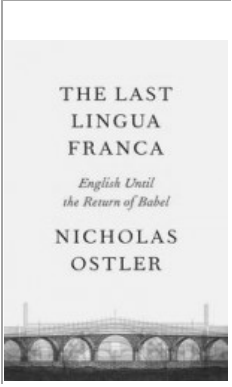


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The Last Lingua Franca: English Until the Return of Babel		
Author:	Nicholas Ostler (2010)	
Publisher:	Walker Publishing Company	
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330 pages	978-0-8027-1771-9	\$28.00 USD



One of the most exciting debates in applied linguistics is whether English will remain the world’s lingua franca. This engaging and thought-provoking book predicts a much more multilingual future where English will not be the dominant language that it is today. The basis for this argument is that lingua francas are used only as long as they are perceived to be useful and beneficial, and once this ceases to be the case they are discarded. Ostler argues that English will soon find itself in this position due to two main factors, namely elitism and technology. In today’s world, English is closely associated with power and privilege, thus creating resentment and negative perceptions of the language. As for technology, Ostler argues it will one day be possible to seamlessly translate spoken and written texts between languages, removing the need for a lingua franca altogether.

These arguments, or at least similar ones, have been made before (see for example, Fishman, 2000; Graddol, 1997; 2006; McKay, 2002). But what sets this book apart is its analysis of several past lingua francas from various time periods and geographical locations as an aid for understanding what may happen to English in the future. This brings a welcome historical perspective to the debate on the future of English as the world’s lingua franca.

Following an overview of the current use and status of English as a lingua franca in Part I of the book, Part II examines the factors that lead a language to become a lingua franca. Through case studies of Persian, Phoenician, Greek, Sogdian, Pali, Sanskrit and Latin, Ostler convincingly demonstrates that a language is adopted and used as a lingua franca due to its association with military might, trade and commerce, cultural practices and products and religion. For each of these cases there is substantial historical detail and

various maps and photographs, all presented in a way that is easy to understand for the reader who is not an expert on the specific languages and time periods under discussion.

The three chapters in Part III explore the reasons why languages lose their lingua franca function. Ostler proposes this can happen through either “ruin” (the breakdown of the economic network which supports the use of the lingua franca), “relegation” (the decision by a new government or ruling group to cease using the lingua franca, especially for official purposes) or “resignation” (the decline and eventual disappearance of the social elite which made greatest use of the lingua franca). Here again there are ample and well-argued historical case studies, including: various pidgins from Europe, Asia and the Americas which ceased being used once trading contacts between the groups using them ended (ruin); the Soviet government’s granting of official status to Russian at the expense of indigenous languages throughout Central Asia (relegation); and Sogdian’s decline when the collapse of the Tang dynasty removed the need for Sogdian intermediaries throughout the Chinese empire and surrounding areas (resignation).

Part IV, also consisting of three chapters, attempts to apply the findings of the rise and fall of lingua francas to the present linguistic situation. This is where Ostler expounds his main arguments regarding the future of English in most detail. Much attention is devoted to assessing the prospects and liabilities of the world’s other major languages—Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi/Urdu, Russian and Swahili among them. While Ostler concludes that none of these languages are likely to match the global scale of English, he argues that as the countries where they are spoken develop and become more significant players in world affairs, they will likely seek to use and promote their languages much more vigorously, rather than learning and using English. Greater importance in world affairs for these countries will also make their languages more attractive to others, who may opt to learn and use them instead of English. This appears to be a reasonable argument given the current enthusiasm for learning such languages, in particular Chinese, around the world.

Ostler’s argument regarding technology is somewhat less convincing however. He describes how online translation programs such as Google Language Tools already offer translation into and out of many languages and predicts such technologies will continue to develop, thus drastically reducing the need for people to learn English as a tool for communication. It is certainly true that such technologies have improved and become much more widely available, yet, as scholars working in the field of globalisation have pointed out, large numbers of people in the contemporary world still lack access to technology and the economic and political resources to gain such access (Inda & Rosaldo, 2002). It is therefore difficult to see how translation technology will play much of a role beyond the relatively well-off and developed areas of the world. It seems strange that this is not discussed, given Ostler’s focus on elitism.

Finally, while this book is not intended to have direct relevance or application to the language classroom, it is worth reflecting on the implications of its arguments for the teaching and learning of English. The global status of English has prompted much debate

on issues such as which variety of English should be taught (for example Jenkins, 2006); the role of non-native speakers as teachers (for example Medgyes, 2006); and the application of certain teaching methodologies, particularly Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), to diverse contexts around the world (for example Bax, 2003). However, there has been almost no discussion of what form English language teaching might and should take if Ostler's predictions prove to be accurate. How should teachers be trained to prepare for such circumstances? What methods and techniques would be most appropriate? What would learners want to learn and for what purposes? It is worthwhile thinking about these issues now because, as Ostler says, many past lingua francas seemed secure in their time but eventually lost their position. The English language teaching profession should not be caught underprepared.

In summary, this book makes an important contribution to current debates and raises many issues that require further consideration from scholars and practitioners alike.

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