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Future English
Johnson: Simpler and more foreign

Jul 3rd 2014, 11:53 by R.L.G. | BERLIN



SEVERAL weeks ago, Johnson [discussed](#) his debate with Nicholas Ostler about the lingua franca of the future. Johnson thinks that English has a very long run ahead of it. Mr Ostler sees English's time as coming to an end, to be replaced by machine-translation tools that will remove the need for people to learn to speak, read and write a lingua franca. But we agreed that whatever the long run might look like, the next few decades are set. No language has anything like a chance of displacing English.

Interestingly, about two-thirds of English-speakers are not first-language speakers of English. To put it another way: English no longer belongs to England, to superpower America, or even to the English-speaking countries generally. Rather, English is the world's language. What happens to a language when it becomes everybody's? Shaped by the mouths of billions of non-native speakers, what will the English of the future look like?

A look into the past can give us an idea. English is of course not the first language learned by lots of non-natives. When languages spread, they also change. And it turns out, they do so in specific directions.

For example, a 2010 [study](#) by Gary Lupyan and Rick Dale found that bigger languages are simpler. In more precise terms, languages with many speakers and many neighbours have simpler systems of inflectional morphology, the grammatical prefixes and suffixes (and sometimes "infixes") that make languages like Latin, Russian and Ancient Greek hard for the foreign learner. Contrary to educated people's stereotypes, the tiny languages spoken by "stone-age" or isolated tribes tend to be the world's most complicated, while big ones are less so, by this metric.

What Messrs Lupyan and Dale found through a statistical look at thousands of languages, John McWhorter, a linguist at Columbia University, found in a detailed study of just five. In his 2007 book "[Language Interrupted](#)", he asked why certain big, prestigious languages seem systematically simpler than their ancestors and cousins. English is simpler than

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German (and Old English); modern Persian is a breeze next to Old Persian and modern Pushtu; modern spoken Arabic dialects have lost much of the grammatical curlicues of classical Arabic; modern Mandarin is simpler than other modern Chinese languages; and Malay is simpler than related Austronesian languages. Mr McWhorter's conclusion, in simple terms, is that when lots of adults learn a foreign language imperfectly, they do without unnecessary and tricky bits of grammar. (Most languages have enough built-in redundancy for grammars to be more complicated than they have to be.) Modern Mandarin is a perfect example of a language almost completely devoid of inflectional morphology, all those prefixes and suffixes. All languages have their complexities, but Mr McWhorter believes that Mandarin, English, Persian, Malay and Arabic dialects are all clearly simpler than they used to be.

What, then, can we predict English will lose if the process goes on? An easy choice seems to be "whom". English was once heavily inflected; all nouns carried a suffix showing whether they were subjects, direct objects, indirect objects or played some other role in a sentence. Today, only the pronouns are inflected. And while any competent speaker can use *I*, *me*, *my* and *mine* correctly, even the most fluent can find *whom* (the object form of *who*) slippery. So *whom* might disappear completely, or perhaps only survive as a stylistic option in formal writing.

Another gilded-lily complication of English that foreign learners struggle with is the tense-aspect system, including three present-tense forms, *I live*, *I am living* and *I do live*, plus compound forms like *I will have been living*. These are tricky for speakers who don't have them in their native languages. While these different tenses and aspects focus on different things, the differences are often not crucial. In the very long run, as English is spoken by more people who have learned it as a foreigner, some simplification of this system would not be surprising.

What about pronunciation and dialect? Predictions that English would become a single undifferentiated mass in the age of mass communication have been shown wrong. Indeed, scholars see new dialects developing. William Labov, an American linguist, has identified a new "Northern Cities Shift" in the vowel system. And linguists see British dialects moving and changing, but not disappearing, as we reported [here](#). Perhaps more relevantly, there are already recognisable accents, vocabulary and, to some extent, grammatical differences in dialects spoken in non-English-native territories like India and Singapore. New dialects will appear wherever English makes greater inroads into daily life—say perhaps Scandinavia, where children are learning English at younger and younger ages.

Or take Brussels, one place where a big non-native-speaker population uses English every day. For example, European Union bureaucrats are likely to use the English "control" to mean "monitor" or "verify", because *contrôler* and *kontrollieren* have this meaning in French and German. (Other examples are *assist* for "attend" and *actual* for "current".) The EU's Court of Auditors has developed a [style guide](#) to correct the many EU -isms that have developed out of interference from other European languages. It's an engaging read that correctly calls these "misused" English words. But if in 50 or 100 years' time a large population is still fluently and easily using "control" for "monitor" and being perfectly understood, we will have to accept that this is a new dialect of English, not a misuse.

As English grammar gets simpler, and foreigners get to vote their funny practices into the language of Shakespeare, there will always be those who consider this decline, or adulteration. (Fears of decline have been with us for centuries already, after all.) But the declinists can take heart, on two counts. One is that languages don't really decline. We speak worn-down, clapped-out Anglo-Saxon, but modern English is plenty expressive, because we need it to be. And the second comfort is that this is the price of success: English may simplify because it is spreading. But it is spreading because it is expressive and useful. Most of the world's languages would love to have the problems that English has.

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Baseldoc Jul 6th 2014 15:20 GMT

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Many of the (correct) statements made here can be taken one level deeper. . .

(1) The original "lingua franca" was not any particular existing language, but a pan-Mediterranean pidgin based mainly on the Romance languages and used for trading in the Middle Ages and early modern period. So English cannot really be called a lingua franca in a strict sense (though the term has been used loosely for "internationally dominant language" for many years now).

(2) It is true that (some) languages tend to drop inflections over time, perhaps because they are taken over by populations that originally spoke something else. But THEN a funny thing may happen: the derivative languages develop their own endings and tack them back on again, making a reverse move back from a more "analytic" language to a more "synthetic" one. For example, the Latin future endings (as in amabo, I shall love) are nowhere to be seen in French, where the future tense was recomposed at a later date, with forms of "to have": aimerai, etc. So why shouldn't the English(es) of the future, or some of them, be more synthetic than today's English?

In the Latin-to-Romance transition, the spontaneous generation of new inflections has occurred in historical time, with plenty of documentation at each stage (well, with a gap in the middle, perhaps). But we can retrospectively conclude that such things must have happened in the prehistory even of Latin itself and of other ancient languages. The inflectional verb endings in classical Hebrew and Arabic, for instance, are pretty clearly derived from the personal pronouns. At some point in the history of pre-proto-Semitic, the verb forms probably consisted of multiple words, i.e., they were analytic, as in English and Chinese, rather than synthetic.

The back story of any language, seen over thousands and thousands of years, must certainly have included many, many episodes of inflection-paradigm destruction and regeneration. Most of this presumably happened before anything was put down in writing.

A few years ago, there was a book called "The Power of Babel" in which it was suggested that "man's earliest languages" were most likely to have been of the analytic type, i.e., with very few endings, because newly-generated languages (pidgins) are almost always like this. But it seems to me that this is fallacious, as a pidgin (a newly formed composite of two or more existing languages) and a very, very ancient language are "young" in entirely different senses. There is no reason to expect one to resemble the other. And any language, no matter how ancient, presumably represents a "late stage" of some even more ancient language -- until we get all the way back to the development of language capability as an event in human evolution. What happened way back then is a whole other, unknown story.

In the end, I suppose that English will evolve into a set of new languages. Two or three thousand years from now, linguists will compare the "Anglic" languages with one another and explain how it came about that they wound up so different despite their common origin -- unless, of course, human life on this planet has been eradicated by then. In any case, none of us will be around any more to see how it turns out!

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ashbird Jul 4th 2014 20:52 GMT

Modern Mandarin is a perfect example of a language almost completely devoid of inflectional morphology, all those prefixes and suffixes. All languages have their complexities, but Mr McWhorter believes that Mandarin, English, Persian, Malay and Arabic dialects are all clearly simpler than they used to be. - in article

Focusing only on the "Mandarin" example cited by professor McWhorter, I would be most indebted for

- [Blighty | Britain](#)
- [Newsbook | News analysis](#)
- [Buttonwood's notebook | Financial markets](#)
- [Pomegranate | The Middle East](#)
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the enlightenment afforded by an actual example of "Modern Mandarin" versus "Old Mandarin", in the context of "inflectional morphology" and "prefixes" and "suffixes".

Separately, an explication of what constitutes "simpler" would greatly help. Do we mean the number of characters used to say the same thing? Or the number of strokes to form each character? [for those readers who are unfamiliar with what a "character" is, or looks like, the last two symbols in this post provide an example - the symbols, repeated, mean Thanks said traditionally in double.]

Lastly, an example of "other Chinese languages" **in the printed/written form** would be tremendously helpful, since I am aware of no other written form than the ONE and ONLY, starting with the old classics from a couple of millennia back and all the way to today, inclusive of the Chinese newspaper I just finished reading half an hour ago, and the Chinese Novel I finished reading yesterday written in 2010. "Read" means exactly the same thing as "read" means in English - the eye-call moving long the stuff that appears on a page, whether a physical or cyberspace page, not the stuff spoken that registers in the brain via the auditory nerves behind the eardrums. Examples of reading material are the lines I am writing, what Johnson has written, what NYT and WSJ has published, what TE prints, etc., etc.

Most obliged to **Professor McWhorter** and many many thanks in advance.

- From one of many Chinese who grew up speaking, READING and WRITING the language, and in the instance of this commenter, a published writer in the language.

N.B. For those interested readers who still mistake PinYin for written Chinese, I am not in the room. :)

This post is written for the record.

謝謝

Recommend 27 Report Permalink

ashbird in reply to Galaxy_Jump Jul 4th 2014 2:20 GMT

I am not aware that's a "Modern" version. As far as I know, those "complications" were never there in the language. Go farther to Classical Chinese, there weren't even punctuations. You may disagree. That's OK. Each unto what they know.

Recommend 18 Report Permalink

ashbird Jul 3rd 2014 20:34 GMT

Anyone who dares mess with the English in Shakespeare deserves to be forced to eat 3 gallons of bad icecream in a flavor he/she hates. In one sitting.

Recommend 18 Report Permalink

ashbird in reply to lao shi Jul 3rd 2014 20:29 GMT

The hardest part of mastering English for a foreigner is to be caught in this inchoate state where what was once learned as "proper" is in the transitional stage to become replaced or displaced by the "new proper", followed by being cussed by proponents of the "new proper" for being "improper" should a learner-user dare to use the "old proper". Were all that "process" not be, the language would have been, and would continue to be, a more unified language to master. As it is, one has to learn to cook a stew with more than one meat, and makes it proper for the old and new proper .

Recommend 16 Report Permalink

Baseldoc Jul 6th 2014 15:20 GMT

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puertoescondidan Jul 7th 2014 16:08 GMT

This reminds me of an old joke about the day the bureaucrats in Brussels start regulating English when they adopt it as the official language of the EU: "The European Commission has just announced an agreement whereby English will be the official language of the European Union rather than German, which was the other possibility.

As part of the negotiations, the British Government conceded that English spelling had some room for improvement and has accepted a 5-year phase-in plan that would become known as "Euro-English". In the first year, "s" will replace the soft "c". Certainly, this will make the sivil servants jump with joy. The hard "c" will be dropped in favour of "k". This should klear up konfusion, and keyboards kan have one less letter.

There will be growing publik enthusiasm in the sekond year when the troublesome "ph" will be replaced with "f"...this will make words like fotograf 20% shorter.

In the 3rd year, publik akseptanse of the new spelling kan be expekted to reach the stage where more komplikated changes are possible.

Governments will encourage the removal of double letters which have always ben a deterrent to akurate speling.

Also, al wil agre that the horibl mes of the silent "e" in the languag is disgrasful and it should go away.

By the 4th yer people will be reseptiv to steps such as replasing "th" with "z" and "w" with "v".

During ze fifz yer, ze unesesary "o" kan be dropd from vords kontaining "ou" and after ziz fifz yer, ve vil hav a reil sensi bl riten styl.

Zer vil be no mor trubl or difikultis and evrivun vil find it ezi TU understand ech oza. Ze drem of a united urop vil finali kum tru.

Und efter ze fifz yer, ve vil al be speking German like zey vunted in ze forst plas."

Recommend 12 Report Permalink

shibakoen Jul 3rd 2014 19:18 GMT

"English is simpler than German (and Old English); modern Persian is a breeze next to Old Persian and modern Dari; modern spoken Arabic dialects have lost much of the grammatical curlicues of classical Arabic; modern Mandarin is simpler than other modern Chinese languages; and Malay is simpler than related Austronesian languages."

Following this logic, what linguistic hell was displaced by Russian?

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lao shi Jul 3rd 2014 15:15 GMT

English has also mostly dropped the subjunctive, were we to retain it, the language would be more complex but no more satisfactory.

Recommend **9** Report Permalink

yobro Jul 3rd 2014 14:35 GMT

I'm surprised that the article did not mention the development of koine Greek after Alexander's conquests, when Greek became the lingua franca of much of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Large-scale simplification in pronunciation and grammar happened rapidly: spoken Greek changed more in 400 years than in the subsequent 1900. Greek still retains a lot of inflection but much of the complexity in verb tenses and moods has been replaced by easier periphrastic constructions.

Recommend **9** Report Permalink

Wresan Jul 4th 2014 0:07 GMT

"any competent speaker can use I, me, my and mine correctly"
- For some reason, however, I find a lot of native speakers of English seem to struggle with stuff like "you and I" vs "you and me".

Recommend **7** Report Permalink

jouris Jul 3rd 2014 14:49 GMT

There is, however, one constraint on the spread of the various dialect changes that Johnson mentions: Hollywood. For better or worse, the main source of movies (and TV shows) in English that spread around the world remains a small area of southern California.

Until that changes, we may see local dialect changes such as those in Brussels. But the chance of those spreading to English as spoken elsewhere are slim, unless they happen to get picked up in the movies. English will keep changing, if only because immigration keeps bringing new people to southern California. But it seem more likely to be its long-standing feature of adding foreign words than tweaking the meaning of words already in use.

Recommend **7** Report Permalink

guest-sjlljm Jul 5th 2014 17:16 GMT

"English is simpler than German (and Old English)"

Morphologically it is. In terms of syntax, it is far more complex. Languages don't get "simpler", they just move the complexity elsewhere.

Recommend **6** Report Permalink

dududo@gmail.com Jul 3rd 2014 14:01 GMT

The same phenomenon occurred in the Lingua Franca of 1600's Brazil- the Nhengatu or Tupi Antigo - a language spoken as a second language by the majority of indiginous peoples and by the small portuguese resident population. A very simple language - the verbs of this language doesn't have any time inflection. Nowadays it is spoken almost only in the city of São Gabriel da Cocheira - Amazonas, some centuries after portuguese became the new Lingua Franca of Brazil.

Recommend **6** Report Permalink

Philyn Jul 7th 2014 20:08 GMT

When I was at school (many years ago) an English language teacher said she was not going to teach us grammar because for every rule there would be 20 exceptions to be learnt. Instead she was going to teach us how to write -- and she did.

Recommend 5 Report Permalink

ashbird in reply to ashbird Jul 5th 2014 5:20 GMT

Typo and missing letter midway 4th paragraph corrected as follows -

... eye-ball moving along the stuff that appears on a page...

Apologies for sloppy proof-read.

Recommend 5 Report Permalink

ashbird in reply to APenNameAndThatA Jul 4th 2014 2:17 GMT

I nominate you. No one is more qualified re the updates.

Recommend 5 Report Permalink

sanmartinian in reply to Bluestocking Jul 9th 2014 18:18 GMT

to Bluestocking on Eton and Shrewbury accents.

Can't tell you "how" but can tell you a true story.

Some fifty years ago, as an engineer in a large design company, I received the visit of two Sperry Rand colleagues.

One was an American who kept saying "back home in Chicago" with a definite new England accent. So after a while, I questioned him who confirmed he had moved from somewhere in Massachusetts to the Mid West.

The other, an Englishman who had kept mum most of the time, was rather puzzled and asked me if I could recognize English accents.

I replied I could and said he had a "*secondary public school accent*" meaning any public school other than Eton or Harrow.

Even before I'd finished my sentence, I realized it was very unclear, almost offensive, and added *say, for instance, Shrewsbury*" the first public school that came to my mind.

Believe it or not, he had been at Shrewsbury and I could never persuade him I had said that by chance.

I'm sure he died under the belief that there was a bloke who could recognize a Shrewsbury Public School accent from, say, Rugby.

Having a close friend who has been to Shrewsbury and having known quite a few who went to either Eton or Harrow, I can tell you there is a definite difference.

Or so I imagine.

On a different tack: I replied to you within one minute of your posting your comment.

Please don't imagine I spend my time looking at the computer waiting for someone to reply to me.

It just happened I was involved in a rather boring work about steel making jargon in two languages when a banner jumped up saying someone had replied to my comment on the Economist.

With such a good pretext to escape the drudgery of peculiar words in steel making, I jumped immediately at it.

After all I'm almost 83 and and master of my time...

Or so I imagine.

Recommend 4 Report Permalink

sanmartinian Jul 8th 2014 1:13 GMT

As I was reading this excellent article, I had the funny feeling of *dejar voo oll ovah again* as a Mafia boss would intone it as per de Niro.

I have the feeling that I have read all this before here.

Well, never mind.

Languages are living entities. Very much alive and kicking as the saying goes.

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The British English and European Portuguese I spoke all my 83 years of life, as well as the Belgian/Parisian French(I unwittingly jump between the two) I've spoken for over 60 years and the European Spanish I've spoken for almost 50 years are markedly different now from what they were when I first spoke them.

You just have to listen to any film produced between the 30's and 50's in any of these languages to realize the huge differences. Maybe I'm over sensitive to accents (I'm close to tone deaf to compensate for it) but surely anyone can notice this.

If this happens in a lifetime with radio and TV already in operation, how can one predict what will happen to languages in the future?

Latin took less than a millennium to separate in some dozen or more dialects that then in about a century coalesced into the main 6 romance languages that exist today.

One, Portuguese, has already two daughter languages. One well established(crioulo in Cape Vert, Guinea-Bissau), the other less so in Macao.

How many pidgins has English?

Modern languages are under two very opposed external circumstances: i) an unifying force caused by all sorts of globalization and ease of communication; ii) a centrifugal force caused by human communities to be "clubbish", i.e., the need to have a code that separates them from outsiders.

When I was a teenager, the half a dozen Lisbon public schools a couple of miles apart had clearly different slangs and accents; Harrow and Eton accents are easily distinguishable from those of Rugby or Shrewsbury.

If we could come back in 200 years we probably couldn't understand of what was being said anywhere in the world; whether there will be one *lingua franca* or more than the present 6000 existing today is, I believe, just speculation.

As the great Joseph Losey said at the beginning of one of his even greater films, visiting the past is just as travelling abroad: people "there" behave differently.

The future is even *different*...

Recommend 4 Report Permalink

APenNameAndThatA Jul 4th 2014 1:23 GMT

I think that "whom" has shifted from being optional to actually being incorrect in most situations. If you are answering the phone at work and ask, "To whom am I speaking?", you will be on the right track. If there has been a mishap with the beer and pizza on Friday night and you ask, "Whom did I tell to get the f----- pizza?!", that's you being wrong.

In Australia, "youse" can be used as a plural of "you". For the greater glory of Australia, I hoped that that replacement for thou/ye would catch on. It deserves to. I am concerned that that would be an increase in complexity and would be going against the flow. I will redouble my efforts. Could any of youse tell me who to contact about updating TE's style guide? Thanks.

Recommend 4 Report Permalink

joe.shuren Jul 3rd 2014 19:12 GMT

I am surprised to see omitted discussion of class. For example, Hong Kong parents protested that their children were taught a sort of English appropriate for business, when they insisted they wanted to pay for an upper-class British accent (too difficult for the teachers).

Also, Chinese learners of English commonly mistake gender, "he" and "she" or "it," lacking in Mandarin, so one might expect that distinction to diminish just as "Mrs." and "Miss," and "it's" and "its". What is a proper solution?

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