



cambridge.org/eng

Peter Trudgill, *The Long Journey of English: A Geographical History of the Language*

Book Review

(1st edn.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. ix+191. Paperback, \$24.99 ISBN: 9781108949576. Hardback, \$80.00 ISBN: 9781108845120. E-book \$24.99 ISBN: 9781108960243.

Cite this article: Wang D (2024). From Tribal to Global. *English Today* 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078424000166>

Keywords:

English language; global spread of English; geographical history of English; Peter Trudgill; language development

Corresponding author:

Dong Wang;
Email: dwang@sdu.edu.cn

Tracing the Growth and Spread of English

Dong Wang 

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, P. R. China

Anyone who is interested in English's rise and its global impact will find the book *The Long Journey of English: A Geographical History of the Language* fascinating. Recent statistics indicate that more than 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today. Of all these languages forming the “contemporary global linguistic ecology”, English has a unique, unprecedented and global status, with speaking communities “at the furthest ends of the earth” (p. 165). However, just 3000 years ago, the language which is now called English was not spoken anywhere in Britain. How did it grow to become the global phenomenon that we know today? Trudgill, one of the foremost authorities on the English language, takes us on a historical journey that this language has made. This is not to use the term “journey” metaphorically; he literally presents a geographical history of the language in its concrete spatial, geographical sense by travelling from one place to another.

Besides an engaging prologue and epilogue, the 12 chapters of the book are divided into three parts. Each chapter is self-contained, denoting its concrete content (for instance, “Chapter 1 *Where It all Started: The Language Which Became English*” instead of “Introduction”), but there are also chronological and/or geographical links among them.

The first part (Chapters 1–6) traces the linguistic ancestor and genesis of modern English, setting a timeline of early movements on local scales. The first two chapters (Chapters 1–2) situate us between 2000 and 1000 BC. How far back do we have to go in order to find the origins of global English? According to historical research, we can only say with some degree of certainty that the linguistic ancestor of modern English was originally a dialect of the Indo-European language, which travelled from the borderlands of Asia and Europe to southern Scandinavia during the second millennium BC. Around 1500 BC, some of the speakers of the language started setting off on their journey that eventually led Germanic-speaking people all the way to England. Next, in Chapters 3 and 4, the author presents the linguistic landscape of the Celtic Island. As soon as the Germanic-speaking people arrived in England from northern Europe in the fifth century, English began to spread around the British Isles, starting the long-term language contact between Germanic speakers and Celtic speakers. From a social perspective, English began to acquire a separate identity of its own once the speakers of West Germanic who had initially crossed the North Sea began to settle permanently in Britain. Chapters 5 and 6 underscore the formation of Old English and its spread. By 900s, the West Germanic language, today called Old English, was spoken almost everywhere in England and the centered parts of traditionally the strongholds of the Celtic languages. After the Norman invasion of 1066, many nobles from England fled north to Scotland, and eventually the language spread throughout the Scottish Lowlands. From the 12th century, Anglo-Norman knights were sent across the Irish Sea, and Ireland gradually fell under English rule. To wit, the language has always been on the move, but compared with later events, these early movements were on local scales, that is, mainly within Southern Scandinavia and the British Isles.

The second part (Chapters 7–9) constitutes the practical core of the book, that is, English on its way going global. During the 1600s, approximately 350,000 people left

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press



the British Isles for the Americas. This “Atlantic Crossing” marked the first significant step in the progress of English towards its status as a global language (Chapter 7). Then English continued its expansion on to the Pacific Shore (Chapter 8) and into the Southern Hemisphere from 1800 to 1900 (Chapter 9). Some of these expansions were the outcome of large-scale, planned and often official attempts at colonization. Other English-speaking settlements just happened, as a result of haphazard settlements by refugees, pirates, runaway slaves, sailors, shipwrecked mariners, passengers and military deserters. Three patterns could be identified in these geographical processes accordingly: the arrival of native English speakers, directly or indirectly from the British Isles; the extermination and/or expulsion of the indigenous peoples by the new arrivals; and where indigenous peoples were not exterminated or expelled, the process of language shift, whereby indigenous peoples gradually abandoned their native languages and adopted English instead.

The third part (Chapters 10–12) addresses the other sides of the stories concerning the spread of English. Chapter 10 looks at a few cases where English, at first, established a presence in the territory of a particular indigenous language, only to be replaced later by that indigenous language as native anglophones abandoned their mother tongue (e.g., English yields to Guarani). The tendency is for human beings to speak like the people around them with whom they have the most contact, not like the rich and the powerful; and it is rather normal for powerful alien elites to end up speaking the language of the indigenous common people. Chapter 11 returns to the island of Britain and studies the dynamics of the situation in the original homeland of the English language, demonstrating that the major continuing story from 1600 onwards is the very familiar one of retreat, not of English, but of the other languages (e.g., Cornish, Gaelic). The last chapter tells a tale of transcultural diffusion, namely, a story of places in the world which native English has spread to, not through the arrival from elsewhere of native speakers, but through the transformation of communities of non-native English speakers into native-speaking communities (e.g., Singapore). Just as we saw in Chapter 1, languages can move from place to place without people actually moving, that is, without demic diffusion. Throughout the whole book, the two-pronged conceptual framework – demic versus transcultural – helps to bond together the English-spreading stories, and substantiates the underlying messages conveyed.

It would be difficult to write a book on the phenomenon of English expansion without risking it being interpreted as a political statement, for language is “a very sensitive index of identity” (qtd. in Crystal 2003, xii). A detached account is all the more desirable, and that is what Trudgill has tried to do in this book, without adopting the kind of triumphalist tone which is unfortunately all too common when people write on English in English. Trudgill indicates that the rise of English as a global lingua franca is far from fair, pointing out that the history of language contacts in the expansions was indeed one of conquest and assimilation, and the effects on the indigenous were disastrous. For instance, in what are now Canada and the USA, there were about 300 languages

at the time of first European contact (p. 79). Now well over one-third of these languages have disappeared and nearly all of the remaining 100 or so North American languages are likely to be gone by the end of the 21st century. Trudgill laments that the loss of linguistic diversity from the world as a result of the expansion of English can only be described “as a language-ecological disaster”, and there is an important sense in which “we are all losers” (p. 165). He believes in the fundamental value of multilingualism as an amazing world resource which presents us with different perspectives and insights, and thus enables us to reach a more profound understanding of the nature of the human mind and spirit.

Another remarkable aspect of this book is the “Linguistic Notes” (altogether 50) interspersed in every chapter. These notes provide sociolinguistic information as well as encourage critical reflection on language learning. To illustrate, in contrast to Old English, Middle English has fewer inflections, conjugations and declensions. Why did simplification take place at this time? A rather obvious answer lies, Trudgill explains, in the phenomenon of adult language-learning whereby adult language learners typically make things easier by regularizing irregularities and removing unnecessary complexities (p. 57). As both a researcher interested in EFL learning and a university EFL teacher educator, I find these language notes both informative and inspiring.

If the book has a weakness, it is that the author overlooks the role of communication technology in the spread of English. Communication technologies such as telegraph, telephone, radio, and the Internet in particular, have played a critical role in the expansion of English. A broader examination covering these areas would be desirable to fill the gaps, even though this may not be the book’s major focus. The book is a welcome addition to the emerging and quite contemporary body of scholarship on the phenomenon of global English. To conclude, this is a book for anyone who is interested in the global spread of English: teachers, students, language professionals, politicians, general readers and anyone with a love of the language.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank the reviewers for their insightful comments.

Funding. This work was partly supported by the National Social Sciences Foundation of China (Grant No. 17BY095).

References

Crystal, D. 2003. *English as a Global Language* (2nd edn.) New York: Cambridge University Press.



Dr. DONG WANG is a professor of Applied Linguistics at Shandong Normal University, China. He received his PhD from Shanghai International Studies University and has considerable EFL teaching experience at tertiary levels in Chinese context. His research interests focus on history of English, second/foreign language acquisition, and teacher education.

His publications have appeared in *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* and many key academic journals in China. Email: dwang@sdu.edu.cn