English, 'so to say'

KEITH DAVIDSON

English: the last lingua franca?

Among common speculations about the ultimate demise of English as the world's lingua franca (see Jeffrey Gil in *ET* 105, March 2011, reconsidering Chinese as a possible replacement) Nicholas Ostler (2010) is one more to project 'the breakdown of English-speaking hegemony', but his case is more curious than most. After an exhaustive, not to say exhausting, survey of ancient empires and modes of communication, in which Latin as the last lingua franca has but a late bit part, he arrives at an unrelated conclusion: ready machine translation sooner or later rendering a global 'lingua-franca' irrelevant (his hyphenation to legitimise an English plural – 'lingua-francas'). Our springtime island-hopping pilgrimage rather gave the lie to this.

Pilgrims

Whan that April with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath *perced* to the roote,
And bathed every *veyne* in swich *licour*
Of which *vertu engendred* is the *flour*;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in holt and heath
The *tendre* croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve *cours* yronne,
And smale fowles maken *melodye*,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem *nature* in hir *corages*;
Thanne longen folk to goon on *pilgrimages*
And *palmeres* for to seken *straunge* strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
. . .

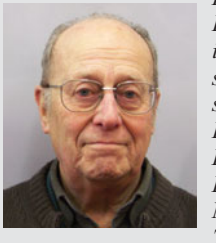
Bifil that in that *seson* on a day,
In Southwark at the Tabard as I lay
Redy to wenden on my *pilgrymage*
To Caunterbury with full *devout corage*,
At nyght was come into that *hostelrye*
Wel nyne and twenty in a *compaignye*
Of sondry folk, by *aventure* yfalle
In felawshipe, and *pilgrimes* were they alle
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1390–1400), 'General Prologue'

And so it was 'in that season' that for some days on a motor yacht a like 'company . . . brought together by chance', circled the Cyclades, the group of islands in the Aegean Sea south of Athens, 'seeking' the ancient island site of Delos – a little Greek 'odyssey', *so to speak*. If in the event that particular objective was ruled out by force 7 gales – 'sweet zephirs' it was not (and Odysseus, too, had problems!) – there were other sites/sights to see, and our diverse little group turned into an intriguing linguistic workshop on themes familiar to readers of *English Today*.

'sundry folk' from 'sundry lands'

***Greek*: cruise company, craft and crew**

The cruise was operated by an Athens-based company in a Greek-owned boat registered at the Athenian port of Piraeus. Crew, cabin and catering



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personnel mostly Greek, did include other nationalities.

Russian

The two Russians would chat together with the two Ukrainians of the saloon staff in what was presumably Russian as their lingua franca. But since the break-up of the Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe Russian's role as a supra-national language has been declining.

Hispanic: Argentinians, Venezuelans and Mexicans

Spanish was the shared language of the central and southern Americans. One of the two Venezuelans was in fact Italian, and the two Argentinians could also speak Italian, Spanish and Italian having much in common. The four Mexican girls were doing a semester of their university studies in Madrid. One of them, studying international relations, was toying with the idea of doing 'Flemish' (i.e. the standard and official Dutch, *Nederland's*, of both Belgium and the Netherlands) as her language option for the following year; we assured her that this would have rarity value at least! While she felt there were particular differences in the common Spanish the Hispanics all spoke together, one of the two Argentinians considered these were not really significant, though they have proved problematic in recognising 'standard' forms of Spanish in 'modern foreign language' examinations in the UK.

Whose language is it anyway? Spain itself has distinctly different Galician and Catalan dialects in the north-east and north-west of the country, and Central and South America are now plainly the heartlands of Spanish: the third largest world language, behind only Chinese and English, with some 266 million first-language speakers and more than 350 million second-language speakers (estimates in Crystal, 2010), and another candidate for the role of the global lingua franca.

Germanic: Germans, Austrians, Swiss, and a Luxembourger

German is no longer a contender, being replaced by English as the second language in, *say*, the Scandinavian countries. However, it was historically a language of the Ukraine, and it is a German language school that now teaches Russian as a foreign language in the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Odessa. In its own homelands 'German' covers a diverse regional and social linguistic continuum.

German

In contrasting the German-speaking with the English-speaking areas we can conclude that the former displays considerably more linguistic differentiation; regional linguistic differences, particularly at the level of traditional dialects, but also within the standard language, are greater than anything found in English, and traditional dialects persist more strongly, particularly in the south.

. . . deviations from formal standard German pronounced with the *deutsche Hochlautung* (*DH*). We shall term this, simply, 'formal standard German', although this is, to an extent, a convenient fiction, since formal standard German can, in fact, be pronounced with a variety of regional accents; most people are unable to eliminate the finer details of their native accents. . ..

Colloquial speech deviates from formal standard on every level, phonetic and phonological, morphological and syntactic, and lexical. In very broad terms we can say that some of these deviations are generally socially acceptable. . .. Other deviations have generally less prestige. . . Yet other deviations are of doubtful status. . . All this is another way of saying that the boundary between colloquial standard and colloquial non-standard is unclear and hazy, though indubitably significant.

The continuum of colloquial German is the normal spoken medium of most German speakers, with important exceptions: in German-speaking Switzerland and in Luxembourg everyone uses types of language which can be regarded as traditional dialect, Swiss German (*Schwytzertütsch*) and Luxembourgish (*Letzebuergësch*) respectively, and which have claims to the status of autonomous languages. Another exception is the persistence in south Germany and Austria of forms perhaps best regarded as traditional dialects. . .

Barbour and Stevenson, 1990

Luxembourgish is, *shall we say*, a 'language' sociolinguistically; the multilingual Luxembourger was diglossic in code-switching from her local variety to standard forms of German. Swiss German is more certainly an autonomous language, with its own range of distinctive dialects partly shared with

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the Alemannic dialects in southern Germany (Swabian) and Austria but largely incomprehensible to most other German speakers. These are the main modes of speech in the Germanic Cantons, the standard forms learned at school mostly reserved for the written language and formal occasions. Our Germanic companions used their own approximations to forms of colloquial standard German as the lingua franca among themselves: the three Germans perhaps having to adopt the standard forms more widely used in the north; the two Austrians switching from their normal colloquial speech; the two Swiss also diglossic in code-switching from their quite different local speech.

Anglo-American: British and Americans

The five British and five Americans were all 'native speakers' of English, with familiar and essentially trivial variables between us. One of the Americans, however, was also a German speaker, an ex-serviceman living in Germany and married to one of the Germans – herself an English teacher, having learned her English in London.

In the major 'native speaker' heartland, the Spanish-English interface across the Mexican-US border has become something of an educational and political issue in the US – the burgeoning 'Hispanic' population in the southern states seen by some as a threat to the status of English.

In the traditional, simplistic family tree of the Indo-European languages English is treated as a 'West Germanic' cousin of German, Dutch and Frisian, which is true enough of the continental origins of Old English but ignores the subsequent influences on the island language of the Scandinavian ('North Germanic') incursions and of the Anglo-Norman 'French' of the later ruling elite. Better characterised as essentially a Germanic-Romance (Latin derived) hybrid: witness the words from 'French' (including Provençal and Anglo-Norman), as italicised in the Chaucer extract and retained in modern English – to say nothing of the learnéd 'loans' from Greek and Latin, now common to many languages, the cultural 'borrowings' from the European Romance languages and the further accretions of an island language that has since gone round the world.

But French, a major world language – an official language in more than 40 countries (loosely linked in the linguistic commonwealth of 'La Francophonie') – lost its role as the international diplomatic language in the last century, though, for historical reasons, it remains with English one of the two official languages of the United Nations. It was not represented here, though some of us did speak some French.

So, how were we to talk to each other?

'brought together in fellowship'

Russian and German were non-starters. One of the two Russians did speak some English at least. And while others of us did speak some German, the Germanic speakers were all at least proficient in English as a foreign language – the Luxembourger lass, doing film studies in London, volubly fluent! Spanish, for all its projected global role, was not a shared language among us. The Central and South Americans all readily spoke English; the Mexican students in particular seemingly 'ambilingual' (speaking two languages if with differing functions) in Spanish and English and possibly doing some of their studies in English.

And of course the cruise was clearly predicated on English. The Athens-based cruise operator bore an English name, its website is in English, and the cruise was evidently marketed worldwide in English – we booked through an English tour operator. The cruise crew and company all spoke some English at least. The cruise co-ordinator, Austrian, even claimed not to speak Greek. He did on occasion speak informally with the Germanic speakers in their essentially common standard forms of German, but otherwise all his briefings, announcements and general socialising were in fluent, and again voluble, English, his working language. This did include divergences from native-speaker norms, and it was down to the German English teacher to feel that she at least could point some of these out to him; as a 'native speaker' I was more hesitant.

whose language...?

But to note some features that caught my ear:

• *archaeological*

A key word for this tour. In the German word, *archäologisch* <ch> represents the standard palatal fricative /ç/ (as in 'ich', 'I'; and in an English phonetic realisation of the initial consonant in 'huge' as [c]), if sometimes realised as a colloquial or dialectical variant more like the English palato-alveolar-fricative /ʃ/, <sh> (as in 'dish'), and as <sch> in German (as in 'Tisch', 'table' – with some potential ambiguity). It was such that he used in place of the standard /k/ represented

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by <ch> in the English word – as also in the French *archéologique*.

• *catholic*

For the 'Catholic' (i.e. non-Greek Orthodox) churches. The German word *katholisch* is differently stressed, on the second syllable, /to:/, as against first syllable stress in the standard English, *catholic* (with a medial 'schwa' if at all). He retained a three-syllable German pronunciation, save for the final consonant, /k/ as in English, instead of the German final /ʃ/.

so to say

Three common sentence adjuncts in English to mark kinds of tentativeness – as italicised in my notes above,

so to speak = ' to coin a phrase'
say = 'for example'
shall we say = 'let's suggest'

Our co-ordinator's briefings and announcements were punctuated with what seemed to be a conflation of all three, 'so to say', but with a rather different discourse function. A typical feature of German discourse is the use of 'fillers', *doch*, *sowie* ('after all'/'anyway'), with little real semantic load. His own repeated calque served a similar function, pacing the information and explanations. It didn't feature in his informal conversation.

Were these features 'English'? The question is beside the point. Just as the Spanish speakers accommodated variations in their shared language, and the German speakers readily switched to more standard forms, so we all shared diverse forms and innovations in English with little loss of comprehension – a lingua franca.

But Ostler questions not just the future global role of English, but any need in the long term for a global lingua franca at all.

'the last lingua-franca'?

In the medium term, probably by the middle of this century, and possibly earlier… a global lingua-franca will no longer be needed. Language technology will take care of interpreting and translation, and foreign-language learning will become an unnecessary chore, except for specialists and enthusiasts. Active communication with speakers of other languages will no more require a special skill than is currently needed to read a foreign text in translation, or to follow the subtitles of a foreign language video.

As each major nation discovers that it can guarantee its global markets without use of English, and rely on technological support to supplement its own language, it will lose interest and motivation in continuing to invest in learning this traditional lingua-franca of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. International English will tend to die out, and English like modern Greek will find itself thrown back on the heartlands where it is spoken natively.

One day English too, the last lingua-franca to be of service to a multilingual world, will be laid down. Thereafter every one will speak and write in whatever language they choose, and the world will understand.

Ostler, 2010

Which, in that conclusion to his book, is simply to ignore the implications of the one word in the final sentence that undermines his whole case – 'speak'. Face-to-face communication: people meeting together do like to talk to each other, for which no technology will serve. For that you need a lingua franca, and English as a variously shared language yet serves well enough. That was our little voyage of discovery.

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