



Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language

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How English conquered the world: a *Guns, Germs, and Steel* argument based on the power of the word.

It seems impossible: a small island in the North Atlantic, colonized by Rome, then pillaged for hundreds of years by marauding neighbors, becomes the dominant world power in the nineteenth century. Equally unlikely, a colony of that island nation, across the Atlantic, grows into the military and cultural colossus of the twentieth century. How? By the sword, of course; by trade and industrial ingenuity; but principally, and most surprisingly, by the power of their common language.

In this provocative and compelling new look at the course of empire, Robert McCrum, coauthor of the best-selling book and television series *The Story of English*, shows how the language of the Anglo-American imperium has become the world's lingua franca. In fascinating detail he describes the ever-accelerating changes wrought on the language by the far-flung cultures claiming citizenship in the new hegemony. In the twenty-first century, writes the author, English + Microsoft = Globish. .

Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language Details

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From Reader Review Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language for online ebook

Alberto Lopez says

That English, with its imperfect set of rules, could be the ideal language for the average new global person is a very interesting concept indeed. Created from the bottom up rather than from the top down as snobbish French or Latin were, certainly sets a great foundation to the argument.

In large part, the book is a historic recollection more than a technical white paper on the logic behind the author's argument. Thus, it feels a little diluted while still an entertaining read.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Reviewers were charmed by *Globish* in much the same manner as McCrum is charmed by English. They found his book expansive yet incisive, erudite yet accessible, powerful yet disarmingly cheerful, if somewhat uneven when charting the history of English through the centuries. But few critics actually accepted the book's putative argument: that English is becoming Globish and that Globish will be the language of the world. Many reviewers noted that McCrum's definition of "Globish" is flexible at best, and a few seemed exasperated by McCrum's failure to examine critically the consequences of a dominant global tongue. Read *Globish* for its ruminations, facts, and anecdotes--but not for its conclusions. This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Aurélien Thomas says

Globish (from 'global' and 'English') is a word coined in 1995 by Jean-Paul Nerriere to describe this type of 'pidgin' English, very simple (about 1,500 words of vocabulary) being used more and more as a lingua franca across the world. Flexible and subversive, Globish has absolutely no pretence beyond its sole practicability and yet, it has an enormous impact. At the time of an accelerating globalization, it seems indeed to be the miracle pill to the Tower of Babel; a miracle pill nevertheless not without side effects on the languages it affects.

Robert McCrum deals here with its ascent; tries and show in which way the Globish phenomenon is important. Well... It is, according to the subtitle of his book, what he is supposed to do! Let's be blunt right now: this read is bad, useless, disappointing.

He first retrace the history of English language, in a way so poor that we learn absolutely nothing (read the relevant article on Wikipedia and you'll get more information on the topic). He throws in common sense comments as if they were deep analyses -like, if English is now the global language it's thanks to the American leadership, itself the product of the powerful British Empire (yeah, duh! But it takes him about an hundred pages to say it and he doesn't go beyond). Worst, for an essay focused on linguistics he doesn't even bother to deal with the potential repercussions on the future of affected languages (not least English itself). He just assumes that, if Indians and Chinese learn a simplified English it's not out of love for the subtleties of Shakespeare's language (or Mark Twain's, since we deal with American English too) but, solely to trade and do business... Yes, I know! It's exactly what the concept of Globish implies, but here's exactly where the problem lies: Robert McCrum seems to think we are dumb.

In a word, the whole is without much interest.

Chuck says

Robert McCrum's "Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language", narrated by James Langton is about the history of the English language and its rise as the new "Lingua Franca".

The English language, in its many forms has become the major language of international commerce, science and the internet. According to wiki, only Mandarin and Spanish have more native speakers than English. Perhaps more people speak English as their primary or secondary language than any other language in the world than Mandarin Chinese. Finally, George Weber, weighing six factors in his 1997 article "TOP LANGUAGES: The World's 10 Most Influential Languages" lists English as the most 'influential' language in the world.

The book is a somewhat random walk around England, English history, the English language, and an even more random discussion on some of the major international adopters of English language. It seemed to me to be meant as entertainment rather than a nuanced educational book. Additionally, the many accents used by the narrator seemed to me to be a bit unnecessary. And occasionally, seemed jarring.

All in all, I found it a worthwhile effort, but fairly shallow. I do agree with one comment though in the book. Those born into the English speaking world are winner's in the language lottery.

Kate says

I assumed that a book about English would be written in fairly good English, but boy, was I wrong. *Globish* appears to have been the victim of some dastardly comma heist, creating these garden path sentences that only lead somewhere after several re-readings. Information is repeated needlessly, and there are several pages that are just fact- and quotation-dumps that lack deeper exploration or connection to the greater thesis.

But there's the main problem with this book — it doesn't have a greater thesis. The term 'globish' is never fully defined, and it is never articulated how exactly it differs from English used globally. The first half of the book is a hodgepodge of facts and anecdotes about the history of England and the United States, jumping around through time and space from invasion to revolution without giving an adequate explanation of how these events contributed to the development of the English language. The second half of the book reads like it was search-engine optimized for the lover of millennial buzzwords. You can hardly get through a paragraph without hearing about outsourcing, globalization, the IT revolution, the web, the net, and 'txting' (I was born in 1991 and I have never heard anyone refer to texting as 'txting.' It doesn't even make sense as an abbreviation).

When the subtitle of a book is 'how the English language became the world's language,' then by the time you've read through it, you should be able to say how the English language became the world's language. So how did it? I have no idea. I could take a stab at it, and say it's something to do with the British being really good at imperialism and America being really good at Hollywood and not being destroyed by World War II, and it probably helped that English only has 26 letters in the alphabet to remember compared to the tens of thousands that Chinese has... but ultimately McCrum never really says how it happened. The book is

basically a list of whats, and whos, and wheres, with no whys or hows — Thing A happened, then Thing B, then Thing C, and now lots of not-English people speak English! Hooray! English forever!

Stephen Collins says

I see what McCrum was getting at and I think his premise is on the money. English, or something more or less like it, is becoming the default spoken and written form for a diaspora of many people, tied by a common need to communicate comprehensibly.

But Globish isn't the book it could have, or should have, been. It's interesting enough and there are a number of interesting anecdotes and points made throughout, but it lacks a strong central narrative beyond the idea of Globish itself to tie it together. Globish, and its story needed to be the protagonist, the hero of the story, making a fundamental difference the world over. I think McCrum would like us to believe so, but the story is not well enough told to be entirely convincing nor un-putdownable.

Globish took me a lot longer to read than it ought, and it was because the story being told didn't suck me in nearly as much as it should have.

If you're at all interested in language as a phenomenon, you should certainly read Globish. Just don't expect to be blown away.

Lauren Albert says

I wrote recently about another book that "The author is like a toddler who can not make it from one end of a room to the other because he keeps getting distracted by what he passes on the way." You have to wonder what destination McCrum had in mind, at all. 90 percent of the book had only a minor tangential relationship to the putative topic of the book, if at all. Why are we reading about the Gold Rush? Why does McCrum describe Samuel Johnson's physical tics? I found myself skimming through bits of American and British history without really knowing why. The sections that are relevant--the writing and adoption of the King James Bible, the contributions of African-born slaves to the English language, etc. I felt he wasn't working at making the connections. When I got to "EuroDisney" on page 227 (of 287!), I thought, "Finally." But alas, he skimmed through the things that mattered (Indian call centers run by American companies, the Internet, etc.). This shouldn't have been 60 pages of the book. 60 pages of the book could have been used to give the basic history of English in English-speaking countries while the rest was given to the actual instances of Globish.

And, on a personal note, when he writes of Wikipedia that it has "provoked the disdainful outrage of librarians, pedants and sticklers," I wanted to scream. First, classing librarians with "pedants and sticklers" is insulting. Second, having just gone through library school, and having discussed Wikipedia in more than one class, I know he's just wrong. Have some librarians reacted with "disdainful outrage"? Yes, but so have some teachers, and lawyers, and doctors. Most librarians I know use Wikipedia while knowing its limitations.

Lenka P?íplatová says

A delightful walk through world history and development of the modern lingua franca, the English language.

Not too deep, but interesting enough and pleasant to listen to.

Petra X says

In the heyday of Harry Potter, the Chinese used to steal bits of the books, combine them with stories plagiarized from Tolkein and then add in Chinese elements to come up with books like Harry Potter and the Leaping Tiger, or similar. Very creative. They could do it because like most countries of the world, lots of people speak English, but very few speak any form of Chinese at all.

This might be an interesting book if it comes up with nuggets like that and doesn't reprise endless books of the history of English language.

Kate O'Hanlon says

I bought this because I wanted something breezy, non-fictional and read in an English accent to accompany me on my walk to the park.

I got that, so I ought not complain.

However, anyone looking for a deep understanding of the spread of English, rigorous scholarship, or even well organised thought will be sorely disappointed.

What we get instead is a survey of the English language so broad as to be trite more often than not, several interesting anecdotes, and some gross oversimplification, like this clanger,

"Ireland had been at war with Britain for eight centuries. In the 1990s a deep ancient enmity became anaesthetised by globish consumerism; Gap jeans, Benton fashion and Dell computers."

Well, yes, but...

Hank Mishkoff says

Terrible book, I can't believe I plowed all the way through it. It perpetrates a fraud on the reader, claiming to have something to do with the spread of English as an international language, while it's really a rambling, disjointed, incoherent jumble of passages loosely related to the development and spread of Anglo-American culture. It reads like a first draft, or perhaps a mind dump to which some editor added a title instead of forcing the author to rewrite the text around some kind of unifying theme.

If you're really interested in the story of English, I heartily recommend the aptly titled "The Story of English" -- which, oddly enough, is partly written by the same author.

Richard says

Globish is an ambitious book - it tries to provide a "biography" of the English language from its origins to its spread as a global lingua franca. Unfortunately, it doesn't fully achieve its goal, and fizzles out in platitudes and anecdotes rather than insights.

The term "Globish" was originally coined in 1995 to refer to the English employed as the default lingua franca for business and government that emerged in the late 20th century; but it seems the author now wants "Globish" to mean something broader. Globish is the global reach of the BBC and Hollywood. Globish is the fractured half-language studied by millions of Chinese and Indians as a ticket to the middle class. Globish is the "-ishes" of Konglish, Singlish, Spanglish, etc. Globish is the nearly grammar-less argot of a couple thousand words that enables travelers to ask "how much?" at any airport in the world. It seems Globish is any manifestation of English anywhere in the world.

This lack of focus opens the book to a wide-ranging discussion in which just about any topic can fit. Thus the book starts out with the history of English, then describes the story of its spread around the world, then concludes with a collection of anecdotes about the role English plays in other countries in the present day.

Much of the book is about the development of English, and its historical context. A great deal of the historical discussion focuses on key individuals and literature, which in my opinion make the most interesting reading. The author doesn't get bogged down with challenging linguistic concepts. We do read about English's troubled orthography and the vowel shift of Middle English, but the linguistic examples are basic word origins and phonetics. Once you're past Shakespeare, the only linguistic examples you'll encounter are loan words like "jungle" and "kangaroo."

A book covering 2000 years of linguistic history inevitably moves through the story at varying levels of depth. It's easy to disagree with the author's choices of the events and characters that are most important to the story, but the author is generally a good story-teller, and any reader will pick up some interesting bits of history and word origins. However at times, the author only tells part of a story, as though the reader already knows the basic story well enough. For example, we hear that African explorer David Livingstone died "on his knees," but have to go outside the book to learn that he wasn't killed, but was praying when he died of malaria.

I was disappointed by the book's factual errors. Most American high school students would know that Lincoln was assassinated in April of 1865, so it would have been a miracle if he had delivered the Gettysburg address in November that year, as one reads in Globish. Regarding World War II, we read that in 1940, Hitler, contemplating the Battle of Britain, knew that "If Russia were defeated, England would have no ally, and America, fully preoccupied with the war against Japan in the Pacific, would offer no help." Of course, the United States only entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Other mistakes, misquotes, and not-quite-right facts crop up intermittently.

The stories at the end of the book tend to echo Thomas Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*. (The author refers to and quotes Friedman frequently.) So you get a lot of anecdotes along the lines of "person from country X meets person from country Y in country Z, and since they don't speak each other's language, they use English." The question is, so what? The author mentions people who have speculated about what globalization means for the future of English, but there's no clear picture, just stories.

Overall, a general message gets through - over the past several centuries, historical events have helped English spread to other parts of the world, and the language was enriched in the process, despite purists that resisted change. Historical events, economic development, and technological change have introduced a need for a global second language, and English turns out to have been best positioned for the job. Today, the

popularity and adaptability of the language enable it to serve as a global lingua franca.

Globish takes on a hard task - the "biography" of a language. The bibliography and end notes show how much there is to the story, and how difficult it is to distill it into a few hundred pages for the general reader. The book tells some good stories, but they suffer from the occasional blooper, as well as the author's failure to deliver a cohesive concept of "Globishness."

Ralphz says

How did a tiny island, beset by wave after wave of conquerors, become the dominant power of one century, and then one of its colonies become the dominant power of another? Language.

Globish explores how English became English, how it spread, and how American English took over the world. The author also explores how a new kind of global English – Globish – will continue to conquer.

This is a fun story about language and its impact. The fact that English is so adaptable and eager to swipe words from other languages, that it's the language of the people instead of the academy, is why it's been so successful.

There are many anecdotes and signposts to the future of the language. Some posit that Chinese, on sheer numbers, will overtake English, but the writer makes a good case against it.

Admittedly, you have to be a bit of a language nerd to appreciate this book, but if you are, you'll delight at it.

Read more of my reviews at [Ralphsbooks](#).

Lars Guthrie says

Not having read anything else by McCrum, I was surprised at how many media outlets reviewed 'Globish.' It appears many are quite familiar with him from his stint as literary editor of The Observer, his bio of P.G. Wodehouse, and most especially his work on the late 80s PBS series, 'The Story of English' and its accompanying book.

While the reviews are generally favorable, there seems to be an uncomfortable and less enthusiastic consensus regarding McCrum's theory that 'Globish,' a simplified version of English used for international business communication is primed to take over as a world language.

There also is a general uneasiness with his view that the dominance of the English language is as much due to street cred as cultural imperialism.

To wit: "English has always had this subversive capacity to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, to articulate the ideas of both government and opposition, to be the language of ordinary people as well as the language of power and authority, rock 'n' roll and royal decree."

Whether you agree or not, reading that sentence might give you an idea of what pleasurable prose McCrum writes. And why I liked his book so much. The tale of our language's origins and transformation has been

told by many others, but I found McCrum's recounting in 'Globish' more engaging and entertaining than the other pop chronicles I've read, Seth Lehrer's 'Inventing English,' and Bill Bryson's 'The Mother Tongue.' Considering my fondness for those works, that's high praise.

Despite the criticisms and even a dismissal by the delightfully crusty John McWhorter in The New Republic, I tend to think there is something there in McCrum's ideas. English is used almost everywhere, and it is seen on protest placards in unlikely places.

But who cares if McCrum is right or wrong about a Coca-Cola-ization of world culture, with a revolutionary underbelly? His breezy story-telling skills and allusions to literature, film, internet--everywhere and anywhere you find the language--made 'Globish' a blast to read.

Highly recommended.

Michelle says

Whew. I was certainly expecting more from this book. I am immensely disappointed. This book was scattershot--the author introduces a term, "Globish", without ever really defining or describing it, and then takes the reader on a poorly organized, pell-mell rush through history, supposedly showing the evolution of English and then Globish, whatever that is. It appears by Globish the author means more a worldview than a specific language? Or perhaps he just means English? I'm really not sure. The author tosses out wild generalizations at a frenetic pace, never stopping to support them. Some of his facts are just plain wrong--the Battle of Gettysburg took place in 1865??? Really? And Thomas Paine supported the Constitution of 1787? Uh-huh. When Brits decide to pontificate upon American history, they could at least look up the details to get it right. Also, Norton has apparently quit employing editors, as shown by the following lovely sentence: "In the Beatles song Yesterday on the the word "trouble" has and old French/Latin root, troubler/trubidare." Yes, that is exactly how it appears. Very disappointing.
