

Review of Nicholas Ostler, *Empires of the Word* (Harper Perennial 2006)

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Read-through quotes and notes

Quotations from *Empires of the Word* are delimited using <>, while quotations from elsewhere are delimited using ‘ ’ or “ ”.

p.xix, Preface, first sentence: <If language is what makes us human, it is languages that make us superhuman.> How typical of a subject-matter expert to vaunt his particular specialism as a measure of superiority over the rest of humanity! And he’s wrong: language merely identifies a species as sentient and reactive; uniquely, it is *literacy* that makes us human. As for ‘superhuman’, that’s just a (somewhat bizarre and wholly fictional) modern fantasy, which for some helps to fill the void between hope and reality. See MyPhilosophy03.pdf, Review05.pdf, and HWPNotes.pdf for further ideas and opinions on these themes.

p.xx: <We may as well admit at the outset that the mysteries of linguistic attraction and linguistic influence run deep: to tell the story is not always to understand it. | Nevertheless, I believe that the universal study of language history, of which this is a first attempt, is at least as enlightening and valid a focus for science as the more usual concerns of historical linguistics.> Yes, if you don’t have an explanation, then at least set down a description.

pp.10-11: <As long as there has been storytelling, and the dispensing of legal judgements and healing rituals, there have been linguistic records, retained verbally in the memories of learned members of the community. ... But there was always a subjective element in learning derived from recitation, as well as a practical limit on the amount that could be retained ... Recall is an act of disciplined reimagination, and the remote past may be beyond anyone’s ken. | All this is resolved through the miracle of writing.> All this, and so much more: as I said, it is literacy that makes us human.

p.23: <Perhaps a language’s type even has survival value, determining whether a new population that has long spoken another language can readily take it up or not. This is one of the innovations of this book: to suggest ways in which it might actually matter what type of language a community speaks. (See Chapter 14, ‘What makes a language learnable’, p.552.)> ‘Arabic’ numerals were taken up because of their great practical advantage over other notational systems when they were set down in writing (and thereby compared, combined, and computed). Likewise, ease of use would have been a potent factor in the preferential take-up of languages that have co-evolved with a simple modular alphabet (*i.e.* a script based on a closed set of discrete symbols, each of which may be recognised, encoded, and interpreted without ambiguity). But thus far Ostler has made no mention of the operation and efficacy of language in its written form. That is, it seems that he has set out a history of language without giving due recognition to the central role of literacy. If so then in my opinion (formulated at this early stage, my bookmark at page 23 of 559) this would be a significant weakness of this work.

p.31: Cuneiform was common to <multifarious languages ... even though it was originally designed to represent the meaning of words rather than how they sounded.>

p.34: The ancient Near East <is a region of so many world firsts for linguistic innovation. Unlike Egypt, China or India, its cities and states had always been consciously multilingual ... This area contains the site of the earliest known writing, in the lower reaches of the Euphrates valley. But in

its western zone, in the coastal cities of Syria, it was also the first to make the radical simplification from hieroglyphs that denoted words and syllables to a short alphabet that represented simple sounds. The political effects of this were massive. For the first time, literacy could spread beyond the aristocratic scribal class ...>

pp.44-46: <the Aramaeans are not associated with any distinctive style or civilisation of their own; nevertheless, they were the ones who brought simple alphabetic writing, the invention of their neighbours the Phoenicians, into the heart of the old empire, where for over two thousand years all culture and administration had been built on skill in the complicated cuneiform writing. They had thereby revolutionised its communications, and perhaps its social structure as well. Twenty-two simple signs could now do the work previously requiring over six hundred. | While this was going on in Asia, the Phoenicians themselves, strung out along the Mediterranean coast of what is now Lebanon, were expanding, or rather exploring and exploiting, in the opposite direction. ... The Phoenicians were the globalisers of Mesopotamian culture. Most concretely, they spread knowledge of their alphabetic writing system to the Greeks and Iberians, and just possibly also to the Etruscans and Romans; so they can claim to have given Europe its primary education. | Phoenician could be heard all round the Mediterranean, especially in its islands and on its southern rim, for most of the first millennium BC. Yet linguistically it had very little long-term impact on Europe. The Greeks and others accepted, quite explicitly, the Phoenicians' writing system as the basis of their own ..., but not a single element of their language. This is partly perhaps a comment on how little of their culture the Phoenicians, always thinking of themselves as outsiders, only there on business, were in fact passing on to their new customers or partners. | But further, it shows how much more abstract a tool an alphabet is than an ideographic writing system. With an alphabet, properly understood, you get a means of cleanly writing your own language, without further baggage.> This insight counters my early negative opinion of p.23. But can Ostler sustain this line of reasoning in other instances? (And, if so, why doesn't he make it the obvious basis of an overall explanatory hypothesis?)

p.61: <Besides its use as a native language by most of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, and its historic role as the first language of literacy for Semites anywhere, Akkadian also came to achieve a wider role as a lingua franca among utter foreigners. How was this possible? Ultimately, it was due to its association with the most sophisticated technology of its day, writing.> Is this another counterexample to my p.23 opinion?

pp.63-64: <The next, and last, great question in the history of Akkadian is why its dominance, and indeed its use, came to an end. ... The paradox deepens the more closely it is considered. Not only was Akkadian, the language replaced, at the height of its political influence: its replacement language, Aramaic, had until recently been spoken mainly by nomads. These people could claim no cultural advantage, and were highly unlikely to set up a rival civilisation. ... But it was in the cultural sphere that the Aramaic speakers brought their greatest surprise. They did assimilate largely to Akkadian culture, certainly. But there was one crucial respect in which they did not, the epoch-making one of language technology. With Aramaic came a new tradition of writing, which used an alphabetic script. Along with this revolution in language representation came new writing materials: people wrote their notes, and increasingly their formal records and literary texts, on new media, sheets of papyrus or leather. | These changes went to the heart of Assyrian and Babylonian culture; so much so that the traditional view has been that it explains the triumph of Aramaic as a language. So Georges Roux, for example, writes: 'Yet to these barbaric Aramaeans befell the privilege of imposing their language upon the entire Near East. They owed it partly to the sheer weight of their number and partly to the fact that they adopted, instead of the cumbersome cuneiform writing, the Phoenician alphabet slightly modified, and carried everywhere with them the simple, practical script of the future.' And John Sawyer: 'The success of Aramaic was undoubtedly due in the main to the fact that it was written in a relatively easy alphabetical script.' | This cannot be right. Writing systems, after all, exist to record what people say, not vice versa. There is no other case in history of

a change in writing technology inducing a change in popular speech.> I take issue with several of these points, and with Ostler's overall perspective, as follows: (i) his inclusion of <language technology> in <the cultural sphere> is unclear and ambiguous, indeed it varies according to the argument he is advancing, and as a result it is inconsistent to the point of self-contradiction; (ii) the argument that <Writing systems ... exist to record what people say, not vice versa> is a rhetorical flourish and not obviously true, especially when one takes the view (as I do) that it is literacy that makes us human; and (iii) in fact there are many other cases in history <of a change in writing technology inducing a change in popular speech>, for example, paper, ink, printing, newspapers, advertising, and social media.

pp.64-66: <The answer lies in an unexpected effect of Assyrian military policy. ... vast numbers of the conquered populations were led off to some other distant part of the empire ... The Assyrians had therefore contrived to reinforce the spread of a new lingua franca across their domains, one that was not dependent on literacy or any shared educational tradition.> This is a convincing argument, I like it!

pp.66-68: <Nor were the newcomers handicapped by lack of the basic art of civilisation, literacy. Although the Aramaeans had appeared originally as nomads, presumed illiterate, they had even before the first millennium begun taking over cities (most notably Damascus) and whole countries (the last Hittite kingdom, its capital at modern Zincirli, in the Turkish province still known as Hatay). Many of them would have come to know the value of writing, and since the cities they knew were of the west, the writing system they would have learnt was simple and alphabetic. ... The net result seems to have been that spoken use of Akkadian receded before that of Aramaic with scarce a murmur of complaint. ... The triumph of Aramaic over Akkadian must be ascribed as one of practical utility over ancient prestige, but the utility came primarily from the fact that so many already spoke it. The fact that its associated writing system was quicker and easier was an added bonus; if anything, it just removed one argument that might have made sections of the Aramaic-speaking population want to learn Akkadian too. After all, what was the point?> So the Aramaeans *did* derive an advantage from their alphabetical script, and Ostler is contradicting himself. Nevertheless these contradictions may be resolved (or, at least, obscured) by means of a more balanced argument acknowledging both the contribution of <Assyrian military policy> in relocating the Aramaeans, and the contribution of their <quicker and easier> <writing system> in giving them a relative advantage in their new home. In any case, this episode gives clear support to my p.23 point that 'ease of use would have been a potent factor in the preferential takeup of languages that have co-evolved with a simple modular alphabet'.

pp.72-73, Phoenician gods: El <the benign high god>; Dagon <his son>; Astarte/Asteria <a beautiful consort goddess>; Hadad/Baal son of Dagon; Kothar, <the divine craftsman and smith>; plus <Dagon later fathers an unknown> Demarus. IDEAL mapping: {Empiricist = Hadad/Baal; Idealist = El; Activist = Dagon; Conformist = Astarte/Asteria; Theorist = Kothar}.

pp.87-88: <The language of the group that formed after Jesus's death clearly was Aramaic ... But the new faith had cosmopolitan aspirations ... Greek accordingly was the language in which the Christian scriptures, the so-called 'New Testament', were composed. It became the first language of the Church in the west. | Nevertheless, the world was bigger than Rome and the 'circle of lands' ... that surrounded its sea. Significantly, the first foreigners mentioned as witnesses to the pentecostal miracle are Parthians, Medes, Elamites and dwellers in Mesopotamia, none of them at the time under Roman rule, and ... much more likely to understand Aramaic than Greek. | It took two hundred years to get established, but the early Christian Church did get a major wing oriented towards the east. It was based at Edessa ... The language of Edessa and its believers was Aramaic, here known as Syriac. This is our first example of a radically new motive for language spread, the drive to win converts to a new religion. Although the originals were in Greek, the New Testament

and most early Christian literature was translated into Syriac, and became the basis of a literature of its own ... Christians of the Nestorian persuasion, judged heretical and exiled from Edessa by imperial order in 489, carried Syriac out to Persia ... Their missionaries went on to India ... When they were rediscovered by Europeans in the nineteenth century, they still had Bibles and religious manuscripts written in Syriac, though it seems the language was little used in worship.> This episode illustrates both the permanence of literature and the impermanence of language.

p.90: <The net result of all this heroic proselytism has been modest: Aramaic or Syriac has survived in small pockets quite close to its original homes. But the language has survived. It owes its survival to its speakers' determination to maintain their communities, and those communities have all been based on a religion. | This 'confessional' route to survival is at most two and a half thousand years old, and seems characteristic of the languages of the Near East, particularly Afro-Asiatic languages. The most notable language to survive by this strategy is Hebrew ... For the strategy to work, the religion of the language community must be significantly different from that of the population that surrounds it. | Another example is the Coptic language, the final survival of Egyptian.> But this survival of language has been achieved through the loss of what I consider to be 'true literacy': the ability to understand what is read, as evidenced by the resulting formulation (in the same written language) of genuinely new ideas. That is, I do not consider recitation without interpretation, or inscription without innovation, to be any indication of true literacy. This observation reminds me of the following scene from *The Time Machine* (1960), which has influenced my world-view ever since I first saw it as child aged 7-10. It is original to the film, and a considerable improvement on the book.

Time traveller: Well, you, you, you mean you have an economy so well developed that you can spend all your time studying and experimenting, is that right?

Eloi man 1: You ask many questions.

Time traveller: Well, well, that is the only way that man has learned and developed. I wish to learn. I want to learn about you, about your civilisation. Perhaps you ... do you have books?

Eloi man 2: Books? Yes, we have books.

Time traveller: Oh, wonderful, I can learn all I want about you from books! Books will tell me what I want to know. Well, could I see the books? [Eloi man 2 shows the time traveller their collection of books. He picks up one, which crumbles to dust in his hands] Yes they do tell me all about you. [He sweeps away a whole shelf of books] What have you done? Thousands of years of building and rebuilding, creating and recreating, so you can let it crumble to dust! A million years of sensitive men dying for their dreams! For what? So you can swim and dance and play!

p.93, Ostler knows of no convincing argument for the rapid spread of Islam: <No one has ever explained clearly how or why the Arabs could do this.> In my view this was the result of the potent combination of trade and literacy, see HWPNotes.pdf pp.29-30 regarding Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* pp.415-418.

pp.93-97: <Arabic is another Semitic language closely related to the Aramaic and Akkadian that preceded it in the Near East. ... Eloquence, the sheer power of the word, as dictated by God and declaimed to all who would listen, played the first role in winning converts for Islam, leaving hearers no explanation for the beauty of Muhammad's words but divine inspiration. ... The authentic utterances of the prophet, himself illiterate, were soon, in some undocumented way, reduced to writing. The text so arrived at was immediately holy and absolutely authoritative; it could not be changed, although it was permissible (as in the Hebrew scriptures) to annotate it with some dots and dashes to mark the vowel sounds, for the benefit of those whose Arabic was not native, and who consequently might need some help in reading the bare consonants. ... Linguistically, the immediate effects were comparable to the political ones: Arabic established itself as the language of religion, wherever Islam was accepted, or imposed. In the sphere of the holy, there was never any contest, since Islam unlike Christianity did not look for vernacular

understanding, or seek translation into other languages. The revelation was simple, and expressed only in Arabic. ... But Arabic is now spoken only in an inner zone within the *Dar-al-islam*, 'House of Islam', as a whole.> No true literacy here, either.

pp.149-153: <Now that we have surveyed the full course of the histories of Egyptian and Chinese, we can consider what the major properties could be which might explain their unshakeable stability in the face of time and invasion. | Certain obvious possibilities can be eliminated at once, since in them Egyptian and Chinese are at opposite extremes. | In the most linguistic aspect, the structural type of their languages, Egyptian and Chinese were intrinsically always very different, and have developed in different directions over their recorded histories. ... Religious outlook is another important aspect of cultures, where we might look for a clue to their stability, which might then be reflected in language. ... Faith in an afterlife was important to Egyptians ... The Chinese attitude to religion was very different, mostly characterised by down-to-earth practicality. ... But there was one aspect of Egyptian and Chinese religion which was similar, and is probably connected with the gross survivability of their languages *in situ* over many millennia. This is the attitude that each of them took to their emperor, and his relation to his land, his people and their gods. | Both these empires achieved early unity under a single ruler, Egypt under the legendary Menes, China under the historical Shi Huang Di. ... Both rulers were absolute, deriving their sovereignty not from the people but the gods. Nevertheless each was subject to an explicit moral constraint. ... Both Egypt and China, therefore, had the same simple but sustaining political doctrine, which based the country's identity on the rule of a single emperor, and based the emperor's sovereignty on righteousness. ... This doctrine was extremely fitting for a stable long-term culture, with the linguistic consequences that we have seen. But it could be maintained that it was the result, rather than the cause, of the culture's stability. At least as revealing, from a more outward, objective point of view, is the gross fact of population density. | In absolute size, Egypt and China are very different. Although they are comparable in terms of their duration, their populations and areas are of quite different orders. ... The Chinese language, and Chinese history, has had fifty times more adherents than Egyptian, and 150 times the space in which to act. | This immediately leads, however, to another aspect that they do have in common – high density of population. ... By ancient standards, then, the density of population in Egypt and China was something truly exceptional. This too must have supported the long-term stability of their languages. The sheer number of speakers in their populated regions gave them immunity against swamping by incomers speaking foreign languages, even when they could not deny them entry. Strength in numbers reinforced languages already buttressed by their cultural prestige, and the robust institution of a monarchy endorsed by heaven.> To me this is another convincing argument; which is why I've copied it at length.

p.154, quote attributed to Confucius: <Writing cannot express all words, words cannot encompass all ideas.> Taken to its logical conclusion this implies that literacy is fundamentally futile and meaningless. Like Gödel incompleteness this is a philosophy of despair, and I reject it absolutely. Instead I take the view that "it is only through the complex connectivity of their associations that we can apprehend the relative significance, or 'meaning', of percepts", see MyPhilosophy03.pdf. That is, every percept (*i.e.* 'mental impression', the broadest of abstractions that certainly includes Confucius' <words> and <ideas>) is defined through its subjective associations, and not through some hypothetical 'objective' mapping that has been set down in a comprehensive dictionary which has been compiled by an official committee and approved by an infallible authority. This viewpoint – which I suppose will be labelled 'subjectivist' or 'associationist', and criticised accordingly – is the underlying basis of my dim view of Egyptian and Chinese traditionalism, as deployed in the following comments.

pp.155-158: <the Egyptians themselves never modified the hieroglyphic system to write their own language. | This resistance to script reform, a trait shared by the Chinese, really shows no more than that these cultures had already – both very early by regional and global standards – achieved a stable incorporation of writing into their way of life. Asking for a replacement of the writing system in such a literate administration was no more practicable than the various attempts to introduce spelling reform into modern English. ... The Egyptian scribe ... represented from the earliest documented time the acme of ambition. ... This complacency generated an extreme conservatism that may ultimately have been Egypt's undoing. Literacy in Egyptian remained the preserve of a small and highly educated caste long after the demise of the last independent Egyptian state, in fact until the Christians adapted the Greek alphabet for the language: this step was taken fully a thousand years after the rest of the Mediterranean, including the Assyrians and Babylonians, had adopted alphabetic writing. | But as if to show that there was no natural term to the life of a pictographic system in an alphabetic age, the Chinese system has survived even the turmoil of the twentieth century. ... The great advantage of the Chinese system is its masterly representation of the highest common factor of structure and meaning shared by all Chinese dialects, many of which are not mutually comprehensible. ... No alphabetic script, based perforce on the sounds of a language, could now be so conveniently neutral in terms of all the different Chinese dialects, unless perhaps it were designed on historical principles with a knowledge of all varieties of Chinese. Such a tour de force would have to be a miracle of subtlety and ambiguity. And so the traditional characters survive. ... There was, then, a clear reluctance to continue the development of Egyptian and Chinese pictographic systems in the direction of reducing their complexity, despite awareness of simpler systems that foreigners were using. The civilisations were built around respect for tradition, and in particular the traditional difficulties in joining the literate class, who held the reins of government.> A writing system is a tool for communication. But in the hands of the Egyptian scribes and the Chinese officials, their pictographic systems became devices for preserving their power and prestige, which is a perversion of their original purpose. It is as if a chisel has been replaced with a very fine sculpture of a chisel; which despite its artistic and technical qualities is utterly useless as a chisel. To extend Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum, if the medium is the message then it has no meaning.

pp.166-167: <Even in hindsight, it is difficult to say whether Christianity was more of a blessing or a bane to Egyptian. It provided a strong ritual focus for the Egyptian-speaking community under Roman secular rule; but it was militant in cutting the links the language had had with its national pagan past. It provided a new synthetic identity, that of 'Egyptian Christian' or Copt, to replace the ancient one, an identity that was to last for many centuries, and for a small minority even until the present day. But the theological motivation for a separate Egyptian sect of Christianity, promoted as a universal faith, was nil. Egyptian was correspondingly weaker when it faced the challenging embrace of the Arabic-speaking community: what ground was there to maintain their Egyptian identity when the gods and rituals of the land of Egypt had all been long forgotten? | Ultimately, Egyptian could not sustain itself when it ceased to be a majority language in its one and only environment, the land of Egypt. The language, like the pharaonic religion, had been a symbol of Egyptian identity. Egypt could survive a government speaking a foreign language, as long as its religion was based in Egypt. It could not survive a foreign government and a truly cosmopolitan religion, for its speakers had nothing national left as a focus for their identity. They might as well become Arab Muslims, just like all the rest.> This is another convincing argument, which reminds me of one put forward by Jared Diamond in *Collapse* (2005), describing the decline of a society that is sufficiently robust to survive one or two adverse setbacks, but not a whole series of them.

pp.168-173: <There were three features of the Chinese situation that kept their vast community not only centred but also united, socially and linguistically. The first was a *fact* about their human environment, which quite literally came with the territory that they inhabited. The second was an *institution* invented quite distinctively by the Chinese, which turned out to be remarkably persistent. And the third was the *paradoxical result* of the barbarian conquests when they came. | The fact was the periodic influx of hostile marauding nomads, speaking languages radically different to Chinese, and preying on settled Chinese farmers. ... The external threat of invasion kept the Chinese focused on what they had to lose; and recurrent partial failures of the centre's defences against it kept the north of China in flux, and so perversely maintained the cohesion of its spoken language. | The institution was the system of public examinations, persistent over thirteen centuries, where success was the key to a career in government. This meant that from a very early era China could boast a formally constituted civil service. When it was working, this had an effect on social order analogous to the influxes of invaders on the linguistic order. ... But it also had a further effect, bound up with the Chinese language. | The syllabus was almost entirely literary, including composition of classical poetry (introduced under the empress Wu at the end of the eighth century) and of the notorious ... 'eight-legged essays', which rigorously elicited clear expression of the ideas from the classical texts and their application to contemporary problems. ... The paradoxical result was the fact that although China was ultimately unable to stem the pressure from militarised pastoral nomads, and had to yield its throne to the Mongols and the Manchus, China remained Chinese. The struggle with the barbarians was, in the last analysis, lost – yet it did not matter for the future of the language, or of the culture it conveyed. In a way, Chinese showed that it could transcend the most fundamental defeat. ... It also leads us to the current Chinese response to the challenge from the Western world. Bizarrely, but revealingly, China is again adopting this traditional strategy. ... China is now in a period of extremely rapid economic development, in which it has consciously adopted Western methods. ... But if we take up again our comparison with the Egyptian case, the long-term future of the Chinese language may be hanging in the balance. The common feature we have found, which explains both Egyptian and Chinese persistence over so many millennia, is the maintenance of a distinct centre of identity and loyalty within the language community. ... In sum, the cultural retreats that we identified as leading to Egyptian's demise all have their analogues in the recent history of the Chinese, except for political conquest. The writing may already be on the wall for the language spoken by one fifth of mankind.> This is another convincing argument, which suggests to me the following points: (i) given that the syllabus for the public examinations <was almost entirely literary>, I suspect that it would have presented a formidable barrier to what I consider to be true literacy, see my comments to p.90 above; (ii) since I take a 'dim view of Egyptian and Chinese traditionalism', I would welcome the replacement of the Chinese script with a simple alphabet; (iii) given what happened to Egyptian culture, Chinese traditionalists would be right to fear the consequences of the loss of their pictographic script; (iv) while I share their disquiet, I don't delude myself that anyone cares about my opinions; (v) so why should I care?

pp.180-183: <Indian culture is unique in the world for its rigorous analysis of its own language, which it furthermore made the central discipline of its own culture. The Sanskrit word for grammar, *vyakarana*, instead of being based, like the Greek *grammatike*, on some word for *word* or *writing*, just means *analysis*: so language is the subject for analysis par excellence. ... the grammar that the tradition has defined was a vast system of abstract rules, made up of a set of pithy maxims (called *sutras*, literally 'threads') written in an artificial jargon. These sutras are like nothing so much as the rules in a computational grammar of a modern language, such as might be used in a machine translation system ... Whereas Western didactic texts until the modern era were formulated in some Greek tradition as a set of axioms and theorems (after Euclid), or more often as didactic verse (after Hesiod), the preferred approach in the Sanskrit tradition has been to encapsulate treatises as a series of memorable aphorisms, usually phrased as verse couplets. ... This approach was very much a part of another distinctive feature of Sanskrit linguistic culture, namely a strong ambivalence about the value of writing. Reliance on language in its written form was seen as crippling, and not giving true

control over linguistic content. ... Even though the language had undergone a full phonological analysis by the fifth century BC, which was even incorporated into the official order of letters in the alphabet, reliance on written texts for important (especially spiritually important) documents was decried. ... By contrast the ideal was the rote learning of all the principal texts, through judicious use of mnemonic techniques. This learning then made possible true engagement with all aspects of them, including the composition of new texts and commentaries, which might indeed benefit from being written down.> Thus Sanskrit grammar rules are to Greek grammar rules as a declarative computer programming language is to an imperative one (or 'logic' programming is to 'procedural' programming, as I refer to them in *How to Make a Mind*). This is such a different approach that it would be unwise to dismiss it out of hand, simply on the basis of unfamiliarity. So while the mention of <rote learning> arouses my negative prejudices, caution dictates that I read on, and indeed in the very next sentence there is a reassuring reference to <true engagement ... including the composition of new texts and commentaries>. So I shall suspend judgment – for now.

pp.199-204: <Sanskrit is the first example in history of a language travelling over a maritime network, through the establishment of trade and cultural links with people on the other side. In this, it can be seen as a precursor of the spread of the western European languages in the last five hundred years. ... What the Indians brought with them was literacy, and an ancient culture with a vast array of rules ... for every occasion. There was the whole mythology of Hinduism, making Agastya, Krishna, Rama and the Pandava brothers into household names, as they have been ever since in South-East Asia. There was the distinctive idea of the complementary roles of king and priest, admittedly at sixes and sevens over which was ultimately the higher, but clearly in a relationship of mutual support. This relationship could underwrite, and make permanent, the legitimacy of rulers. And so the rulers that the Indians met were happy to become their friends, business partners and fathers-in-law. The new generation that sprang from the mixed marriages would have been the first to receive a full Sanskrit education. | One characteristic of Indian civilisation that they brought with them was a tendency to modify and customise the alphabet. Just as there are now at least ten major scripts derived in India from the Brahmi characters (diffused all over the subcontinent in Asoka's time), there are another nine that developed in South-East Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines, all derived from Indian scripts, mainly through the Pallava script of the south. The origin of this diversity lies in the variety of writing materials available in different places, but the different styles evidently came to be national icons. ... this roll-call of states and civilisations that took their beginnings from India reminds us how vast, how varied and how long lasting this influence was, all the more remarkable because no military force seems to have been applied anywhere to bring in the new, more organised, Indian society.> Like the Arabs, the Indians propagated their culture by means of 'the potent combination of trade and literacy' (see my comments to p.93 above), but unlike the Arabs they refrained from the use of violence. Indeed this is quite <remarkable>. Perhaps it is a benign consequence (intended or otherwise) of the culture and mindset of the settled farmer, in contrast with that of the itinerant nomad.

p.209: <Buddhism has proved a faith of remarkable attractiveness from India outward to the north and east, and so Pali and Sanskrit are extremely well known in these vast areas. But they have remained no more than liturgical languages. As a result, Buddhism's linguistic effects have been far weaker than those of Christianity or Islam. After all, Latin, the language of Western Christianity, provided the foundation for the growth of a common language in the monasteries and then the universities of Europe in this same period (AD 500 – 1500). Islam propagated Arabic all round North Africa, Arabia, Palestine and Mesopotamia, persisting up to the present day, both in unchanged form as an international lingua franca for the educated, and, with local variations, as the basis of many vernaculars. There is no comparable linguistic union of Buddhists, in their daily languages.> Hypothesis: unlike the Christians and Muslims, the Buddhists did not combine their literacy with trade and/or violence.

pp.215-216: <The natural conservatism of institutions meant that their symbols would tend to ossify – witness the fate of the Pali language among the Buddhists, starting as an attempt at an unstuffy people’s lingua franca but ending up as just another classical language. India, with its caste system, was nothing if not a home of conservative institutions. Such conservatism always played into the hands of Sanskrit: it was defended through its own sutras as the unchanging linguistic standard, from which any change would mean decline and degradation. | Being concretely defined in the grammar books, Sanskrit was eminently learnable: indeed, it could be held that since the standard was so explicit, if complex and abstruse, it encouraged explicit displays of lawyer-like intelligence, though always in a strangely impractical realm divorced from the usual imperatives of penalties, property and military force. There were no wars based on the results of its debates, hotly disputed though they often were (and are). *Vyakarana*, grammatical analysis, provided a natural forum for intellectual exercise and argument, simply concerned with the establishment of what was right in the world of language, or how it should best be formalised. ... One result was that Brahmanical skills could never decline into mere rote learning and stipulation, since they were based in a rigorously articulated intellectual structure. | As in linguistics, so in the gamut of Indian sciences. In its continual appeal to abstract principle, rather than its own specific cultural tradition, Sanskrit-based civilisation is different from those of Greece and Rome to its west. Indian culture does not revolve around its epics and its literary classics, treasured though these are. Nor does its philosophy emphasise socially useful theories, such as politics, ethics or the art of persuasion. Rather it theorises about states of being and modes of perception. There is a certain sense in which Sanskrit theory fails to connect with the practical world.> This rings true. Amartya Sen says as much in *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), which commences, “Prolixity is not alien to us in India. ... We do like to speak.” This is no bad thing: even the arch-imperialist Winston Churchill took the view that ‘jaw-jaw’ was better than ‘war-war’. But better still would be the instinct to let others speak too, and to write down a succinct summary of all that was said, so that this may be taken into account in future debates. To me this practice is more than a civil courtesy, it’s common sense, but somehow it doesn’t come naturally to an Indian (at least, not to any of those that I’ve encountered in my long and close association with the people and their land). That is, it’s not an essential ingrained feature of their culture. But what they’re missing out on is a key feature of ‘iterative development’, which I consider to be one of the twin pillars of ‘scientific method’, the other being ‘the toolkit approach’, see MyPhilosophy03.pdf. And if they’re not familiar with all aspects of (what I call) scientific method, and not implementing it in their daily lives as a default failsafe routine, then no wonder there’s a tendency to <ossify>. So while this culture is a clear advance on one that subjects its people to an infallible book written in an alien tongue, or an obsolete script devised in a bygone age, nevertheless, it could be so much more.

pp.228-229: <After the stately self-possession of Chinese and Egyptian, the sensuous prolixity of Sanskrit, and the innovative absolutisms of the Near Eastern languages, Greek makes a much more familiar, not to say modern, impression. This is the language of the people who brought wine, olive oil and literacy to the Mediterranean world, who invented logic, tragic drama and elective government, famed as much for competitive games as for figurative arts of striking realism. All of Europe became directly or indirectly their students. ... Yet the history of the Greek language itself is far more complex and beguiling than its net influence would suggest. ... Above all, Greek stands as an example of a classical language that ran its course, fostered with a self-regarding arrogance that for over a thousand years its neighbours were happy to endorse, giving it their military support as they accepted the benefits of its more advanced culture and technology. These powerful, but impressed, neighbours included the Roman empire and the Christian Church. Greek’s influence was eclipsed only when it ran out of new alliances, and was forced to face alone an unsympathetic enemy which drew its cultural support elsewhere. It is an instructive example of what can happen to a prestige language when its community ceases to innovate, and the rest of the world catches up.> This is an excellent summary of the good and the bad of the ancient Greek language.

p.232: <the Greeks always felt that there was a rational basis that set them apart from the *barbaroi*, the rest of humanity, whose varying speech could just be thought of as an elaboration of ‘bar-bar’, hardly worth distinguishing from the noises made by animals.> Since the vast majority of <the rest of humanity> were illiterate, the Greeks were absolutely correct!

p.234: <The language that so united the known (Western) world, especially its educated members, over all those centuries was a complex organism that made few concessions, if any, to foreign learners. Its words were polysyllabic, with complex clusters of consonants ... Speakers needed to tell long vowels from short, plain consonants from breathy ones, and be able to manage elaborate systems of prefixes and suffixes, where an ordinary noun would have nine different forms, and an adjective nineteen, and a verb well over two hundred. There were, of course, regularities in the system, but they fought a losing battle: there were ten major patterns for nouns, ten more for adjectives, and besides ten different patterns for verbs, there were well over 350 individual verbs that were irregular somewhere.> I suspect that these statistics reflect the broad diversity of Greek as it was spoken in many independent city-states and far-flung colonies. These dialects would have been virtually incomprehensible to one another if not for their shared alphabet, which had the magical power to record all words with no ambiguity, whether long (Ostler spells out <the longest on record>, having 183 letters) or short (probably the practical basis of a common demotic). But the ancient Greeks never did systematise their grammar and vocabulary, a blunder that presented their neighbours with a tempting opportunity, and in due course the Romans took full advantage.

p.238: <The outward-looking nature of the Greek-speaking community is worth contrasting with that of another prestige language, which was spreading at much the same time – Sanskrit. Both languages developed significant theories of language use. But Sanskrit’s theory, as we have seen, was aimed at preservation of the details of religious texts; as such, it was focused on the minutiae of the language’s grammar and pronunciation, with little to offer to improve communication with other people. Greek linguistic theory (until the school requirements of the Roman empire take over) is focused above all on the effective use of language to persuade others: native command of the grammatical details tend to be assumed (despite their complexity), and the theorists talk rather about the construction of a case at law, or (if philosophically inclined) about the form of a valid argument. One could say that whereas Indian linguistic theory is an exercise in disinterested analysis, the Greek theories are always close to practical application.> This focus on the practical suggests that Greek culture indeed encouraged an attitude of open enquiry and active learning, that is, dedication to a research ethos; which turns out to be just as important as the adoption of a simple modular alphabet (p.23), or the application of scientific method (pp.215-216).

pp.241-242: <The colonies played a cardinal role in introducing neighbouring peoples of Gaul and Italy to writing: from Massalia on the French Riviera, Gauls learnt to write their own language in Greek characters; Pithecusae (Ischia) and Cumae on the south-western coast taught the Etruscans first of Campania, and hence of the whole centre and north of Italy; a little farther south, Paestum (Poseidonia) could pass literacy on to the Oscans in Lucania, and over in the heel, Taras to the Messapians in Calabria. Most significant of all was one indirect path of such education: as well as many others in north Italy (for example, the Insubrian Gauls in the foothills of the Alps), the Etruscans went on to teach their great adversaries the Romans to read and write. Through an elaborate cascade of successful conquests and commercial infiltrations over the next twenty-seven centuries, the Roman alphabet has become the most widely used in the world at large.> Note Ostler’s reference to <the Roman alphabet>: literacy, again. But it’s disappointing that he doesn’t trace its evolution from the Etruscan and Greek alphabets, or the origins of Latin grammar and vocabulary.

pp.243-249: <About a quarter of the way through the three thousand years of Greek's recorded history came the single decade that changed everything. | Over the period 334-325 BC a Greek army under Alexander III of Macedon eliminated the Persian empire ... The result of this lightning advance, the wholesale takeover by Greek military administrators of a multi-ethnic empire that had existed for over two hundred years, was an instant trebling of the area where the Greek language might be heard, and Greek cultural traditions known and appreciated. ... The process of Hellenisation in the realms conquered by Alexander created the heartland of a vast Greek-speaking community that would dominate the eastern Mediterranean for over a thousand years. ... In Egypt as a whole, although the Ptolemies, like all the Hellenistic Diadochi (*diadokhoi* – heirs of Alexander), relied on their armies to guarantee their authority, there was a major cultural project started to validate it. A Museum (*Museum* – temple of the Muses) was established as a government-funded research institute, and the eternally famous Library, both close to the royal palace in Alexandria, the newly founded capital city. These attracted Greek-speaking scholars from all over the *oikoumene*, the inhabited world. Coinage was issued in Greek, from a single mint, also at Alexandria.> Note that the Greeks also pioneered the use of money: trade and literacy, again. Nevertheless Bertrand Russell took a dim view of the contemporaneous stagnation of philosophical enquiry, see *History of Western Philosophy* pp.236-238, quoted on HWPNotes.pdf p.19.

pp.267-268: <This survey of the expansion and contraction of the Greek language community over three millennia only makes more urgent a fundamental question. What was it about Greek speakers which has commended them over their contemporaries, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Etruscans, Gauls, Carthaginians or whatever? What was it about them that made them think their group, and their way of life, more civilised than all these others, and furthermore by and large persuaded these miscellaneous 'barbarians' to take the Greek view of the matter? Most importantly, given the flow of power relations through the ancient world, why did the Romans become philhellenes, rather than admirers of Etruscan, Punic or indeed Egyptian ways? | Western Europe likes to think itself an indirect heir of the Greeks; but the countless modern accounts of what the Greeks were like never ask, much less answer, this question. Rather, they simply trace the processes by which the Greeks produced so many pioneering contributions to Western civilisation, in mythology, politics, literature, the arts, architecture, philosophy and science. Part of the answer is thus given implicitly: for none of their contemporaries has laid by as vast a record of their cultural product as the Greeks – unless one counts the Romans, who chose to build on the Greek work, rather than replace it. Literacy could be seen as the Greeks' secret weapon. | But this can't be the whole answer. After all, literacy was a gift to them from the Phoenicians, who themselves were just the lately travelling sales representatives of a vast Middle Eastern range of literate societies, from Egypt at one end to Babylon and Elam at the other. But unlike the Phoenicians, the Greeks had chosen to use their literacy to record their culture: the ability to read Greek brought a vast range of original works in its wake. The result was that the Greeks had access to 'the arts of civilisation' in a way that could only impress others when they came in contact with them. Civilisation, after all, when combined with such delights as olive oil and wine, is apt to be attractive. | The question can be thrown one stage farther back: why was it that the Greeks, living on the lands that adjoined the Aegean Sea at the end of the Mediterranean, were able to develop and propagate arts of civilisation in this way? Any answer to this one becomes extremely speculative: but it is notable that the Greeks were the only language community around the Mediterranean where the groupings were large enough to form cities, but which, though literate, had no tendency to be agglomerated into larger states, and hence ultimately to be united into an empire. This may have been the result of the mountainous and island-studded environment in which they lived, making small communities easier to feed and defend than large ones: but it did mean that Greece became a vast competitive playground for cultural developments – developments that could spread to other Greeks if successful or attractive (as, for example, was Attic literature), but which would not tend to crowd each other out. In this sense, the early history of Greece can be seen as comparable to that of Europe after the Renaissance – a fertile marriage of competitive independence and good communication.>

From this lengthy extract it's clear to me that Ostler greatly underestimates the power of literacy. But in my view literacy *was* <the Greeks' secret weapon>, and together with trade this *was* <the whole answer>, for the following reasons.

- (i) Their alphabet. "The Greeks, borrowing from the Phoenicians, altered the alphabet to suit their language, and made the important innovation of adding vowels instead of having only consonants. There can be no doubt that the acquisition of this convenient method of writing greatly hastened the rise of Greek civilization." Thus Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* p.31, quoted on HWPNotes.pdf p.2. It's disappointing that Ostler doesn't trace the evolution of the Greek alphabet in even this sketchy manner. Maybe one needs to be a mathematician to appreciate that 'a script based on a closed set of discrete symbols, each of which may be recognised, encoded, and interpreted without ambiguity' (p.23) is much more efficient and penetrable than one that is effectively open (because it has a vast or unlimited number of symbols) or ambiguous (because for absolute precision it requires additional symbols such as diacritical marks). But to me it's obvious.
- (ii) Their writing. If you can write then you can record your <many pioneering contributions> for posterity. Probably this is the basis of Ostler's hypothetical <Literacy could be seen as the Greeks' secret weapon>, but again it's disappointing that he appears to reserve judgment on a point which to me is blindingly obvious.
- (iii) Their reading. If you can read then you can remind yourself what you and others were writing about days or years or centuries ago, and build on it in a process of iterative development, see my comments to pp.215-216 above. In my view, the product of all this reading and writing isn't merely a stack of interesting documents, it's also a step-change in individual and collective cognitive capability and acuity that (frankly) makes all the difference between us and the barbarians. As I said, it is literacy that makes us human.
- (iv) Their numeracy. If you can count then you can trade without being cheated. And since the Greeks established the world's first 'reserve currency' then they could control the terms of trade. That is, as an exclusive collective they could cheat onto others as they would not be cheated onto themselves. Thus another important lesson for the Romans was to 'beware of Greeks bearing gifts'. From (i)-(iv) it's clear that Ostler's magic formula of <a fertile marriage of competitive independence and good communication> is nothing more than trade and literacy, again.

pp.272-314, <Chapter 7 | Contesting Europe: Celt, Roman, German and Slav>: <The history of Europe, over the three thousand years for which we have evidence, is dominated by the changing fortunes of four closely related families of languages: Celtic, Italic, Germanic and Slavonic. In every age, their advances across the continent have been warlike: there is a depressing brutality about the heroics in which they all gloried. ... The cases where serious language change failed to follow on from conquests exposes the hollowness of much military glory – the conquests in western Europe by Franks, Vandals and Visigoths, even the conquests in Britain by Romans and Normans.> In this chapter Ostler recounts a fascinating period in history, but much of it is *description* rather than *explanation* (as indeed he flags in the Preface, p.xx), and as a result it reads like a just-so story. In my view this is a direct consequence of his persistent neglect of the central role of literacy. For example, regarding the Celts he opines that <Literacy was unnecessary, and largely avoided> (p.289), but this is a blanket generalisation over an entire society which fails to draw any distinction between chief, priest, and slave. To see why this matters see HWPNotes.pdf, in particular, p.24, p.28 and p.30 regarding *History of Western Philosophy* p.303, p.380 and p.418 respectively.

pp.279-280: <when they wanted to put them down, the Greeks liked to refer to their Roman masters as *Opikoi*. 'They keep calling us barbarians and insult us more foully than others with the name of *opics*,' the proverbially stiff Marcus Cato complained. The point of this slur seems to have been the lack of education, since the word was being borrowed back into Latin as a byword for illiteracy.> As I concluded above, p.232, barbarianism equates to illiteracy.

p.295: <It is no secret that the basis for the spread of Latin was the political and military spread of the Roman imperium (a word originally meaning *command*, but later carrying all the connotations of its French rendering, *empire*.) In this it was unlike Celtic, but rather like English in its early modern career. But like the speakers of English too (and again unlike the Celts), the Romans were seldom nakedly aggressive or belligerent in motivating their campaigns. There was also, among both sets of empire-builders, an unwillingness to talk openly about the commercial and material benefits of what was achieved – again unlike the Celts with their emphasis on the joys of booty. What really drew Rome out to conquer every country round the Mediterranean?> Ostler gives no clear answer, but their ever-increasing demand for raw materials, foodstuffs, and slaves must have had something to do with it.

pp.298-299: The Romans' <respect for tradition did not extend to a particular respect for the older remnants of their language, Latin. Although the Romans' most ancient code of laws, the famous Twelve Tables, was written in Latin, somehow no authoritative version of them survived until the end of the Republic. The Romans were unsentimental about their own language; even their closest equivalent to Holy Writ, the Sibylline Books, consulted for guidance in time of trouble, were not written in Latin, but Greek hexameter verse. ... Latin was spread round the empire not least by the army, originally made up of citizens but into which increasingly men were enlisted from all over, and also by the common Roman policy of granting soldiers land on which to settle after their discharge. ... in Gaul and Iberia the Roman colonies seem to have led to the eventual decline and replacement of their Celtic languages by Latin.> And no wonder, given the practicality of an everyday language spoken with military clarity and precision. At the same time, the standardisation of the written language in the form of Classical Latin – referenced in the index, but barely touched upon in the text – must have conveyed a huge advantage to those that could read.

p.302: <After the conquest of AD 43, which led to full-scale permanent occupation, the Romans made a conscious effort to spread Latin, and indeed Roman education, among the British elite.> I doubt it: the Romans would not have ruled Britain for four hundred years if they had repeated the fateful mistake of the Etruscans, see pp.241-242 above. (This is a novel variant of the celebrated 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' argument. It applies equally to the British in India.)

p.303: <our reliance on written records distorts our sense of the role that must have gone on being played by British. This absence of written British is quite surprising, and has not been explained. Gaulish was often written down on the Continent, but British evidently not: in Britain, only two inscriptions from the Roman period in a language other than Latin have ever been discovered. They are two of the inscriptions on tin/lead sheet from the waters of Bath, and seem to be in something like Celtic, but are not decipherable at all. | Latin persisted after the Roman conquest as the language of learning: in Britain, as elsewhere, essentially unchallenged until the Renaissance and the Enlightenment ... But somehow, some time in the fifth century, between the Roman withdrawal from Britain and the Saxon conquest of England, it got lost as a language of the British people.> Hypothesis: there were simply too few literate Britons to sustain a joint enterprise of writing in their own language, let alone in Latin; this being the case, there would have been scant reward for their keeping up with a second spoken language; and so there was an <absence of written British>, and Latin was <lost as a language of the British people>.

p.308: <The German and Alan invasions marked the final, total failure of the empire's civil defence. One of the effects of the social dislocation that came in its train would have been a breakdown in the availability of education. In fact, there is evidence that illiteracy had been growing everywhere since the instability of the preceding century. Numbers of preserved inscriptions decline in the mid-third century, severely in Italy, drastically in a border region such as Upper Moesia (modern Bosnia), dying out everywhere around 400. Augustine, writing in North Africa in the early fifth century, recounts as a miracle the story of a slave who could read.>

pp.311-313: <Prima facie, the fate of Britain should have been just like that of Gaul or Iberia, or indeed Italy. Germanic invaders, in this case from the north-western coast of Europe, entered a reeling province of the Roman empire in the fifth century AD, and never went home. In light of the experience of western Europe, this should have resulted in a few centuries of turmoil before the establishment of a more or less stable kingdom or (failing unification) an array of states, which would have ended up speaking some new variant of Latin. ... Linguistically, the intermediate stages are obscure, but the triumph of Latin as a popular language, analogously to what always happened on the Continent, never even looked possible. There is never any sense of a takeover of British society by Saxons; it is more the classical story of alien invaders gradually establishing a bridgehead, then spreading out, and building a new order on their terms, like European imperialists in the Americas. There are no records in British of the period, but the records left in Latin ... paint a hostile picture of the Saxons as destroyers. West Saxons were literate from the ninth century in their own language (itself a curiosity for Germanic invaders), the Norsemen from a little later. Neither pay much heed to their British predecessors. | How could this be? The Britons, after all, were heirs to four hundred years of Roman civilisation, just like the Gauls, and were if anything notorious for their military prowess; indeed, potentates from Britain (Maximus in 388, Constantine in 407) had twice led successful forces on to the Continent in the previous fifty years. Granted that the major forces had already been withdrawn to Italy, allowing the Saxons to make their bridgehead, in the generations that followed the Britons should still have had expertise in depth to regroup in the 90 per cent of the country they still controlled, and either drive back, or force a compromise with, the incomers. | Instead we see a steady fall-back, and the unmixed spread across the country of English, a mixture of Angle, Saxon, Frisian and perhaps Jutish varieties of Low German. The only parallel, in fact, to this spread of a Germanic language is what happened when the Germanic invaders encountered virgin territory, in the islands of the North Sea and in Iceland. There of course the Vikings' language, Old Norse, spread, because it had no competition. Could the Britons of the urbanised lowlands somehow just have melted away? Nothing less is needed to explain the complete walkover within Britain of those Germanic languages, and above all of English. | A recent theory, from David Keys, says that they may have. The mid-sixth century (close to 550) was the time when bubonic plague entered Britain, along trade routes from the Mediterranean. Significantly, it would have been Britain (the west and centre of the island) which it hit, rather than England (the south-east), because only Britain maintained trade links with the empire. And it would be less likely to spread to the Saxons since they did not consort with Britons and, living outside the established Roman towns and cities, may have lived at a lower density.> Well, it's possible. Or maybe the wholesale evacuation by the relatively-literate Roman garrison left a C3 void which handicapped the relatively-illiterate British in a way that didn't happen elsewhere. ('C3' is a military acronym meaning 'Command, Control, and Communications'.) In either case, 'more research is needed'.

pp.325-326: <The discovery by the western Europeans that their ships could cross oceans, and bring them directly to distant lands, whether for trade or outright conquest and exploitation, opens a new era in the global history of language spread. ... The spread of languages through the dominance of the new elites was far more pervasive than anything that had been seen before. ... Yet before these languages began their accelerated progress round the world, there came an epoch-making development, which emphasised and reinforced the spread of literacy in western Europe. It widened the range of competition between Latin and the vernacular languages, including the Romance ones, and massively raised the stakes in the contest. The result was the dethronement of Latin as the lingua franca of western Christendom: in effect its death, after two millennia, as a language of any real communication and innovation. | The event was the rise of a mass market in printed books.> This is a most telling counter-example to Ostler's argument on pp.63-64 above.

pp.336-338: <It is impossible to estimate safely the numbers living in the Americas before European contact. Estimates vary between 13 million and 180 million. But everywhere there is evidence of a massive fall in the early years after the Europeans arrived. First of all, the Spaniards complained of depopulation in the first islands they colonised, Cuba and Hispaniola, and the figures bear them out: a census of Hispaniola in 1496 gave a figure of 1.1 million, but just eighteen years later the *repartimiento* of 1514 listed 22,000. ... The diseases travelled faster than the spearheads of Spanish conquests ... The Spanish were not notably humane conquerors, but they had no interest in genocide. From the first days in Hispaniola, they had hoped to exploit the labour of the natives, and for this alone they were dismayed at the sudden and disastrous collapse in their numbers. Yet everywhere, the fact that the previous population was melting away would have materially aided the long-term spread of the conquerors' language, changing the balance in numbers by subtracting predominantly from the speaker communities of the indigenous languages.> Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) is predicated on similar shocking statistics. But the plausible tie-in with language use is Ostler's innovation.

p.340: <the conquest of the Philippines did not share in all the unprecedented properties of the conquest of the Americas. It was, admittedly, a seaborne invasion, and its point of origin was, like many expeditions of exploration into North America, in Mexico. But the land targeted was part of the Old World, not the New, and hence did not suffer from the disastrous lack of immunity to European diseases which devastated America: the advent of the Spanish was not followed in the Pacific by any collapse in the native population. Furthermore, the settlement of the Philippines did not proceed by individual groups spreading out to explore and exploit in their own interest. It was a Spanish government foundation, set up first at Cebu, and then, more permanently, in Manila. Thereafter, expansion of Spanish presence, and hence the Spanish language, came through the (more or less) disinterested activities of missionaries. The Philippines lacked the precious metals found in the Americas, and were much harder to reach from Spain, since the only barely practical route lay through Mexico: the colony offered little practical incentive for a Spanish-speaking community to grow and expand.> The exception that proves the rule (of the earlier 'tie-in').

p.354: <The Aztecs ... knew that the reedy, but defensible, islands in the middle of the lake should be their home, Tenochtitlan, 'place of the prickly-pear'. It was the year *ome calli*, '2 House', 1325. | This was the origin of the vast and miraculous lake city, which so entranced the invading Spaniards when they reached it in November 1519. The Aztecs had regrouped and prospered in their lakeland home for a hundred years, and then begun to expand their domains through a series of aggressive wars. ... A single minister, Tlacaelel, presided over the first five decades of this bloody expansion. With an eye to the future, his policy was to burn all the books of conquered peoples to erase memories of a pre-Aztec past.> Clearly the Aztecs knew all about the power of literacy.

pp.380-455, <Chapter 11 | In the Train of Europe: Europe's Languages Abroad>: In which Ostler investigates the influence of <European imperialism> on the spread of their languages. His conclusions, p.446: <Our quick review of the linguistic careers of most of the European imperial powers has revealed a bewildering variety of ways in which the empire can be won, exercised and lost, with or without long-term transmission of the imperialist's language. ... But there is one simplistic prejudice that does seem to hold up: any foreign empire does tend to spread some language. It may be a local language, not that of the dominant power, as Malay came to dominate the Dutch Indies; and it may not persist long after the departure of foreign control, as Russian is slipping away from Russia's ex-colonies. But a common language is a practical necessity in a territory brought under common, external, control, and this necessity tends to foster language spread if the domination persists over time, with recruitment of local people to represent, and interface with, the foreign power in later generations.> That's useful, as far as it goes. But by clinging to another <simplistic prejudice> Ostler has missed a much stronger conclusion, that a self-sustaining native population with its own culture of literacy will be disinclined to take up <the imperialist's

language>, even when sweetened with favourable trade, and certainly not when threatened with invasion. Why should they, when already they have the greatest gift, that which distinguishes them from barbarians and other creatures? On first contact the aspirant imperialists' primary question should have been that of the time traveller, "Do you have books?" As he found, the answer would have told them all they wanted to know about their hosts.

pp.456-521, <Chapter 12 | Microcosm or Distorting Mirror? The Career of English>: More of the same, with minor variations, as follows.

p.458: <This idea of 'English – the Businessman's Friend' may be what is really distinctive about the spread of this language, though equally distinctively reinforced by English-speaking science and technology.> Trade and literacy, again; plus the relentless application of scientific method.

p.464: <In all these extensions to its domain, Norman influence brought the same rather complex linguistic regime: French for the rulers, English for their retinue, and Latin for technical support.> This last clause is casually dismissive and wholly misleading, given that five pages later we are told that <important writing was all in Latin>. 'Latin for literacy' would be nearer the mark. And of course the Church maintained close control on its acquisition and use; like the Egyptian scribes and the Chinese officials (pp.155-158), this is how they preserved their power and prestige. See also HWPNotes.pdf p.24 regarding *History of Western Philosophy* p.303.

pp.466-468: <Earlier, when trying to explain the remarkable linguistic impact of the Anglo-Saxons, we conjectured that English originally established itself in Britain in the wake of a major epidemic, in the fifth century AD ... But when it comes to the effect of the Black Death, no conjecture is necessary. This plague first reached England in 1348, and returned twice more before the century was out. ... England's population was halved ... The result was massive disruption of the feudal system ... By the late fourteenth century, then, French had been dropped as a medium of education in England as a needless barrier to vernacular understanding ... In the century after the Black Death, even royalty stopped using French.> See above, pp.311-313.

pp.471-472: <Caxton, then, claimed to be following a classic English policy of reasonable compromise. But what he was actually doing was converting texts into London English. ... Printing, once enough people could read and did read, became the first of the mass media, with the polarising, 'winner takes all' effects now familiar from TV culture. People inevitably learn from the books they read how English should be written, and the King's English thereby became the people's English too, at least on the page. 'The English tongue', for the first time, was being defined.> Another counter-example to Ostler's argument on pp.63-64 above.

p.473: <The Bible was cardinal also in the definition of English. ... John Wyclif's translation had been put into circulation through handwritten volumes, only to be rigorously suppressed in 1407-9: there is always a party who believes that great blessings must be distributed only under rigorous supervision, and this view largely prevailed until the end of the fifteenth century.> The close control of literacy, again.

p.474, footnote: <The Shakespeare phenomenon recalls the place of Homer in the history of Greek. Each was a poet of encyclopedic range and unchallenged quality but obscure identity, at or near the very foundation of the language's main tradition of literary classics. Each seems to have acquired this status at least a century after he actually lived and composed. Each went on to have an overwhelming role in the heritage of his language, endlessly praised by critics and schoolteachers, and also to inform traditional ideas of the language community's history. Perhaps this is best explained by emphasising that each of them is indebted more than most to a rich ancient tradition, Homer to that of the travelling bard or *aoidos*, Shakespeare to that of the strolling player. This was

less remarkable to their contemporaries, who saw them in context, but somehow, as time went on, their works were felt to sum up the tradition, and so replaced it in memory.> Another instance that illustrates both the permanence of literature and the impermanence of language.

pp.476-477: <As a result of the complexity of relation between spelling and sound, a large proportion of the primary teaching profession, in England at least, was until recently of the opinion that phonics are more confusing than helpful when teaching children to read and write: hence the notorious 'Look and Say' method, which essentially treated each word as if it were a Chinese character. | As with Chinese, one can say that, for learners, the English language has been literate too long.> Such considerations become irrelevant when the meaning of a word is defined through its subjective associations, see my comment to p.154 above. It's no coincidence that this was one of the conclusions of my analysis of how my son learned to read independently by the age of three years and four months, see *How to Make a Mind* chapter 4.

p.484: <The [New England] settlers' attitude to the Indians was to attempt to coexist peacefully until they needed to dispossess them to provide more land for their expanding community. There was little or no cohabitation, but hostilities followed sooner or later; and the natives of New England in the end died out far more thoroughly and rapidly than those of Mexico or Peru.> Thus English spread in North America just as Spanish had spread further south, see pp.336-338 above.

pp.497-498: <When the English East India Company acquired its crucial bases in India – Madras (1654), Bombay (1668) and Calcutta (1690) – the effective lingua franca was still very much Portuguese ... It is also clear that until the nineteenth century higher-level dealings with Indian authorities, above all the Mughal government, were conducted in Persian. ... And there was an extra motive in the back of British minds which drained any enthusiasm for wider use of their native language in India. As a member of the British Parliament put it in 1793: 'We have lost our colonies in America by imparting our education there; we need not do so in India too.'> As indeed the Romans had learnt from the Etruscans in an earlier age, see p.302 above.

p.500, quoting the Reverend D. MacKinnon: <I could not discover one particle of classical taste, of the knowledge of mathematical truth, or of genuine moral or religious principle in any class nor in any individual of the human species born and educated in Hindoostan or even in all Asia. The dark race appeared and do appear to me, buried in darkness, moving like mere mechanism and utterly void of those sentiments which dignify and ennoble our species and entitle us to claim kindred with the Gods. | All my speculations were at last reduced to two simple propositions: | 1. That the natives of India cannot be illuminated by their own languages, nor by the Books now existing in those languages. | 2. That therefore they must be enlightened by the acquisition of other languages & by reading Books capable of forming their taste & of teaching them useful & solid knowledge as well as genuine moral and religious principles.> I can think of two other explanations for the good Reverend's observations: (i) blatant racial prejudice; (ii) long-term neglect of scientific method, resulting in a dearth of true literacy, see my comments to pp.215-216 and p.90 above.

p.503: <Another long-term influence that favoured English, especially in the south, was the absence of any other useful lingua franca: Britain's domain had already included the south of the country, and went on to encompass the whole subcontinent; but Persian or Hindi-Urdu were never acceptable south of the old Mughal boundary. If India, especially a democratic India, is to stay united, it needs a common language that seems neutral, or at least equally oppressive to all.> Linguistic divide-and-rule!

p.504: <Indian scholars found that English did indeed give them access to a world of thought beyond Indian tradition, in law, physical and social sciences, politics, literature – even, here and there, religion.> This supports my explanation (ii) to p.500 above.

p.512: <For scientists and engineers, but crucially for businessmen, English has been the language in which the world's know-how is set out.> Scientific method, again.

p.512: <These triumphs in what is called 'communications' all tend to reduce the time-taking and effort-costing effects of distances in the world. ... But they also standardise the images and phrases that people carry in their memories, from advertising through entertainment to education ... and quite likely the words we remember will be in English, even if we are Hungarian, Balinese, South African or Mongolian.> Another counter-example to Ostler's argument on pp.63-64 above.

p.517: <English is associated with the quest to get rich, the deliberate acquisition of wealth, often by quite unprecedented and imaginative schemes.> Trade and literacy, again.

p.521: <In our age, Arabic is for foreign learners the language of the Koran, English the language of modern business and popular culture.> It's clear that for centuries the English language has derived its strength from 'the potent combination of trade and literacy'. However, in recent times this success may also have distracted its leading users from their customary dedication to a research ethos, with potentially damaging consequences, see my comments to p.238 and pp.243-249 above.

pp.534-559, <Chapter 14 | Looking Ahead>: Contrary to its title this closing chapter is disappointingly retrospective and repetitive, and it adds nothing of substance.

Summary observations and conclusions

Positive:

- As it explains on the back cover, <The history of language is also a history of its speakers, reflecting the power, culture, conquests, prestige and occasionally the declining fortunes of its users. Through the study of its languages, we find a potted history of the world itself. | *Empires of the Word* is the first and only book to recount this remarkable story in all its glorious variety.> Excusing the <and only> as a superfluous exaggeration, the remainder is a significant claim of originality which is well-deserved. Indeed, this book's unusual and unique perspective presents a much-needed test for my own ideas on the topic. (Ideas which, while interesting and insightful, are also the bold speculations of an amateur enthusiast who is straying far from his own domain of learning and expertise.)
- As a direct result of this 'much-needed test' I've given closer consideration to 'my own ideas on the topic', which consequently I've combined and summarised in the deceptively simple formula, 'It is literacy that makes us human.' Whilst this phrasing derives directly from that of the first sentence in this book, the core idea is mine own, as first expressed in *How to Make a Mind*. (Specifically, p.104: "in order to formulate predictions and plans our agent would have to be expressing complex ideas, out loud and in writing. That is, there is a profound and direct link between our agent's development and use of her System 2, and her development and use of an 'analytical' language ability.") In comparison I much prefer the new mantra, which is both more striking and more catchy, while not losing or changing any of the original intended meaning. Thus reading *Empires of the Word* has helped me to develop the presentation of my ideas, but not the ideas themselves.
- Also as a result of reading this book I've formulated the notion of 'true literacy', in order to help distinguish the variety of ways in which people relate to their books. This expedient makes me nervous, however, because it evokes the spectre of the 'No true Scotsman fallacy' (see references below). Thus I've felt it necessary to go beyond my original working definition (see p.90 above), and to identify several quite specific characteristics or behaviours indicative of (what I call) true literacy, as follows: (i) a script based on a modular alphabet (see p.23 above and Review05.pdf); (ii) a set of grammatical terms, and their associated

syntax, in fulfilment of the necessary and sufficient requirements of an ‘analytical’ or ‘abstract’ language (see p.234 above and Review05.pdf); (iii) acceptance that “semantics is mainly concerned with the identification of associated percepts” (*How to Make a Mind* p.86, see also p.154 above and MyPhilosophy03.pdf); (iv) the routine use of (what I call) scientific method (see pp.215-216 above and MyPhilosophy03.pdf); and (v) an attitude of open enquiry and active learning (see p.238 above and Review05.pdf). In my view this list (i)-(v) is a robust and reliable set of criteria by which competing claims of literacy may be judged.

- Also as a result of reading this book I’ve been confirmed in my view that a key determinant in the historical ebb and flow of human affairs is ‘the potent combination of trade and literacy’, see p.93 above. This insight even has its counterpart in modern business practice, where it’s entirely typical for a dynamic new ‘top team’ to initiate ‘culture change’ by scrapping their company’s established pay scales and closing the library. I’ve seen this too often not to recognise its true purpose: the assertion of absolute authority; showing them who’s boss.

Negative:

- *Empires of the Word* is <a potted history of the world> as told from the point of view of its many and varied (spoken) languages. As such it is always interesting, often entertaining, and occasionally informative. What it is *not* is insightful: it turns out that there’s very little correlation between the objective events and the subjective viewpoint (see, for example, p.xx and p.446); and as a result there’s not much that can be reliably inferred or predicted from its very many pages. It’s what I’d call a just-so story.
- In comparison, as I’ve noted already, ‘the potent combination of trade and literacy’ explains a great deal. But Ostler has persistently underestimated the importance of both of these factors, to the detriment of his narrative.
- Furthermore, as well as correlating ‘the historical ebb and flow of human affairs’ with our use of spoken languages, and with ‘the potent combination of trade and literacy’, Ostler would have done well to take account of the evolution and migration of: (i) people, as inferred from DNA analyses (he touches on this in one case, p.313, but even by 2006 when *Empires of the Word* was published this technology had transformed the broader field); (ii) scripts, as inferred from the written record (see, for example, pp.241-242); (iii) literacy within a population, as inferred from social analysis (see, for example, pp.272-314); and (iv) the products of our language and literature, that is, our time-honoured histories, stories, and ideas, as inferred from the written record (which hardly feature at all). This last omission is particularly disappointing, given the close relationship that must exist between the use of a language and the message that it conveys. Of course it’s not at all easy, but other authors have done it, for example, Stephen Oppenheimer in *Eden in the East* (1999).

Overall:

- This is an interesting book. I’m glad I’ve read it. Nevertheless, on the basis of the above review I feel justified in sticking to my world-view (as set out in MyPhilosophy03.pdf and Review05.pdf, in particular), and in that sense I’ve not gained much from this reading.

References

References to online resources, including .pdf documents available on my website, are as follows:

HWPNotes.pdf: <https://idealectic.com/idealectic/HWPNotes.pdf>

MyPhilosophy03.pdf: <https://idealectic.com/idealectic/MyPhilosophy03.pdf>

No true Scotsman fallacy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_true_Scotsman

Review05.pdf: <https://idealectic.com/idealectic/Review05.pdf>

The Time Machine clip, ‘Books Have Crumbled To Dust In The Distant Future’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbTz7EZF7s>