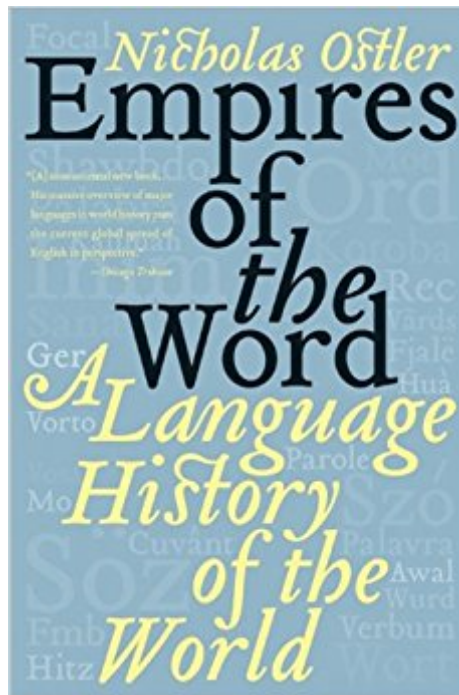




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Empires Of The Word: A Language History Of The World



Synopsis

Nicholas Ostler's *Empires of the Word* is the first history of the world's great tongues, gloriously celebrating the wonder of words that binds communities together and makes possible both the living of a common history and the telling of it. From the uncanny resilience of Chinese through twenty centuries of invasions to the engaging self-regard of Greek and to the struggles that gave birth to the languages of modern Europe, these epic achievements and more are brilliantly explored, as are the fascinating failures of once "universal" languages. A splendid, authoritative, and remarkable work, it demonstrates how the language history of the world eloquently reveals the real character of our planet's diverse peoples and prepares us for a linguistic future full of surprises.

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Customer Reviews

The book is excellent. The ebook formatting, on the other hand, leaves a lot to be desired. 1) Images (and there are hundreds of them, including many special characters) only appear in the "View on your Browser" environment or (presumably) on a direct-networked Kindle device. They do NOT appear on the Kindle for PC reader or, therefore (I believe) in side-loaded Kindles. (And if you convert and read the file on an ePub device, they don't appear there, either.) You can read the book without the images, but you are missing a lot of the helpful illustrations, and most of the unusually

accented characters.²) Page references all point to the print edition and (of course) have no relationship to whatever digital device you use, nor are they live links.³) eBook pagination jumps all over the map. For example, on my device, crossing a chapter boundary moved me from p. 662 (of 696) to p. 140.

Despite the author's supple writing style, this can be a difficult book to read. Due to the incredible level of detail some readers will either feel intimidated or give up before the end. That would be regrettable, because there is much to learn from "EOTW." Ostler strikes a nice balance between discussing origins and early diffusion of languages and more recent centuries, which are both better-documented and presumably hold more interest for general readers. He neatly summarizes a number of ongoing debates about how languages change and spread, and where necessary, shows intimate familiarity with the more technical aspects of linguistics and language history. Another review criticizes, I believe too harshly, some errors concerning African languages, but Ostler gets the basics right. A work like this requires an author to frequently step beyond his/her formal expertise, so occasional gaffes are unavoidable. Some familiarity with both history and linguistics will help, but Ostler includes more than enough general history to provide context; in fact, readers will learn a great deal about the past beyond linguistics from "EOTW." Considering how important languages are as repositories of history, culture and local knowledge, this book provides a valuable service in making connections across time and space. It's worth the effort.

This book is enlightening and in its way fun to read. Found myself looking at different parts of the world in clearer way.

This book helps answer many of the big questions about languages. Why are there so many? Why do languages change? Why do languages come into existence or become extinct? This book contains many important insights regarding these questions. Answers to these questions are necessarily sought in the contexts in which languages live and die. People who think that a book about languages should not discuss the contexts, causes and effects of languages are like the zoologists hundreds of years ago who studied animals only in zoos and laboratories. Without its environment, an animal's anatomy, physiology and behaviour are incomprehensible. That's why "ecology" was invented. This book by Ostler is like an ecological study of languages, understanding them in their historical context, including society, politics, conquests, wars, economics and even pandemics. And as in animal ecology, the effects are two-way. Languages have a powerful

influence on society, politics, conquests, wars and economics. Language is what makes humans different to animals. So it is by understanding languages that we can understand the stellar rise of the human species to world dominance. We try to understand the contexts, causes and effects of everything else. Similarly, understanding language ecology and evolution is essential if we want to understand human nature. In particular, language differences have always been closely correlated to social, tribal, national and imperial divisions, perhaps even more so in the last century than in previous centuries. For example, there is usually hostility between language groups and solidarity within language groups. (No surprises there!) Anyone who wants to understand the present state of humanity must first understand the role of languages in shaping history, which this book explains very well. By the way, I bought this book at a local book-store in 2007 and read it in 2008. I still consider it to be one of the best books I have read on both language history and general history, particularly the history of national conquests.

The author takes an anthropological (cultural) and historical approach to linguistics, or put another way, a linguistic approach to history and anthropology. He proves that language is a viable way to study the movement of people and changes in their ideas and behaviors. It is one of the only texts (as opposed to textbooks, journals, and articles) that is fascinating to read and rich in information.

I'm not a linguist. This book made me think thoughts I'd never had before. At my age that's gold.

Very well documented and written. Nevertheless, its central thesis is too strong, and from my point of view unsustainable: it states something like a "language charisma" (p.16) responsible for the spread of a language. This implies some "secret life of languages", as if there were languages and not their speakers. In order to defend his main thesis, which is that languages are not "dialects with an army" (Weinreich) the author neglects political and above all economical facts. I strongly miss an analysis of materialist and military power aspects of language diffusion with colonialism and imperialism.

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