

Letter from Cairo: 1
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About English: On the Other Hand

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I read Philip Yaffe's two recent *Ubiquity* pieces with interest, all the more so because I myself have plunged back into an international experience after sampling the delights of retirement for a year.

I found his "[Fast-tracking Foreign Languages](#)" column in *Ubiquity* v8i36 a good match for my own observations and experience with languages (none fluent, but varying exposure to French, Thai, German, Russian, Spanish, one tantalizing week of Tagalog before being suddenly transferred to Thailand, and now barely scratching the surface of Arabic). I'm less persuaded, however, by the case he constructed for English as a universal second language ("[Should English Be Declared the World's Official Common Language?](#)" *Ubiquity* v8i51), although I found it interesting, informative, and provocative.

I guess my problems with English in this role arise from the difficulties I see it so reliably causing among non-native speakers (a category into which the Brits, admittedly, sometimes place us backsliding former colonists). I am sure nothing I say here will be new to Philip, who I hope will excuse the first-name informality. It will also no doubt be clear to anyone with linguistic training that I have had none and can therefore enjoy generalizing as only an armchair amateur can.

In fact, Philip himself highlights one of those difficulties - the mysteries of English spelling - although I don't understand his claim that French is worse than English in this regard. I have encountered no language even close to English in the spelling-strangeness sweepstakes. Sure, French has some funny rules for pronunciation (silent letters and liaisons, for example), but at least there seem to be rules and patterns. Contrast that with English, where some words can't be correctly pronounced until one knows the context (I won't know whether "r-e-a-d" should be pronounced like "red" or "reed" until you tell me more) and some letter combinations can produce a hilarious diversity of sounds (the infamous "ough" of rough, through, dough, bough, bought, drought, and cough, to name some principal (note: not "principle") ones. My admiration for literate speakers of English as a non-native language is boundless. George Bernard Shaw famously lobbied for a radical overhaul of English spelling and at some points apparently thought the movement was making significant progress, yet we seem no better off now. For an amusing take on English orthography, check out some ditties "celebrating" the subject, offered by The Simplified Spelling Society (a group that shared Shaw's goals but suffered his scorn):

<http://www.spellingsociety.org/news/media/poems.php>.

One other beef I have with English arises from its complexity bordering on insanity in verb tenses. Pity the poor foreigner who asks for an explanation of the difference between the simple present and present progressive tenses: "he goes" vs. "he is going." And what about "he is going next week," which is a future construction, although still in the present progressive? "Are you going to the office tomorrow?" Well, no. Not yet.

It's common for second-language English speakers to make analytically correct but uncolloquial choices, to say "I am going to school" when they obviously are not in transit and mean what a native speaker would express as a simple present: "I go to school," indicating the routine of doing so.

"Go" is an amusing example, because it can also be of auxiliary use, again indicating the future: "I am going to take a nap now." Huh? Going where? And why "now" if you mean to indicate a future action? There is no doubt an explanation why the verb "go" has a role, but I double-dog dare you to justify why "take" is in there. Besides, sometimes it must seem to the language student that we choose our auxiliary verbs just for the fun of it: did you eat, have you eaten, will you eat, are you eating, will you be going to eat, are you be going to go eat?

Then there's the complexity of English negation. Most of the languages I'm familiar with can negate a positive statement by adding a single word (two, for the extravagant French). We often insert a fresh verb (to do), conjugate and negate it, and return the original verb to infinitive status: They drank; they didn't drink. We retain a poetic sense of the simpler construction ("She loves me; she loves me not," and "Ask not what your country can do for you.") but people look askance at us if we talk that way. As Dorothy Parker wrote, "if you use studiously correct grammar, people suspect you of homosexual tendencies."

In short, I argue that the "virtues" of English do not line up to ensure it slam-dunk status for Common World Language (nor, I recognize, did Philip argue that they did). As any teacher and student of English as a foreign language can attest, there is an abundance of matching vices, of traps waiting to ambush the would-be speaker.

On the other hand, the empirical case for English seems rather strong, since it was the first language of the global Internet/WWW generation and seems to have been the most widespread language of global entertainment media for the last 50 years or so. Those recent developments appear to have given it an edge as *de facto* second language over the other most common colonial languages of Spanish and French. We speakers of English are truly fortunate, already, to be able to find speakers of some level of the language virtually anywhere.

The principal reason I oppose English for common-language status, though, is personal and political: it seems to me that we North American native speakers of it are already regrettably insular and too little aware of the rest of the world and their customs, lives, cultures, and speech. I'd hate to see that lack of knowledge encouraged. I recognize that this is only one political view (and judged "politically correct" by some). I treasure diversity and difference, whereas I recognize that others value sameness and consistency. The

latter faction also seems to me to embrace, with a fervency inversely related to their exposure to other languages, the view that English is somehow "better."

I'm tempted to lobby for one of my personal favorites as an alternative. For grammatical simplicity it's hard to beat Thai. Its verbs have no tense or conjugation; the infinitive is the verb and in fact frequently the entire sentence, and if you need more information, add a clarifying word (she, tomorrow, already, for example). Its nouns and adjectives have no gender, number, or case. The simple noun is enough for most uses, and if you need to indicate more specificity, add a number or some other clarifying word(s). The addition of a single word will turn a positive statement into a negative one or a question. I believe many of these virtues are present in other Asian languages.

Sadly, foreigners tend to stumble over the fact that Thai's vowels are pronounced with varying duration and several of its consonants have subtle hard and soft forms, both attributes being tricky for the Western ear. Its words are also pronounced with one of five tones (rising, falling, low, medium, high) that are notoriously difficult for non-tonal-language speakers but essential for meaning, since the same sound with a different tone is a different word. Thus, to cite a classic example, a Thai speaker can ask, "New wood doesn't burn, does it?" by repeating what sounds to non-speakers like the same word (the English possessive adjective "my") five times.

Sigh. Tell me more about Swahili, Philip.

John Stuckey, who retired as Director of University Computing at Washington and Lee University after similar positions at Northeastern and Carnegie-Mellon, has taken an interim position in Egypt as Chief Technology Officer at the American University in Cairo. He is an associate editor of Ubiquity and agreed to write us from time to time.