

Have we just seen the beginning of the end of English?

One way of looking at the outcome of the British referendum is to understand it as an act of self-sabotage:

Of course, this spectacular act of self-harming is more like a murder-suicide in that the damage done will not be contained to Britain and affect the rest of the world in ways that we cannot yet know but that look distinctly unpleasant for Europe and “the West”:

If Britain is self-destructing, what will happen to English as a global language? Have we just witnessed the beginning of the end of the global hegemony of English? [Some have already started to question the role of English in the EU after the British will no longer be part of the union.](#)

Let's examine how other global languages have lost influence.

To begin with, for a language to rise to importance as a transnational language, it seems inevitable that its native speakers successfully pursue imperial expansion. That is how English spread and that is how other lingua francas acquired their status. However, history also shows that a transnational language does not necessarily go into decline with the decline of the empire that spread the language. Indeed, English has shown no signs of decline since the end of the British Empire in the mid 20th-century; on the contrary, global English language learning has gone from strength to strength since then.

When an empire dies, the language of the empire may simply cease to serve as a transnational language but may still serve as the native language of the group who used to be dominant. Obviously, English will continue to be used as mother tongue in England etc. even after its speakers have shot their own political and economic influence in the foot. What is interesting is whether speakers of other languages will continue to embrace English as enthusiastically as they have to date.

In his examination of the fate of lingua francas after the fall of their empires, Nicholas Ostler argues that their survival as transnational languages “depends on the successful renewal of the marketing campaign, implicit or explicit, that has supported its rise to currency [...] the language [needs] to find itself another *raison d'être*” (Ostler 2010, p. 174).

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Latin, for instance, saw its greatest triumph as a transnational language after the fall of the Roman Empire. Its continued success after the Romans proved themselves incapable of constructively addressing the population movements and socio-economic and military challenges of their time, depended on two consecutive new purposes: first, Latin became the language of the Catholic Church, which gave it a new lease on life as a transnational language of religion for almost two millennia. Second, from the Renaissance into the 19th century Latin also served as a transnational language of education and higher learning in universities across Europe and beyond.

Persian provides another example: after Iran fell to the Arab invasion, Persian became the language of the army that spread Islam into Central and South East Asia, and was then taken up by Turks, Mongols and, in fact, all Muslim rulers of the region as the administrative language of their realms.

Latin and Persian thrived as transnational languages for well over a millennium after their native speakers had lost military-political and socio-economic clout. In the end, Latin as a transnational language faded away before the ascendancy of national languages. The end of transnational Persian came more abruptly as the administrative structures of Central and Southeast Asia were dismantled by the British and Russian Empires in the 19th century.

What does this mean for transnational English after Brexit? English has already been repurposed as the transnational language of multinational corporations and international business. So, we have not seen the beginning of the end of English as a transnational language and it may well thrive for a long time to come.

What we have seen is another nail in the coffin of native speaker supremacy. Native speakers have just chosen to make themselves even more irrelevant to the story of English.

Reference

Ostler, N. (2010). *The Last Lingua Franca: English until the Return of Babel*. London: Penguin.