Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World

By Nicholas Ostler


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This book is a fascinating history of the world, or at least significant portions of the world, approached not from the perspective of political domains or military conquests, but from the perspective of language use. Certainly, there is some sort of relationship between these, but Ostler’s approach shows that this relationship is complex, and not entirely predictable. Why, in one case, does the language of the conqueror replace the native language, while in other cases, the native language persists and the conquerors adopt the language of the vanquished? Or why does a language with a short time of contact become so influential, while another language with generations of contact fails to make inroads into a community? Ostler looks at various factors and tries to tease apart some of the issues affecting this.

This book is divided into 4 parts: The Nature of Language History, Languages by Land, Languages by Sea, and Languages Today and Tomorrow. Part I consists of two chapters, “Themistocles’ Carpet” and “What it Takes to Be a World Language; or, You Never Can Tell.” These are introductory chapters describing the assumptions, goals, and parameters of the book. Significantly, Ostler looks only at languages for which there is written documentation, i.e. they had a writing system leaving records of the use of the languages.

Part II: Languages by Land deals with languages of the Eurasian land mass (plus Egyptian), which were able to spread almost exclusively by land migrations. Chapter 3, “The Desert Blooms: Language Innovation in the Middle East,” covers Sumerian, Akkadian, Phoenician, Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. Chapter 4, “Triumphs in Fertility: Egyptian and Chinese,” compares two distant languages with very similar histories. Chapter 5, “Charming Like a Creeper: The Cultured Career of Sanskrit,” deals with the languages of the Indian subcontinent. Chapter 6, “Three Thousand Years of Solipsism: The Adventures of Greek,” deals with a language whose influence as a desired medium of communication extended well beyond its regions (and time) of political power. Chapter 7, “Contesting Europe: Celt, Roman, German and Slav,” covers the ebb and flow of Indo-European languages across Europe, organized by language family. Chapter 8, “The First Death of Latin,” concludes Part II, focusing on the
ascendance of the daughter languages of Latin as Latin gradually became a foreign language to speakers of its daughter languages.

Part III: Languages by Sea deals with (mostly European) languages that spread as result of sea travel, whether for military conquest, trade or missionary endeavors. Chapter 9, “The Second Death of Latin,” deals with the results of the invention of the printing press and the subsequent rise of a mass market in printed books (in vernacular languages), which also coincided with the Reformation and the rise of Protestant churches. Chapter 10, “Usurpers of Greatness: Spanish in the New World,” shows how Spanish took root in the Americas in vastly different ways, depending on the local situation, both linguistic and political. This is contrasted with how Spanish did not gain a foothold in the Philippines. Chapter 11, “In the Train of Empire: Europe’s Languages Abroad,” compares the colonial histories of Portuguese, Dutch, French, Russian, and German and the resulting language heritage in the regions they controlled. An epilogue traces the brief (in comparison to other languages investigated here) history of Japanese in mainland Asia and the Pacific islands, which ended abruptly at the end of the Second World War.

Part IV: Languages Today and Tomorrow, looks ahead with some ideas about how language use may play out in the future. Chapter 13, “The Current Top Twenty,” looks at the languages used by the greatest number of speakers, while acknowledging the difficulties inherent in counting what a speaker of a language is. Ostler distinguishes those languages which have grown “organically,” i.e. primarily by population growth within the area of origin, from those which have grown by “merger and acquisition,” i.e. those which have spread by seaborne invasion and settlement. Chapter 14, “Looking Ahead,” considers the patterns of growth and decline of major languages in the past and suggests where some of the major languages of the world today may be heading in the coming centuries, with disproportionate emphasis on English.

The book is well written, although at some points it seems a bit tedious. I think this is the result of a high density of information – there are a lot of details about a lot of languages. It is a fair trade off. The book is well organized. One significant advantage of the way the material is presented is that even though there is a general continuity to the book, the chapters could reasonably be read independently by someone interested in one specific area.

For SIL purposes, this book could be useful in at least two different contexts. For those studying the biblical languages, this book places them in a broader context than is often given in a class on just Hebrew or Greek. Chapter 3 gives disproportionate attention to Hebrew, relative to the size of its speaker population and political scope, because of its religious significance. In addition, this chapter also discusses the competing local sister languages (Canaanite), as well as the languages of the dominant empires – Sumerian, Akkadian, Phoenician, and Aramaic. I found it particularly interesting that these language communities and the political infrastructure of their speakers often had explicit language policies. This relates to the second aspect which could be useful for SIL purposes, namely in sociolinguistics training. There is considerable discussion throughout the book on what speakers in a language community thought about their own language and how they, either officially or unofficially, promoted its use. Because of the grand scope of the book, looking at centuries and millennia, it gives a picture of the effects of language policies, both immediate and long-term.