,” written with William Cran and Robert MacNeil) about the distinctive fiber, force, diversity and adhesiveness of English? Here’s how: “The history of the world’s English, however, puts it on the side of the individual confronting a demanding new challenge about his or her place in society. Inevitably, it is an imperfect solution, with many loose ends and much unfinished business. But, it is precisely the imperfections of English that are part of its enduring strength.” To me, that has the ring of corporate P.R. prose.

Call me an old crank. But I’ll say this: I am not horrified to learn that “all the world’s texters use ‘lol,’ ‘gr8’ and ‘u,’ ” whatever their native thumbs. “Traditionalists,” McCrum affirms, “will deplore the witty text rendering of Hamlet’s most famous line (2b?Ntb? = ?).” We should be reassured, he says, that “there is, perhaps, no need to panic.”

True that. I would even lose the “perhaps.” A single slash between the first “b” and the “N” might work better than the first two question marks, but no skin off my nose, or, I venture to say, Shakespeare’s. What bothers me about what happens to the English in this book, as it moves into the present and future, is not McCrum’s receptiveness to new forms of English like textese. It is, for instance, this: “Texting operates with quintessentially linguistic parameters: it is playful, concise and universal.” Operates with parameters? Parameters that are quin­tessentially linguistic? Parameters wherewith it is playful and so on?

Maybe McCrum is being playful himself there, but I can’t see it. He’s certainly not being concise, since the six words between “Texting” and “is” serve only to muddle up a simple, if too sweeping, assertion. As to “universal” — the only thing universal in communication is our inability to say exactly what we mean.

But, speaking of playful, we can do better than this, from McCrum: “Bollywood is to the suspension of disbelief what the Indian rope trick is to Newtonian physics.” India’s wild and crazy popular movies may make great demands on the suspension of disbelief, or richly reward it, or defy the notion that art depends on it. The Indian rope trick (aside from its having been made up, most likely, by The Chicago Tribune in 1890) doesn’t do any of those things to Newtonian physics.

McCrum, in fact, provides evidence that the globalizing of English will water it down, at least literarily:

“Such is the obsession with the transforming power of the marketplace in the new China that the eager young book­sellers I spoke to were concerned to know more about likely British ‘best sellers.’ The idea of a little book making its way through word of mouth and the quiet accumulation of devoted readers is foreign to this generation of English-language readers. Best-seller readers in China are Globish readers. They are being willingly coerced by the soft power of a global force, and by Globish prose, a universally accessible style and story.”

Given recent number-crunching tendencies in American publishing, good books are probably already being rejected as insufficiently Globish.

It’s easy to see how Globish benefits emerging go-getters abroad and international corporations. That doesn’t mean it will be good for readers who value more interesting English. “Microsoft + Dow Jones = Globish,” McCrum writes. If that sounds promising to him, we are speaking only roughly the same language.

1. Is Globish really English?
2. How do different dialects develop?

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**By CHRISTINE KENNEALLY**

# Giddyap

The first and most intimate affiliations we have are the genetic ties we share with our family and the language we speak. In the first case, the links are pretty straightforward. Without exception, everyone is created by two parents, who each had two parents, who themselves had two parents, and on and on, so that behind every reader of this review, thousands of mothers and fathers fan out and multiply in a completely predictable way.

Linguistic inheritance, by contrast, is a story of irreducible patterns and historical contingencies. In “The Horse, the Wheel, and Language,” David W. Anthony argues that we speak English not just because our parents taught it to us but because wild horses used to roam the steppes of central Eurasia, because steppe-dwellers invented the spoked wheel and because poetry once had real power.

English belongs to the very large Indo-European language family. All of the Germanic, Baltic, Slavic, Celtic, Latin, Hellenic, Iranian and Sanskrit languages (among other families) are Indo-European, which means that Lithuanian, Polish, English, Welsh, French, Greek, Kurdish and Punjabi, to name just a few, descend from the same ancient tongue. It is known as Proto-Indo-European, and it was spoken around 3500 B.C. Thanks to a careful comparison of the daughter languages (as linguists call them), thousands of Proto-Indo-European words have been reconstructed, including those for otter, wolf, lynx, bee, honey, cattle, sheep and horse. The way some words group together in Proto-Indo-European shows that its speakers believed in a male sky god, respected chiefs and appointed official warriors. One word for wheel sounded something like “roteh.” The word for axle? “Aks.”

Where Proto-Indo-European came from and who originally spoke it has been a mystery ever since Sir William Jones, a British judge and scholar in India, posited its existence in the late 18th century. As a result, Anthony writes, the question of its origins was “politicized almost from the beginning.” Numerous groups, ranging from the Nazis to adherents of the “goddess movement” (who saw the Indo-Europeans as bellicose invaders who upended a feminine utopia), have made self-interested claims about the Indo-European past. Anthony, an archaeologist at Hartwick College who has extensive field experience, makes the persuasive case that it originated in the steppes of what is now southern Ukraine and Russia, a landscape consisting mainly of endless grasslands and “huge, dramatic” sky. Anthony is not the first scholar to make the case that Proto-Indo-European came from this region, but given the immense array of evidence he presents, he may be the last one who has to.

Anthony lays out crucial events that built up the economic and, later, military power of Proto-Indo-European speakers, increasing the reach and prestige of the language. It’s a linguistic version of the rich getting richer, with the result that more than three billion people around the world today speak a descendant of this mother tongue.

Perhaps the most important moment came with the domestication of horses, first accomplished around 4,800 years ago, at least 2,000 years after cattle, sheep, pigs and goats had been domesticated in other parts of the world. Initially, horses were most likely tamed to serve as an easy source of meat, particularly in winter; it wasn’t until centuries later that they were ridden, and then eventually used to pull carts with solid wheels, turning the Proto-

Indo-European speakers into mobile herders and the steppes into a conduit for themselves and their language. Later, they became skilled warriors whose spoked-wheel chariots sped them to battle and spread their language even farther.

The impact of horses on the reach of language is particularly important to Anthony, and he conveys his excitement at working out whether ancient horses wore bits (and were therefore ridden by Proto-Indo-Europeans) by comparing their teeth to those of modern domesticated and wild horses. He muses on the “deep-rooted, intransigent traditions of opposition” that existed along the Ural River frontier, slowing the spread of herding and the cultural innovations that went with it. He also cites remarkable genetic analyses suggesting that although all the domesticated horses in the world may have come from many different wild mothers, they might all share a single father.

Anthony also describes a world in which spoken poetry was the only medium, one that helped spread Proto-Indo-European through what he calls “elite recruitment.” It wasn’t enough for the newcomers to assume a dominant position: in order for their language to be picked up, they also had to offer the local population attractive opportunities to participate in their language culture — a process that continues today, incidentally, with the spread of English as a prestige language.

“The Horse, the Wheel, and Language” brings together the work of historical linguists and archaeologists, researchers who have traditionally been suspicious of one another’s methods. Though parts of the book will be penetrable only by scholars, it lays out in intricate detail the complicated genealogy of history’s most successful language.

1. **Where did the proto-Indo-European language come from?**
2. **How did the Indo-European languages spread?**