

## All Over the World

W e as a species must have begun speaking one language. There are linguists who believe that one basic breeding language will eventually be discovered behind every language we now speak. There is a yearning for it among some of us. There have been several attempts artificially to create a one-world language. Esperanto is probably the best known. Invented in 1887 by a Polish oculist called L.L. Zamenhof, it was based on Romance language vocabulary and aimed to provide a universal second language. It has about a hundred thousand speakers in fifty countries. For instance, the sentence 'It is often argued that the modern world needs a common language with which to communicate,' appears in Esperanto as 'Oni ofte argumentas ke la moderna mondo bezonas komuna linguon por komunikado.'

Before that there was Volapuk, invented in 1879 by the German Johann Martin Schleyer; in 1928, there was Novial, invented by the Dane Otto Jespersen, and there has also been Interlingua in 1903, invented by the Italian Giuseppe Peano, and Ido in 1907, invented by the Frenchman Louis de Beaufort. What is happening today despite the population power bloc of China and the resurgence of Spanish in the Americas, is that English, invented by tens of thousands of people from about AD 500 onwards, is making its way all over the world. And in the last hundred years or so, while British English has maintained its astonishing fertility and Englishes from every continent have laced the mix, American English has added the

extra cylinders. That has been the most telling injection of all. They have invented and reinvented words to describe their own society.

We can see American English downtown in any city in the States. We would look up a block of 'apartments' to a 'penthouse', be deluged by the 'mass media', go into a 'chain store', breakfast on 'cornflakes', avoid the 'hot dog', see the 'commuters' walking under strips of 'neon', not 'jaywalking', which would be 'moronic' but, if they were 'executives' or 'go-getters' (not 'yes-men' or 'fat cats'), they would be after 'big business', though unlikely to have much to do with an 'assembly line' or a 'closed shop'. There's likely to be a 'traffic jam', so no 'speeding', certainly no space for 'joy-riding' and the more 'underpasses' the better. And of course in any downtown city we would be surrounded by a high forest of 'skyscrapers'. 'Skyscraper' started life as an English naval term – a high light sail to catch the breeze in calm conditions. It was the name of the Derby winner in 1788, after which tall houses became generally called skyscrapers. Later it was a kind of hat, then slang for a very tall person. The word arrived in America as a baseball term, meaning a ball hit high in the air. Now its world meaning is very tall building, as typified by those in American cities.

Then you could go into a 'hotel' (originally French for a large private house) and find a 'lobby' (adopted from English), find the 'desk clerk' and the 'bell boy', nod to the 'hat-check girl' as you go to the 'elevator'. Turn on the television, flick it all about and you're bound to find some 'gangsters' with their 'floozy' in their 'glad rags'.

In your bedroom where the English would have 'bedclothes', the Americans have 'covers'; instead of a 'dressing gown' you'll find a 'bathrobe', 'drapes' rather than 'curtains', a 'closet' not a 'wardrobe', and in the bathroom a 'tub' with a 'faucet' and not a 'bath' with a 'tap'.

All along the way the Americans and the English have hurled mostly genial abuse at each other about their respective tongues. It has its moments. Coleridge raged about the terrible Americanism 'talented' which was in fact an English word. Walt Whitman said that American was a glorious new language reinvented away from

the tradition and authority of British English. There is fear that the Americans are mangling 'our' language: who needs 'the inner child', 'have a nice day', or 'authoring' a book; a lot of us do. Just as we use 'cave in', 'flare up', 'fork over', 'hold on', 'let on', 'stave off', 'take on', 'fall for' and 'get the hang of' – all fine upstanding English phrases which very likely originated in America.

Sometimes it seems that America has collared modern life. 'Photogenic', 'beauty queen', 'beauty parlour', 'beautician', 'nutritionist', 'sex appeal', 'sugar daddy', 'pop songs', 'smash hits', 'a record store'. Financial, computer and slang words show more of a balance. Here are a few terms from the last decade or so: 'anorak' (UK), 'Big Bang' (UK), 'Black Monday' (US), 'car boot sale' (UK), 'cashback' (UK), 'cyberpunk' (UK), 'cyberspace' (US), 'derivative' [finance] (UK), 'desktop publishing' (UK), 'enterprise culture' (UK), 'golden parachute' (US), 'hacker' (US), 'Internet' (US), 'World Wide Web' (UK), 'laptop' (US), 'loadsamoney' (UK), 'mattress money' (US), 'PEP' (UK), 'scratchcard' (UK), 'short-termism' [finance] (UK), 'slacker' (US), 'subsidiarity' (UK), 'trailer trash' (US), 'trustafarian' (UK), 'yuppie' (US).

Some even feared – wrongly – that English's 'innings' on its home ground was about to come to an end. In 1995, the Prince of Wales expressed the anxieties of many of his contemporaries when he told the British Council that 'we must act now to ensure that English ... and that, to my way of thinking means English English ... maintains its position as the world language well into the next century.' Clearly he feared that the home team would be 'caught on the back foot', even 'hit for six'; however you cut it, he saw us on 'a sticky wicket'. But we 'kept a straight bat' although some of us became so fanatical about using the right word that we banned the flamboyance that had once been a mark of the language. When Rupert Brooke's mother saw it reported that her dashing young son, poet-hero of the First World War, had left Cambridge 'in a blaze of glory', she put her pen through the phrase and substituted 'in July'.

Nothing is alien to the appetite of English. In the First World War,

English English brought us 'shell-shocked', 'a barrage', 'no man's land' (re-charged from the fourteenth century), 'blimp' (an observation balloon). Aerial combat gave us 'air ace', 'dogfight', 'nose dive' and 'shot down in flames'. 'The balloon goes up' is a signal for the artillery to begin firing. 'Over the top' is from the moment you clambered out of the trenches to attack. You muffled a gramophone trumpet by 'putting a sock in it' and the phrase 'at the eleventh hour' stems, via the Bible, from the precise time the Great War ended.

In America the language of the southern blacks moved north as they were sucked up-country to man the booming factories. (In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, for instance, US steel production rose by over eleven thousand per cent.) In the 1890s over ninety per cent of African Americans lived in the rural south; sixty years later, ninety-five per cent had moved to the urban north. They discovered that they had not left behind the 'colour bar'. Where they settled was invariably on 'the wrong side of the tracks'. But their language took over those for whom they worked. It was often language associated with pleasure. People began to dance the 'cake walk' and then the 'hootchy-kootchy' and 'the shimmy', they started to 'jive' and 'boogie-woogie'. 'Jazz' and 'blues' arrived at the beginning of the twentieth century and changed music for ever. 'Hip' probably came from the African word 'hipikat', meaning someone finely attuned to his/her environment. 'Jazz' later came to mean having sex, as did 'rock'n'roll'. 'Jelly roll', 'cherry pie', and 'custard pie' were all words for female genitalia. 'Boogie-woogie' was a euphemism for syphilis – 'boogie' was a southern word for prostitute. 'Shack up' meaning living together in common-law fashion also came from black speech at this time.

As the twentieth century rolled on, the English-speaking youth of the world adopted 'black' American English as a mark of their generation. You wanted to be 'cool', 'groovy', 'mellow' and certainly not 'square'. Then there's 'to blow your top', 'uptight', 'right on', 'hassle', 'far out', 'bread' (for money), 'make it', 'put down', 'ripped off', 'cop out', 'no way'. 'Man' is very early, first recorded in 1823 as

black English. 'Out of sight' and 'kicks' are also from the nineteenth century.

Language has its own force and works, I think, to demands and impulses which cannot always be slotted into the received idea that economic and military superiority alone produce linguistic dominance. Pressure groups and revolutionaries can play a part. African American English came from a minority, mostly poor, often oppressed, all of whom were descended from a different language pool than English, and yet their expressions colonised the English language and not only of youth. Even President Nixon said 'right on' and gave the 'thumbs up'.

A characteristic of English throughout is the ease with which it can borrow or steal words from other languages. By the end of the sixteenth century, there were words from fifty different languages being used as 'English'. The flow of immigrants to America had the same result. On to the bone of Puritan English so tenaciously nurtured by the *Mayflower* families and others who followed from England, came Irish and Scots, especially on the frontier, together with words from Native American, and words from other European languages. 'Ouch!' came in less than a hundred years ago from the German word 'autsch'. German also gave us 'hamburger' and 'frankfurter', 'wanderlust', 'seminar' and the game 'poker'. 'Bum' in its meaning as 'tramp' comes from the German 'Bummler', a good-for-nothing, 'hold on!' from 'halt an!' and 'so long' from 'so lange'.

Yiddish of course. Its words include 'nosh', 'bagels', 'pastrami', 'dreck', 'glitch', 'schmuck', 'schmaltz', 'schmooze', 'schlock' and 'glitzy'. There are phrases too: 'Am I hungry!', 'I'm telling you', 'Now he tells me', 'Could I use a drink', 'I should worry'.

It was not only people who fed the resource; culture did the same. From the gangster culture, for instance, we get 'racketeers', 'hoodlums', 'goons' and 'finks': you could 'take the rap' and end up in 'the hot seat', especially if you'd been involved in a 'hijack' with a 'submachine gun', much to the dismay of your 'bimbo' who was always on the 'blower'. Would she 'spill the beans' or be 'taken for

a ride'? The smart thing would have been to have avoided all 'junkies' and 'pushers', cut out the 'hooch' and lead a straight life with no 'gimmicks'.

And there was the culture of 'the Talkies'. You went to the 'movies' at a 'movie theater', to see 'the stars' in 'close up' in 'Technicolor'. The movie could be a 'weepie', a 'tear-jerker', a 'spine-chiller', a 'cliff-hanger' or just plain old 'slapstick' with some 'ham' actors. The 'usherette' would be in uniform. You'd be obliged to sit through 'trailers' and you might well dream of going for a 'screen-test' on some distant day.

When the movies went east to Britain they were gobbled up by millions who absorbed the vocabulary and the phrases as eagerly as they copied the hairstyles and had a go with the American accents. The democratic cultural vote was overwhelmingly pro American English. We flattered it by imitation. This did not deter the objectors. 'Twenty years ago, no one in England "started in", "started out" or "cracked up". We did not "stand for" or "fall for" as we do today' (*New Statesman & Nation*, 1935). 'Those truly loathsome transatlantic importations "to help make", "worthwhile", "nearby" and "colourful" are spreading like the plague' (*Daily Telegraph*, 1935). 'The words and accent were perfectly disgusting and there can be no doubt that such films are an evil influence on our society' (press interview given by Sir Alfred Knox, Conservative MP).

The Americans are more polite about our English than we are about theirs. There was a fear that 'our' English had been taken from us; that its new owners were not looking after it as it deserved; and a deeper fear that they were at the cutting edge now: it was not us who propelled the adventure. But the mother-tongue country was not really daunted, as its leading minds prove to this day. British scriptwriters, songwriters, playwrights, novelists and poets were and are generally delighted with America's words, pillaged them, turned them into English-English and added their own new images ceaselessly. Sometimes it is very difficult to see the joke. That most English of writers, P.G. Wodehouse, lived in America for about half a century.

His plays, musicals, songs and novels enjoy many American characters and who can tell whether some of his more idiosyncratic usages came from this or that side of the Atlantic. 'Vac' for vacation, 'caf' for cafeteria could be UK or USA, 'gruntled' as the opposite of 'disgruntled' is pure Wodehouse, but was the influence English or American? It can be very clear as 'In the matter of *shimmering* into rooms the *chappie* [Jeeves] is *rummy* to a degree.'

Wodehouse went to Dulwich College in south London as did the American-born Raymond Chandler. Chandler named his leading character, Marlowe, after his house at Dulwich College. For many readers and writers his lean prose epitomises an enviably modern style. In 1949, he wrote: 'I'm an intellectual snob who happens to have a fondness for the American vernacular, largely because I grew up on Latin and Greek. I had to learn American just like a foreign language.' There is a thesis waiting for anyone who wants to unravel what could be called the four imperial languages in Chandler – Greek, Latin, English English and American English.

Given the mass of America and the inrush from elsewhere, it is perhaps surprising to find that plain, more or less monosyllabic Old English could still resonate so powerfully and movingly. But it could, as we saw in Winston Churchill's speech: 'We shall go on to the end . . . we shall fight on the seas and oceans . . . we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air . . . we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.'

That war brought the first mass invasions of Americans into Britain. The GIs arrived and a little handbook was given them to ease their conversation with the natives. They were informed that a kipper was a smoked herring. There were skittle alleys with ninepins rather than bowling alleys with tenpins. They were told that a five and ten store should be called a bazaar and instead of OK, which was already on its way to becoming the most famous word in the world, they should say 'righto'. They were also told: 'the British are



tough . . . The English language didn't spread across the oceans and over the mountains and jungles and swamps of the world because these people were panty-waists.' 'Panty-waist' is American for 'sissy'.

By 1944, more than one and a half million Americans were billeted around Britain. And this war, like all wars, brought the recording of new words – from 'jitterbug' to 'doodle-bug', 'smooch' to 'stakeout', 'passion-wagon', 'teenager', 'ballsy', 'gung-ho' (from Chinese 'work together'), 'genocide', 'anti-gravity', 'jet plane', 'chicken' for 'coward', 'laundromat' and 'squillions'.

From the mid twentieth century the English language flooded all over the world until by the year 2000 no one was in any way surprised that a Polish-speaking Pope, the head of a Latin-speaking Vatican, on his arrival in a Hebrew-speaking state, should say in English: 'May this be God's gift to the land that He chose as His own – Shalom.' Nor, as I write this, does it surprise anyone that so many of the diplomats and leaders of states at the United Nations are speaking to the world's press in English.

Countries such as Japan made learning the English language compulsory. The Japanese turned it into a form of Japanese-English: 'biiru' for 'beer', 'isukrimu' for 'ice-cream'. And American soldiers took Japanese words back to the USA: 'honcho' from 'hancho' – leader; 'kamikaze', 'hari-kiri' and 'tsunami'.

In 1945, George Orwell gave the language a new term, 'cold war', and this was yet another war which delivered new words. 'Big Brother', 'Gulag', 'Newthink', 'double speak', 'fallout', 'overkill', 'megadeath'. And from the world of spies, there came 'moles', 'sleepers', 'brainwashing', 'bug' and 'safe house'.

What happened in the second half of the twentieth century has been described rather dismissively as the coca-colonisation of the world. American brand names, American popular music, its movies and television, stormed the world and for a time the jukebox became the shrine of youth. To buy and sell, to enjoy and participate, to sing and be heard, increasingly and everywhere, you needed American English.

Yet English does not have the biggest core-speaking population. There are over a billion speakers who have Mandarin Chinese as their first language. By comparison English's three hundred and eighty million core speakers look quite puny. All the more remarkable then that it has taken such a worldwide hold. For outside the core speakers, it is estimated that upwards of three hundred million have English as a second or third language essential, as in India and Singapore, to enter into many of the central processes of society. There is yet another batch who use English as the preferred adoptive means of communication. Many from different languages now speak to each other in English rather than in either one of their own languages – say Malay or Russian. This figure has been estimated to be over a billion and rising rapidly.

A lateral-thinking way to look at this is to measure the economic strength of different languages. Measured in billions of pounds, Chinese is 'worth' four hundred and forty-eight billion, Russian eight hundred and one, German one thousand and ninety, Japanese one thousand, two hundred and seventy-seven billion, English four thousand, two hundred and seventy-one. English is the buyers' and sellers' language, the stock language of the market.

And English is the first language among equals at the United Nations, at NATO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund. It is the *only* official language of OPEC, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the *only* working language of the European Free Trade Association, the Association of Baltic Marine Biologists, the Asian Amateur Athletics Association, the African Hockey Federation . . . while it is the second language of bodies as diverse as the Andean Commission of Jurists and the Arab Air Carriers Association.

And that is not the end of it.

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