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A Quick Snapshot of the English Language

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Abstract

Into the tapestry of the English language are woven qualities that make human communication so attractive: flexibility, resilience, versatility, clarity, conciseness, to name a few. This article presents a succinct perspective and traces the tumultuous development of the English language from its humble beginnings to the present-day global acceptance as the international means of communication among people in various walks of life, cultures, scientific and local communities, mass media, and any other field in between. Intermediate steps included historical events which switched the focus from other languages to English, as well as its relevance in cultures across the globe. References to attest the validity of such approaches come from researchers, historians, linguists, mass media reporters, and writers. Explaining how English became the first global language is an exercise in world history, not just because it includes most parts of the world but even more because the story of the English language's spread intersects with so many other themes in world history. In conclusion, whether English is used and taught as a native language, as a second language, or as a foreign language, its historical development will undoubtedly help in understanding how and what made English a powerful communication tool in today's world. English has assumed a new role as a means of communication and as a medium of instruction in the classroom and it has undergone a dramatic change in terms of its use and users for many diverse social and business purposes in the global community.

Keywords: English, Language, Communication, Globalization

1. Introduction

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have been described, in linguistic terms, as revolutionary in the development of multilingualism and, equally relevant, the increasingly public recognition of the global position of English. People who speak several languages are presented with the ability to perceive an amazing array of different perspectives and insights, which leads to a better understanding of the world around us. Language in particular, and languages in general, have become the focus of intense analysis and debate. Graddol (1998), McArthur (also in 1998), prompted David Crystal (2012) to look into both issues and finally come with a startling conclusion, namely that both multilingualism and the spread of English as a global language are "two sides of the one coin." (Crystal, xiii)

As a researcher in general linguistics, David Crystal is clearly "devoted to persuading people to take language and languages seriously, so that as much as possible of our linguistic heritage can be preserved." (ibid.) After considering English as a first language, second language, and foreign language, the author refers to statistics data affirming that about a quarter of the world's population is already fluent or competent in English. In simple words, in the early 2000s, approximately 1.5 billion are able to understand, read, write, or communicate – at different levels of proficiency – in English. The linguist argues that no other language can match this growth.

A similar perspective comes from Northrop (2013), whose teaching and life experience in various parts of the globe led him

to a surprising but well explained conclusion, which comes along the same lines. Whether you go to Seoul, where subway signage is in English as well as Korean, or whether you travel to Venice, where the vaporetto stops are announced in Italian and English, or whether you hear announcements in English at airports everywhere, the widespread use of English is obvious. International meetings, business transactions, social messages, as well as courses at various colleges and universities, are held mostly in English. People who fly more or less frequently will notice that communication between cockpits and control towers is conducted exclusively in English.

Although there is a general consensus that English is to be found in diverse forms (English as a native language, English as a second language, English as a foreign language), their common ground is the astonishing power of unity and diversity, spread and shared by people all over the world through mass media, traveling, business and science meetings, school curricula, and any other types of inter-cultural communication. English has become a global language.

This article presents a succinct perspective and traces the tumultuous development of the English language from its humble beginnings to the present-day global acceptance as the international means of communication among people in various walks of life, cultures, scientific and local communities, mass media, and any other field in between. Intermediate steps included historical events which switched the focus from other languages to English, as well as its relevance in cultures across the globe. References to attest the validity of such approaches come from researchers like Charles Berlitz, historians like William of Nassyngton, linguists like David Crystal, mass media reporters like Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil, and writers like Walt Whitman. In conclusion, whether English is taught as a native language, as a second language, or as a foreign language, its historical development will undoubtedly help in understanding how and what made English a powerful communication tool in today's world.

2. An Overview of the Historical Development of the English Language

The rise of the English language is considered by many linguists a mystery, while others have rated it as a success story. When the Romans conquered Britain, English did not exist. In time, the language developed and grew out of its original territory and slowly but surely crossed borders and became international.

What makes the English language of today so unique can incidentally be explained by its origins and its humble beginnings. Successive waves of migration, mostly without any connection to each other, brought people from various homelands to a place where communication was vital, and that brought together a wealth of traditions and customs. "Language is an expression of human activity" (Pei, 1965), and that can be expressed not only by using a specific vocabulary, but also by gesture, look, or sound. It is interesting to note that linguists have noticed the kinship between Greek, Latin, and the Germanic languages, which can also be related to what is called Indo-European, a family of languages to which English also belongs. To be more specific, the same linguist, Pei, provides salient examples:

> In most Indo-European languages, the numerals from one to ten and the words of close family relationship (father, mother, sister, brother, etc.), as well as a number of other fundamental words, are recognizable as coming from the same roots. "Brother," for example, is easily discernible in the German *Bruder*, less easily distinguishable in the Irish *bhrathair*, the Latin *frater*, the Greek *phrater*, the Russian *brat*, the Sanskrit *Bhrātā* the Persian *biradar*. (Pei, 30)

Latin vocabulary was a major linguistic influence that pervaded the Germanic languages of Europe, such as Old High German, Gothic, and Old Saxon. "Anglo-Saxons, wherever they came from, would not have been immune to this influence." (Crystal, 59) Historically speaking, we do not know when exactly and how many words entered English from Classical or Vulgar Latin. "Mary Serjeantson (1965) lists 183 words from the Continental period, another 114 words from the period between 450 and 650, and a further 244 from 650 to the Conquest." (ibid.)

In 1066, following the landing of the Norman French at Hastings, the English language showed its resilience, versatility, and its astonishing capacity to adapt to major linguistic collisions. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, originally compiled around 890 during the reign of King Alfred the Great, recorded this event in a language that matches the historical moment when a major linguistic collision took place:

> Then Count William came from Normandy to Pevensey on Michaelmas Eve [28 September], and as soon as they were able to move they built a castle at Hastings. King Harold was informed of this and he assembled a large army and came against him at the hoary apple-tree, and William came against him by surprise before his army was drawn up in battle array. But the king nevertheless fought hard against him, with the men who were willing to support him, and there were heavy casualties on both sides. (Quoted in McCrum, Cran, & MacNeil, 73)

With Harold being the last of the English-speaking royalty, his death and the Norman victory at Hastings signaled an event that changed the linguistic history of English, although its aftermath effect was considered a disaster. The adaptability and the viability of the language was further tested in the centuries that followed.

During the early Middle Ages, English saw the combined influence of French and Latin, "with French at the outset by far the more important," and that considerably changed the character of the language. "The impact was most noticeable in vocabulary, though all aspects of language were affected to some degree." Changes are inevitable in the development of any language, but this time the acquisition of new vocabulary words propelled English in a new direction, and eventually "it would become the most etymologically multilingual language on earth." (Crystal, 144)

Robert Wace (c. 110-1174) was a Norman-French poet who is famous for his *Roman de Brut*, a "rhymed chronicle of British history based on *Historia* of Geoffrey of Monmouth." Wace belongs to a long line of chroniclers who "succeeded in uniting scattered legends attached to Arthur's name, and in definitely establishing their place in chronicle history in a form that persisted throughout the later British historical annals." (Wace, 2019) What makes the poem so relevant is its content, "stories of ancient battles in atmospheric settings – which motivated the poet to use an older indigenous vocabulary; or perhaps it was the association with the rhythms and resonances of the Old English metrical tradition." (Crystal, p. 145)

Certain historical events, like the Hundred Years War with France (1337-1454), the outbreak of the plague called the Black Death, which in itself made labor scarce, accelerated the rise of the English language. After the plague, schools started to teach English grammar, not French or Latin. In 1325, William of Nassyngton (a village in Northamptonshire in England) made the following statement, which rendered into contemporary English would read like this:

In the English tongue I shall tell you,
If you with me so long will dwell,
No Latin will I speak nor waste,
But English, that men use most,
That is able each man to understand,
That is born in England;
For that language is most displayed,
As much among the learned as unread.
Latin, as I believe, know none
Except those who have it in school done.
And some know French and not Latin,
Who have used it at court and there remain.
And some know of Latin partly
Who know of French but feebly.
And some understand well English
Who know neither Latin nor French.
Both learned and unread, old and young,
All understand the English tongue.
(quoted in Crystal, 2004, p. 131)

In the companion to the PBS TV series, *The Story of English*, McCrum, R., Cran, W, & MacNeil, R. (1986) continue the story after William of Nassyngton, the chronicler whose statement was read before senior staff at Cambridge University in 1384:

> English now appears at every level of society. In 1356, the mayor and aldermen of London ordered the court proceedings there be heard in English; in 1362, the Chancellor opened Parliament in English. During Wat Tyler's rebellion in 1381, Richard II spoke to the peasants in English. In the last year of the century the proceedings for the deposition of Richard II (together with the document by which he renounced the throne) were in English. Henry IV speeches claiming the throne and later accepting it were also in English. (p. 78)

Spoken English was different from county to county, and the five main speech areas – Northern, West and East Midlands, Southern and Kentish – are similar to contemporary English speech areas. In a bridge over centuries, the same authors also mention that, towards the end of his life, the American poet Walt Whitman defined language as "something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity" and having "its basis broad and low, close to the ground." (p. 351)

In his highly entertaining and informative book, *The Stories of English*, David Crystal (2004) opens his exploration of English with two stories, the standard and the real story. He then goes on and becomes more specific:

> The standard history of the English language usually goes something like this: In the year 449 Germanic tribes arrived in Britain from the European mainland, and displaced the native British (Celtic) population, eventually establishing a single language which was Anglo-Saxon in character. […] By the end of the eighteenth century, the standard language had become so close to that of the present day, at least in grammar, pronunciation, and spelling, that it is safely described as Modern English. But there continued to be massive increases in vocabulary, chiefly as a consequence of the industrial and scientific revolutions, and of the ongoing globalization of the language – a process which would continue throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. (pp. 3-4)

Besides the standard story, Crystal also takes into consideration what he calls "the real story." It is not what the orthodox histories include which is the problem; it is what they omit, or marginalize. Crystal states,

> The story of English, as it has been presented in the mainstream tradition, is the story of a single variety of the language, Standard English, its special status usually symbolized through capitalization. But this variety is only a small part of the kaleidoscopic diversity of dialects and styles which make up "the English language". (p. 5)

At a certain point, the author is ready to get into conversational English, although he says its story is "patchy." This is "a casual style, with its half-formed thoughts, loosely constructed sentences, unfinished utterances, interruptions, changes of subject, vagueness, repetitiveness, and a general 'play it by ear' attitude to interaction, is somewhat intrinsically inferior to a style where everything is carefully thought out, sentences are tightly organized and complete, the progression of meaning is

logical and coherent, and conscious effort is made to be relevant, clear, and precise. This is a message which prescriptive grammarians and purist commentators have been drumming into us for the past 250 years. It may take another 250 to forget it, though the signs are that it will take much less." (p. 10)

Linguists, researchers, and teachers should look at both aspects. What needs to be done is a concerted effort to unite the "standard" English with the spoken language of today. No matter how much we read and write and teach these skills together or separately, the spoken aspect is an integral part of the teaching process. Even grammar, vocabulary, or listening, for that matter, should be done as a conversation activity. Whatever is taught as new material should be practiced and reviewed so students can get a feeling of what a new grammar point, for example, sounds like in a real life situation.

As far as the written form is concerned, after the grand master of the Elizabethan era left us the legacy of Shakespearean drama and poetry, English moved slowly but gradually towards other parts of the known and little explored world. When the *Mayflower* left Plymouth in 1620, the written form that was recorded in those days gave us "one of the finest and earliest examples of prose written in America." (McCrum, Cran & MacNeill, 1986).

William Bradford, the Mayflower's historian and the first Governor of the Massachusetts Colony, describes the whole situation in this short passage:

> Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles … they had now no friends to welcome them, nor inns to entertaine or refresh their weather-beaten bodyes, no houses or much less townes to repair to … it was muttered by some that if they got not a place in time they would turn them and their goods ashore [and return; … But may not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say – Our Fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in the wilderness, but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voices and looked on their adversities. (*The Puritans in America*, p. 57)

Then came the American Revolution, and the citizens of the new country wanted to separate themselves from those in the old country in every way possible. In 1782, the United States Congress for the first time used the phrase "the American language." In the way it was formulated, *The Declaration of Independence* is living proof that those who signed it meant every word when they wrote the following:

> When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (Jefferson, 1904, p. 200)

The American nation was therefore ready to assert itself not only politically, but also in all matters related to its standing in the world, including the historical and the linguistic characteristics of the new nation. According to Ben Ames Williams, "No nation knows itself until it knows its past." (Quoted in Pei, 59). That being said, the saga of the American place names, for example, takes us back to the origins of the American toponymy. "Half of our states bear Indian names. […] Dakota means 'leagued' or 'allied,' having once been the home of the confederated Sioux tribes; Tennessee is 'the vines of the big bend'; Iowa 'the sleepy ones'; Oklahoma 'the red people'; Kansas 'a breeze near the ground'; Illinois 'the tribe of perfect men'; Texas 'Friends!' and Idaho 'Good morning!' "(ibid.) Although the spoken language of the native inhabitants gave way to that of the newcomers, the place names are still there as a reminder of those people who first lived there.

3. English as a Global Language

Ostler (2005) takes his readers into what he calls "an inquiry into the Language Prestige, defined as the propensity to attract other users." (p. 19) Borrowing from other similar researchers, the author argues that several new linguistic approaches have tried to explain or at least give a tentative answer to a difficult question: Under what conditions do languages have the power to grow?

> World powers make world languages … The Roman Empire made Latin, the British Empire English. Churches too, of course, are great powers … Men who have strong feelings directed towards the world and its affairs have done most. What the humble prophets of linguistic unity would have done without Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Sanskrit and English, it is difficult to imagine. Statesmen, soldiers, sailors, and missionaries, men of action, men of strong feelings have made world languages. (Ostler, p. 20)

How did English become a global language? Is it because of its rich vocabulary stock (close to one million words) with an exhaustive combination of sources coming from Latin, Greek, French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Scandinavian and many other cultures, including Polynesian, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Malay, to name a few? Is it because English has developed a wide array of synonyms expressing nuances very difficult to translate into other languages, like *fraternity* and *brotherhood*, *celestial* and *heavenly*, *felicity* and *happiness*, *royal* and *kingly*? Is it because it was necessary to express the vocabulary origin in naming animals like *ox, sheep, calf, swine, deer* - to denote the ordinary Saxon serfs who cared for the animals when alive – and their corresponding words like *beef, mutton, veal, pork, bacon, venison* – to define words denoting the flesh of the animals as used for food eaten by their French superiors? (Bradley, 1931)

Is it because English has augmented its vocabulary sources by adopting words from other languages and by making new words using *composition* (joining together two existing words, like *daisy* from *day's eye*, *window* from *wind's eye*), *derivation*

(making a new word out of an old one, like clever*ness*, clever*ly*, rogu*ish*, think*er*, noisy), and *root-creation* (the invention of entirely new words, like the 1700+ words coined by Shakespeare or like those imitating a noise: *bang, boom, hiss*)?

Is it because most of the words consist of only one syllable, and because of the tendency to abbreviate longer words, or is it because its SVO grammar structure is easier to learn because it is common among other languages like Chinese, Spanish, or French?

Or is it simply because English can be easily understood and interpreted by people and societies in all cultures?

Researchers, as well as language buffs, have come up with ingenious answers and explanations. When looking at famous writers, Warren (1990) argues that Walt Whitman was able to define the necessary qualities of a language like English because "the history of language is the most curious and instructive of any history, and embraces the whole of the rest. It is the history of the movements and developments of men and women over the entire earth. In its doings everything appears to move from east to west as the light does." (p. 57)

According to Anderman & Rogers (2005), language instructors always look at the positive effects of English as an international language:

> There is little doubt that the increasing use of English as a means of international communication has helped to establish contacts across linguistic and cultural borders as perhaps never before. Research, technology and business all benefit from the use of a common language, and, in some respects, English would seem an ideal candidate to take the role of the *lingua franca* of Europe. (p. 20)

In the same vein, linguists like Northrup (2013) have made references pointing out that a quick look at history would eventually clarify how English has emerged as the first global language. The "pervasiveness" of English can be easily attested by announcements in airports and on planes, by its use at international meetings where English is often the default language, and better yet, in communication between cockpits and towers where English is spoken exclusively.

The English of today is being spread all over the world through mass media, radio, TV, social media, emails, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook and any other types of electronic messages that people use to communicate with each other. We should also remember that a growing number of English-language websites, technical documentation, as well as university lectures, summit meetings, cultural and sports events, books, magazines, journals, newspaper articles and TV shows slowly but surely promote the use of English on an international scale. This is the English language - written and spoken - that people are using and educators are teaching and propagating today, knowing that its inherent qualities, built and consolidated over a long period of time, will undoubtedly make it a desirable goal for those who want to be understood when they express their ideas, feelings and emotions, and communicate by means of a structured system.

The Oxford Companion to the English Language (2018) summarizes the current situation:

> At the close of the fifth millennium since recorded history began, English is unique. No other world language has ever been put to so many uses by so many people in so many places or on such a scale – on land, by sea, in the air, and in space; in the mind, in the mouth, and by hand (in writing and sign); through printing on paper and increasingly on screen; on tape and film; and through radio, television, telephone, electronic networks, and multimedia. It is used as a mother tongue or other tongue (fluently, adequately, or haltingly; constantly, intermittently, or seldom; happily, unhappily, or ambivalently) by about a fifth of the human race – something over a billion people.

When referring to the same current situation, Wolf (2018) stresses the relevance of the huge volume of information we absorb on a daily basis, mainly because the English language makes it possible:

> Not long ago, the Global Information Industry Center at the University of California, San Diego, conducted a major study to determine the amounts of information we use daily and found that the average person consumes about 34 gigabytes across various devices every day. Basically, that is the equivalent of close to 100,000 words a day (p. 72).

Explaining how English became the first global language is an exercise in world history, not just because it includes most parts of the world but even more because the story of the English language's spread intersects with so many other themes in various cultures. Other languages will also survive and continue to be vital locally, nationally, and regionally, but for the first time in history a single language has become the global *lingua franca* (Anderman & Rogers, p. 1) In other words, while most languages can still be used in their own territories or cultures, English is now a global language.

4. Discussion

According to Berlitz (2005), there are 2,796 languages in the world today. As a polyglot, language teacher and writer, Berlitz resorted not only to his vast experience but also to contemporary findings in the field of historical linguistics. As such, his research provided a thorough analysis of language families, etymologies, dialects, as well as linguistic development. In a nuanced perspective, in his *Native Tongues*, he mentions that "the world's languages are divided into 12 important languages families and 50 lesser ones. The Indo-European language family, to which English belongs, is one of the 12 most important – and among languages importance is measured by the number of speakers around the world." (p.2) He continues,

> English, in its earliest form, Anglo-Saxon, was the dialect of powerful Wessex; modern English, which developed after the Normans conquered England in 1066, grew out of the dialect of London, the capital city (ibid).

Along the same lines, one of the key concepts in Berltiz's view is the study of language based on its place on the geographical map and its obvious influence on the overall linguistic evolution and change. Versatility is again a necessary indicator and a major component of the language structure, acquisition, and its practicality among speakers.

Before we delve into the historical development of English, we need to take a look at the overall qualities and abilities of language in general. Generated by the need to communicate and by the culture of those who exchange ideas, opinions, or general knowledge, language is conveyed by speech, writing, symbols, drawings, and various art forms to enable human communication. According to Leith (2018), when we talk about English, we automatically imply that, in order to survive and grow, a language needs to be used, practically by as many people as possible. In his opinion, as a means of communication, "a language is not only a set of practices." He goes on to posit his own view:

> When we talk about "language," everyone knows we're not talking about just one thing. There about seven thousand languages spoken worldwide. Less attention is paid to the fact that when we talk about "English," we are not talking about a single thing either; we're talking about a huge, messily overlapping mass of dialects and accents and professional jargons and slangs – some spoken, some written – that have their own vocabularies and grammatical peculiarities and resources of tone and register. (p. 7)

By the same token, when language is used to communicate, people connect with each other in various forms, be it verbal or writeen, and that validates is function in society. From this standpoint, the sociological value of language is paramount and can hardly be exaggerated.

In the same context, Gheerbrant & Chevalier (1996) argue that we definitely learn its function and (re)discover its priceless value in this careful and detailed description:

> Language is the soul of cultures and societies. […] Language is, in fact, an intellectual and social structure. It is the main channel of communication between one individual and another and between group and group. It is the most highly refined and subtle means of exchange and interfusion. It transmits a measure of unity to the individual and it is a socially cohesive factor. Societies break up when they abandon or weaken their language, and this is why ethnic minorities endeavor to preserve their languages as emblems of their own identity. [. . .] Knowledge of languages bonds its possessor with the individual or group. To attack a language is to attack an individual; to respect a language is to respect the person who speaks it." (pp. 591-592)

The wide variety of style and the wealth of vocabulary alternatives illustrate the relevance of clear communication based on cultural traditions and efficiency. Versatility and meaning are clearly notions of cultural and sociological exchange of opinions among people of all social strata.

Furthermore, according to Cran, MacNeil & McCrum (1986), towards the end of his life, Walt Whitman defined language as "something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity" and having "its basis broad and low, close to the ground."

A pioneer in language, Whitman was just one of the many literary figures who used his lyrical voice in order to praise and extoll the power of English, and at the same time championed the cause of the American language with its spelling, its grammar, and its own pronunciation.

5. Conclusion

Over the centuries, language teachers have been trying to organize their classroom activities so their students may benefit from their knowledge and learn the skills necessary to function in society, to communicate, and to understand each other.

Whether English is used and taught as a native language, as a second language, or as a foreign language, its historical development will undoubtedly help in understanding how and what made English a powerful communication tool in today's world. English has assumed a new role as a medium of instruction in the classroom and it has undergone a dramatic change in terms of its use and users for many diverse social and business purposes in the community.

People can travel these days and communicate across culture boundaries, researchers can collaborate with their colleagues in any other country, diplomats and political leaders can exchange ideas and opinions, students can attend classes in various subjects in person or online – they all benefit from the global rise of English and its unique flexibility, versatility, conciseness, and resilience across ages and cultures.

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