Linguistic Diversity in English

“English’s emergence as the global language, along with the rapid progress in machine translation … and the fragmentation of languages spoken around the world, make it less clear that the substantial investment necessary to speak a foreign tongue is universally worthwhile” (Laurence Summers, President of Harvard, 2001-2006, “What You Really Need To Know,” NY Times, Jan.20th, 2012)

This quotation represents a widely held set of contemporary assumptions about the English language, even among people who (we must hope à propos the author of these remarks) have had a good education. Summers’ dismissal of foreign language learning is bad enough, but the notions about English and language on which that dismissal depends are worse. The idea that machine translation can cope with human linguistic interaction, the assumption that ‘global English’ is a single unproblematic entity, and the idea that languages are somehow now in ‘fragmentation’ are all erroneous and in some way pernicious. The unthinking propagation of English as a global language is consonant with the idea that, since immigrants need to learn English in order to flourish, they must give up their own languages, which will then need no recognition in our education system. Currently it isn’t hard to imagine that American schools could have a policy of monoglot anglophone teaching imposed on them, with intensified stigmatisation of other languages and those who speak them.

Here then, are some things that English speakers ought, arguably, to know about English.

1. It certainly is an important language. By number of native speakers, it’s the third largest in the world, and by number of countries in which it’s spoken, it’s the most influential.1
2. By totals of native and non-native speakers, it’s the second largest in the world, but only about a third of its users are native speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>L1 speakers</th>
<th>L1 Rank</th>
<th>L2 speakers</th>
<th>Total ([L1+L2] ) Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Chinese (incl. Standard Chinese)</td>
<td>897 million</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>193 million</td>
<td>1.09 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>371 million</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>611 million</td>
<td>983 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindustani (Hindi/Urdu)</td>
<td>329 million</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>215 million</td>
<td>544 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>436 million</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>91 million</td>
<td>527 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>290 million</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>132 million</td>
<td>422 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Speaking English as a native speaker and speaking it in a monolingual environment is an abnormality. The basic human linguistic condition is multilingual. People who speak only English are a global minority of a global minority (about 43% of humans are brought up bilingual, about 13% trilingual, 5% plurilingual (4 or more languages). Against this 61%, only
some 39% of language users are monoglot: multilingualism is the norm, not the exception for human language. (Just as well, since contemporary studies of language acquisition show that cognitive development is more rapid among speakers of multiple languages). Two-thirds of the world regularly communicate in more than one language. The idea that monolingualism in individuals or in states is the natural state of humans is not a scientific reality, but a normative cultural myth.²

4. ‘Mother-tongue’ is a modern idea, a cultural myth framed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To us it seems intuitively correct that everyone grows up speaking the language of their mother, that this is their most ‘natural’ language, and that you can just map that model onto the nation as an enlarged linguistic and ethnic family. As Yasmin Yildiz points out in her study of this myth’s formation, this model endows each language with a ‘native genius’ that makes it organic and unique, and thus produces an aesthetics of originality and authenticity. The possibility of writing in non-native or multiple languages is disavowed.³

But the idea that you should write in your mother tongue made no sense for much of European history. Rarely used before the twelfth century, the term lingua materna can simply indicate a mother with a different language from a father.⁴ Elite children often had less initial exposure to their mother’s tongue than to cradle vernaculars- the languages of their nurses and wetnurses. (The very word vernacular comes from the Latin for a female household slave.) Latin was the language in which any children who were going to be taught letters first learned the basics. In medieval England, for example, not everyone needed or was allowed to learn the skills of composing in Latin, let alone the physicalities of writing it, but for those who did, it was their first written language. Their second was French. English, with its shaggy and unstable orthography, was a third written language. It was most people’s first spoken language, but not,
for most of the Middle Ages, what anyone would readily or lightly experiment with writing in, compared with Latin and French. Even today, for all the hegemony of English-language publishing, English remains highly differentiated and in contact and exchange with dozens of other linguistic communities among the 400 languages used in America. Many writers work intra-lingually drawing on resources from more than one language (as with this year’s Reid book).

5. English’s global status replaces no other language, merely interacts with it. The ‘global nature’ of English is no simple matter. English looks likely to retain for some time what linguists call its ‘hypercentral’ quality as a language most people need to interact with in some way, but it’s worth noting that that’s not the same as having more countries make it a birth language. The English so globally spoken for commercial or diplomatic purposes is not always taken home by its users to their families. What has spread around the world, as has often been noted, is less English, than bilingualism with English: world English remains a lingua franca, operating in particular domains and registers. Globally, English consists of so many varieties, contexts and uses that sensitivity to its speakers may involve efforts comparable with learning another language. It remains highly diverse, not a consistent single entity: here, for instance, is a linguists’ representation of varieties of English by their relative closeness to one another:
There is no reason to regard English’s global status as a settled and permanent condition. The history of imperial and global languages shows that they disappear, sometimes with surprising rapidity, at the change of just a few socio-political factors. Latin, of course, is one example: others include Persian (for all its career of over twenty centuries from the ancient world to the nineteenth century and the changes and flexibility that helped sustain it in Turkic Asia and India), Sanskrit, Greek, Aramaic, Arabic and Sogdian. So too, lingua francas of more specialised domains come and go: thus, German has ceased to be the international language of science it was in the nineteenth century, French, though still one of two working languages for the UN (in the Geneva headquarters) is no longer the international language of diplomacy. The world’s 7,000+ languages are never still: their status changes all the time, with language death as well as some new language creation.
7. **English has no intrinsic qualities that ‘naturally’ make it a global language.** Far from it, it’s a complicated, multiply influenced language of complex orthography, not easy to learn. The construction of English as ancient, continuous, and pure was a particular concern of the sixteenth century, but recurs in many times and places, often with a regulatory purpose. (‘We have room’, said Theodore Roosevelt Jr in 1907, ‘for but one language in this country and that is the English language’, with repressive policies and consequences for American Indians and for immigrant education). None of the supposedly legitimating characteristics of English can be shown to be intrinsic to it.

(a) It’s unclear, if we argue from language-internal evidence, that English can be seen as the same linguistic entity across time: as Milroy has pointed out, it is, for instance, easier to show that Middle English (the conventional label for English c. 1100-c. 1500) is different from Old English (c. 600 – c. 1100) than that it is continuous. Structurally, Old English, in its multiple cases, grammatical genders, declensions and conjugations, remains much closer to modern German than to modern English. However, the Victorian imperial requirement for English to be an ancient language with an ancient literature (an idea that made philological continuity important for English from the fifth century onwards) has undoubtedly had the great merit of giving us *Beowulf*, a poem with no Anglo-Saxons in it, as part of a common, ‘English’ heritage (often nowadays experienced as adapted by an Irishman, Seamus Heaney, who found it expressive of his own community’s relation to language, or in film versions).

(b). The very last thing English is is ‘pure’ (no language is that, since language contact and interaction is the condition of all human communities). Historically, English is a late-comer immigrant language in the small British archipelago in the North Sea. It arrives -after Welsh, Pictish, Gaelic, Irish and Latin are established in Britain (and with most of which it develops
relations and interactions), as the language of invading and immigrant Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century. Throughout its career, English is marked by further immigrations, expansions and other cultural contacts, so that even monolingual English speakers aren’t monoglot. Thus, the English we speak today, for instance, is about 30% French in its wordstock, the result of the long and intimate cohabitation of English and French in England from the eleventh century onwards.

8. No global or imperial language, however hegemonic, is unaltered by its position in various linguistic communities. This is nicely exemplified by what happened to French while it was for four centuries the prestige vernacular of England (as well as an elite language there until the twentieth century). Continental French speakers who settled in England rapidly became bilingual, using English in domestic life and on agrarian estates, though continuing to use French in governance, court and the professions. English remained a regional dialect (until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries if we go by when Chaucer and Shakespeare were first widely translated into other languages, or until the sixteenth century if we go by when the first formal English grammars were composed). French, alongside Latin, was England’s chief
language for international trade, diplomacy, cultural contact etc. But because of its very prestige, French also became a meritocratic language, giving entry into clerical, administrative and court positions to many who learned to become bilingual in English and French. Rather like the relative numbers of native and other speakers of English in our day, many more people spoke French in thirteenth and fourteenth-century England than those who had it as a birth language. The idea that a colonizing or a global language is undifferentiatedly hegemonic overlooks the agency of the colonized, many of whom will always aspire to, reframe, deploy, put scare quotes around supposedly dominant languages. Those speakers of medieval English who could access education, -Chaucer, for instance,- used French and were not merely used by it. Today, English as a global language is neither a done deal nor itself unaffected by its linguistic contacts (one possible future, though perhaps an unlikely one, is that English will split into a family of languages their speakers recognise as separate languages: another is that some other language will become more important: another that English will become proportionately smaller as a native speaker language and those who interact with it will do so increasingly as a lingua franca only).

9. Working in multilingual cultures, writers can exploit many different possible relations in and among languages, which in effect function as a series of enriching registers.

For some examples of English linguistic diversity and internal multilingualism, we can take Chaucer- the supposed founder of English poetry, and actually someone who most probably began his career writing in French. (Comparable exploitations can be seen at almost any time: the most striking is perhaps Joyce’s Oxen of the Sun in Ulysses, but more everyday examples abound).
(i) Here’s Chaucer doing something that’s still very hard to do in modern English: he uses lexis only of English/Germanic etymology –just for a moment and for a particular purpose- in the tournament in “The Knight’s Tale:”

2605 Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke; 
There splinter spears upon thick shields;
2606 He feeleth thurgh the hertespoon the prikke.
He feels the stabbing through the breast-bone.
2607 Up spryngen speres twenty foot on highte; 
Up spring spears twenty foot on height;
2608 Out goon the swerdes as the silver brighte; 
Out go the swords bright as silver;
2609 The helmes they tohewen and toshrede; 
The helms they hew to pieces and cut into shreds
2610 Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede;
Out burst the blood in strong red streams….

(The Canterbury Tales, quoted from the Harvard Chaucer web page with minor adjustments).

The context of this passage draws on words from French; tournament, heralds (originally a Germanic word, but used in French and thence into English), trumpets, joust, etc. For the encounter itself, however, Chaucer alludes to the rhetoric of English alliterative verse, and he uses only etymologically English words (even though Middle English alliterative verse, such as that of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight freely ranges across words from English, French, Latin, Norse). Chaucer also adopts an important convention of English alliterative verse’s battle poetry whereby weapons rather than humans become the agents. It’s highly successful at evoking both the clash and din of battle and the difficulty of seeing it coherently from within.

(ii) Here is Chaucer writing, in all likelihood for his young son Lewis, a treatise on the astrolabe, an instrument for astronomical calculation:
De astrolabio (or, according to some manuscripts, Brede and Milke for Children):

Lyte Lowys my sone I aperceyve wel by certeyne evydenes thyn abilite to lerne sciences touching nombres and proporciouns. And as wel considere I thy besy praier in special to lerne the tretys of the astrolabie. … therfore have I yoven the a sufficient astrolabie as for oure orizonte compnowned after the latitude of Oxenforde, upon whiche bye mediacioun of this litil tretys, I purpose to teche the a certain nombre of conclusions apertenying to the same instrument….. This tretis .. wol I shewe the under full light reules and naked wordes in Englisshe: for Latyn canst thou yit but small, my litel sone. 10

[Little Lewis, my son, I have well perceived from clear evidence your ability to learn sciences touching numbers and proportions. And as well I consider your earnest prayer in particular to learn the treatise of the astrolabe... I have therefore given you an astrolabe adequate for our horizon, calibrated to the latitude of Oxford, on which, through the means of this little treatise, I intend to teach you a certain number of propositions pertaining to the same instrument.... I will expound this treatise to you with easy discourse and simple words in English, for you as yet know only a small amount of Latin, my little son.]
Chaucer claims that he’s using ‘naked’- simple- ‘wordes in Englisshe’. Most words here, all those I’ve italicised, aren’t English words by origin, but French, Latin, or Latin and French derived. The intimacy of English as first language is there in the English family relations and pronouns– son, you, he, his, my (none of which here happen to be our pronouns from Norse, i.e. they, them). The repetition of the English ‘litil’ has an effect of great tenderness, and this is intensified by presence of other registers: notably the franco-latin lexis of what is being taught (sciences, proportions, conclusions [propositions], treatise, horizon, latitude, instrument).

Nevertheless, this franco-latin lexis is part of regular medieval English usage: - certain, ability, numbers, consider, prayer, rules – as it is of modern. These words are found in both French and English dictionaries with minor orthographical variations.

Thanks to the magnificently mongrelly and miscegenated history of English this multilingualism is present almost wherever it is written or spoken. It is also continuously adding, losing, changing.

**Conclusion**

England itself has always been a multilingual zone, and English a mongrel of a language, owing its rich resources to immigration and cultural contact of various and continuing kinds. The rhetoric of one nation / one language is still with us, however, and to combat such arguments as immigrants must lose their language in order to acquire English, or that other languages in our classrooms are inferior or minoritized, or that English will always be the global language and is all you need, we need to think multilingually and relationally about English, whether we’re monoglots in it or bi- or multilingual with it. We need ourselves to work with the diversity that is IN English, and to enable our students to work with it, and we need to respect and engage with our students’ bi- and multilingualism. We need to teach adequate, historically aware cultural
narratives of English as what in fact they are: diverse, shifting, contested and multilingual, and offering no historical legitimation whatsoever for one-language one-nation simplifications, linguistic stigmatisation, or the brute utilitarianism and inadequate account of language deployed by Harvard’s former president.

1 See the regularly updated Ethnologue website for statistics on languages.


8 Robert C. Young’s ‘That which is casually called a language’, PMLA (2016, October): 1207-21, argues productively for the difficulties of the conception of discrete languages (a position with which many medievalists and linguists would agree) but overlooks linguistic agency in the ‘colonized’ in arguing for the concept of language as a colonizing strategy, and for translation (based solely on post-C18th models and theorists) as similarly hegemonic; the first millennium of European multilingualism and translation provides many other models.
The Oxford English Dictionary comments that *touching* in its prepositional use (touching on, touching upon) is “formed within English, by compounding; modelled on a French lexical item. Etymons: English *touching*, TOUCH v. Etymology: < *touching*, present participle of TOUCH v., perhaps after Middle French *touchant* (see TOUCHANT prep.).”