

## **The growth of English as an international language. A case for culture-free communicative competence?**

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### **Résumé**

#### **Développement de l'anglais international : preuve pour l'existence d'une compétence communicative a-culturelle ?**

Dans l'Europe la suprématie de l'anglais dans la communication internationale et/ou inter-culturelle semble inéluctable. Pour les participants aux discours internationaux une compétence de locuteur natif ou proche de celle-ci devient gênante. Elle est gênante pour des raisons pratiques, car elle mène à des perturbations communicatives, mais –comme le remarque Michael Byram– gênante aussi comme source principale d'une sorte de « schizophrénie langagière » qui va de pair avec l'isolement de sa propre culture et l'acquisition d'une nouvelle compétence socioculturelle. L'avertissement explicité par Byram s'applique à ce type de situations où l'acquisition d'une langue s'accompagne d'une saisie d'aspects culturels.

Il y a aussi d'autres possibilités d'analyse à savoir les relations qui peuvent intervenir entre la culture et la langue dans le processus didactique tels que, entre autres, le développement de la compétence socioculturelle dépourvue de son aspect langagier ou l'inverse : un apprentissage de la langue qui est culturellement neutre.

Dans quelle mesure cette dernière option, serait réalisable ? Dans quelle mesure elle convient au processus didactique ? Un usager de l'anglais dans sa version internationale, profitera-t-il réellement d'un enseignement culturellement neutre ? C'est à ce type de questions que je cherche des réponses dans ma communication.

### **Mots-clés**

L'anglais international, socioculturelle, a-culturelle, l'acquisition d'une langue, compétence communicative.

### 1. Introductory remarks

Since the heyday of behavioural psychology, the conceptualization of the relation between language and culture has undergone a number of radical changes and modifications. Its subsequent criticism in Chomsky's writings gave rise to the establishment of the generative model, embracing bio-nativism, modularity and language autonomy. It was, perhaps, a natural reaction to the behavioural fascination with language conditioning, "a healthy methodological antidote to the psychology of the early twentieth century" (Hudson 2007: 1). Today, the intellectual isolationism of the generative enterprise is no longer an attractive option, and the pendulum seems to have swung in the opposite direction. Not only are language and culture (e.g. socio-pragmatic competence) equal partners, but precedence is given to socio-pragmatic considerations and broad contextual clues in shaping/coding messages. Hudson (ibid) again: "Language is not, *sui generis*, a unique system which can, and should, be studied without reference to any other system." Geeraerts (2006: 29), within Cognitive Linguistics, conceives of language "as integrated with the other cognitive capacities of man."

Culture and language are interconnected. Within a sufficiently broad interpretation of the terms 'language' and 'culture', they co-determine complex processes of social construction, in the sense of Fairclough (2006: 27), where "particular economic systems or forms of state depend upon and are closely connected with particular meanings, interpretations, narratives, values, attitudes, identities and so forth. Furthermore, these processes of social construction inherently involve discourse and (...) are in part what we can call *effects of discourse*".

The purpose of this paper is not to question the interconnectedness of culture and language. Its assumption is infinitely more modest: socio-pragmatic mechanisms operate on the strings derived by linguistic competence, and so any pragmatic idiosyncrasy (e.g. cultural colouring) is the effect of modifying those original strings. Just as cognitive grammar sees communication as involving "a balancing act between the static, shared set of idealized cultural models and the more dynamic needs of individuals faced with the realities of a social world" (Coulson 2006: 205), I will assume the same kind of a balancing act takes place between sentence meaning determined by the static, shared set of linguistic rules and speaker meaning, enabling the proper application of cultural models. Please note that this is not an attempt to minimize the role of socio-pragmatics in utterance formation/interpretation, I am merely exploring the possibility that one *builds* upon the other.

Why is this change of perspective important? Needless to say, if X is built upon Y, then X and Y are interconnected. The new perspective allows one to dissociate X from Y, which is particularly important in modelling language teaching. For almost every natural language used in the world today, X and Y (i.e. language and culture) are the property of the same group of users, most notably the *native* users of X and Y. Examining, and eventually imitating, the way in which form and function, the idealized and the idiosyncratic, interact to produce native discourse is the essence of foreign language learning. However, should we find a language which spreads dynamically, with little respect paid to political borders, both X (linguistic system) and Y (socio-pragmatic competence) characterizing that language will soon cease to belong to any native group of

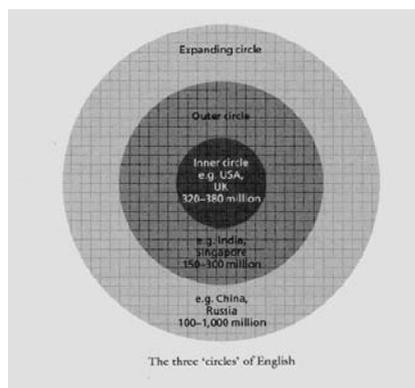
speakers. It will no longer be limited to the employment of conceptual blending, socio-pragmatic construal, or the like, associated with native use.

Every new user will bring his/her own affective values (the Y mentioned in the preceding paragraph) while trying to retain a common denominator – the shared, stable X as a way to ensure mutual comprehensibility among users with different linguistic backgrounds.

The structure of the paper reflects the reasoning just presented and addresses two main issues, namely the unique position English enjoys in the world today, which is leading to the development of international or lingua franca varieties of the language and the immediate pedagogical consequences of having to teach an international code that has no native speakers, yet belongs to everyone. In this respect the culture-free option will be examined.

## 2. The growth of English as a lingua franca

It is only proper to begin with Braj Kachru (1982, 1985) and his famous concentric circles, cf. also Crystal (1997).



(source: [www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/eng/WE/circles.html](http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/eng/WE/circles.html))

The *inner circle* refers to countries where English is spoken natively as the first language (e.g. the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia). These are the strongholds of native usage and the source of native speaker models, both in terms of linguistic and socio-pragmatic competence.

The *outer circle* includes countries where English enjoys the status of a powerful “second language” in bilingual or multilingual communities (Singapore, India, Jamaica). The degree of bilingualism varies, code mixing and code switching are notorious, and the outer circle English bears the unmistakable signs of local modifications introduced by the communities that have adopted it for everyday usage. The term ‘World Englishes’ is sometimes used to refer to the outer circle varieties, though this is not a particularly opportune label, as it implies that *inner circle* varieties are somehow “out of this world” while strongly suggesting a contrast between pure and impure dialects. It seems unavoidable that outer and inner circle varieties are treated as native dialects, and the geo-political

complications which may arise in due course as a result of the proposed re categorization are just as foreseeable.

And now onto the most important category: *expanding circle* countries. The expanding circle is very much the rest of the world, with English enjoying a prominent role, despite the lack of any historical or geo-political reasons which would explain that dominance. The number of English speakers from the expanding circle is staggering and has certainly exceeded a hundred million. In all likelihood that number is too conservative. For example Kachru in a recent book (Kachru 2005) provides a startling statistic – there are more than 530 million users of English in China and India alone. By Wikipedia estimates the European Union with its 27 member states has the combined total English speaking population of 229,850,000 including 61,850,000 native speakers and 168,000,000 non-native speakers, and occupies second place in the world in terms of the total number of English speakers (both first and additional language), between the US and India.

Even the most conservative count reveals something about the status of English these days: the number of *norm-dependent* users is considerably larger than *norm-providing* (inner circle) and *norm-developing* (outer circle) users taken together. No other language can claim that kind of disproportion between native and non-native users. No other language is better suited, therefore, to become a culture-free linguistic vehicle to be loaded with whatever values and cultural patterns its new owners want it to have. To use Kachru's (2005) succinct metaphor, "the English language needs to be decolonised, to be made in other images", images of those with different (e.g. non-Anglo-Saxon) cultural backgrounds.

Language teaching today is very sensitive to cultural issues, and rightly so. Yet, given the rapid growth of new varieties of English, the teaching of specific native cultural patterns, including those that are reflected in the fabric of language itself, might turn out to be more of a hindrance than an advantage to global communication. More than thirty years ago Thumboo (1976: ix) advocated "breaching a body of habitual English associations to secure the conditions of verbal freedom" thus enabling "the permutations of another culture and environment." The necessity to do just that is even more pressing today than it was in the 1970's.

None of what I have said so far should be seen as advocacy of linguistic 'laissez-faire' policy of idiosyncratic chaos, in the absence of rule-governed behaviour. More and more English-based communication patterns are being developed around the globe, many of which may give rise to "functional nativism" (in the sense of Kachru 2005), but many will not, depending – *inter alia* – on the degree of social penetration of the new language. Ultimately, perhaps, the concept of "functional nativism" should replace that of natural nativism (i.e. nativism by birth)<sup>1</sup> because the boundary between native and non-native competence has become imprecise.

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<sup>1</sup> Kachru calls this category *genetic* nativism (as opposed to the already mentioned *functional* nativism). The reference to the human genetic make-up in this context may imply, however, that we are genetically predisposed to learn a *specific* language. To the best of my knowledge no such limitation exists. Every child can learn any natural language

The emergence of new functional Englishes is an inevitable consequence of the way they spread. Brutt-Griffler (2002) suggests the term *macroacquisition* to refer to the fact that international languages do not spread through speaker migration but instead by many individuals in a given speech community acquiring the language. Today, English mainly spreads via *macroacquisition*. Learners of English in a non-English speaking country will have different (and more restricted) needs from those of immigrant populations, because their ultimate goal is not to use English on a regular basis for every-day communication and negotiations (cf. also cf. Byram (1997) and McKay (2002) for more discussion of the issue).

English is increasingly used as a language of choice in non-native communication. This, calls into question the traditional assumption that teaching English should involve introduce the culture of the English-speaking countries. As McKay (2002: 12) remarks speakers of English as an international language “do not need to internalize the cultural norms of Inner Circle countries in order to use the language effectively as a medium of wider communication”.

### **3. Pedagogical implications**

The new needs of international audiences are frequently ignored by examination syndicates, textbook writers, in-service teachers. EFL teaching industry of today seems largely insensitive to the growing internationalization of English. Consider a list of topics from a randomly chosen C1-level textbook. Popular culture is discussed with reference to Rambo and “A nightmare on Elm Street,” the guidelines for writing business letters meticulously follow the *inner circle* standards of layout, punctuation, phraseology and politeness level, the past times section looks at the bright and dark sides of Victorian Britain, favourite author - Aldous Huxley, fame and fortune - Charlie Chaplin, school education – Eton. The inner circle becomes a major reference point for culture and cultural artifacts and reflects the deep-seated conviction of the authors that an English language textbook must obey the correctness standards of native English users. In the light of the preceding discussion, this may no longer be the relevant reference point. But the descriptors for English, as proposed in the Common European Framework of Reference, leave no room for “functional nativism”.

Common reference levels introduce three broad categories of language competence, each further subdivided into two stages, yielding a global scale of six levels, starting with A1 (basic user) and going all the way up to C2 (mastery). Let us consider some of the specifications that allow us to define a learner as a C2 user.

- a) Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read.
- b) Can express him/herself spontaneously at length with a natural colloquial flow, avoiding or backtracking around any difficulty so smoothly that the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.
- c) Shows great flexibility reformulating ideas in differing linguistic forms of meaning precisely, to give emphasis, to differentiate and to eliminate ambiguity. Also has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms.

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with equal ease (if certain conditions are met, e.g. appropriate time, manner and amount of exposure). This is the essence of the generative equidistance principle.

Despite certain concessions made to the learner (a good, rather than very good command of idiomatic/formulaic language, avoidance strategies are allowed, the interlocutor is *hardly* aware of the difficulties) some of these criteria may prove challenging even to a tenth-generation native speaker.

That level of proficiency is beyond the capabilities of most foreign language learners. As argued above, this may be unreachable. Perhaps it is also likely to be undesirable. An important argument for the reconsideration of the tradition-sanctioned native perspective comes from Michael Byram's major work (Byram 1997: 11-12):

“The second ground for criticism of the native speaker model is that, even were it possible, it would (...) imply that a learner should be linguistically schizophrenic, abandoning one language in order to blend into another linguistic environment, becoming accepted as a native speaker by other native speakers. This linguistic schizophrenia also suggests separation from one's own culture and the acquisition of a native sociocultural competence, and a new sociocultural identity. The strains involved in this process, even if it were desirable and possible, (...) could be permanently damaging (...).”

There are two major issues raised in the quote. One is linguistic, the other sociocultural. We have already noted a new wave of resistance against linguistic blending. The time has come, therefore, to examine the options teachers and learners have for relating culture and language in the classroom. The terms *culture*, *socio-cultural competence* and *pragmatic competence* have been used more or less interchangeably so far, though not out of sloppiness. While the definitions and ranges of potential referents vary for each of the labels, there exists a common conceptual core which serves our immediate purposes.

Specifically, it will be assumed, as a convenient pedagogical approximation, that the following notions and categorizations are essential to “introduce culture” in the classroom:

- culture as artefacts/products, thus overlapping with art,
- culture as a factual data base,
- culture as social norms/perceptions/values/beliefs,
- culture as linguistic behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

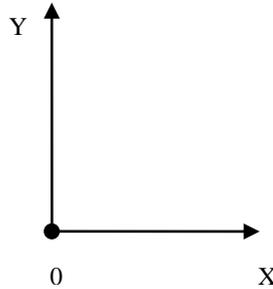
#### 4. Four scenarios

To present the basic possibilities of the language–culture relatedness in the teaching–learning process, let us use quadrant I of a rectangular coordinate system, plotting the subsequent stages of linguistic development (x units) on the abscissa OX (horizontal) axis and the subsequent stages of the socio-cultural growth (y units) on the ordinate OY (vertical) axis. The first scenario represents non-learning.

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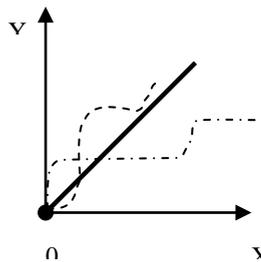
<sup>2</sup> The proposed categorisation is meant for practical, classroom purposes only. It cuts across Moran's (2001) cultural perspectives, especially chapter 7, and relates to the discussion in Risager (2006).

scenario one: *non-user*



A non-user is a monolingual speaker, with nonexistent or negligible knowledge of the target culture and language. The number of truly monolingual speakers in most European countries is said to be rapidly diminishing. Some of them refuse to tolerate or acknowledge otherness, perceiving it as a threat or an oddity. Others may not have the time, money, opportunity or motivation to gain a new skill; they may have been told they are no good as language learners, they may be too shy to begin, they may fail to see a sufficient number of potential benefits that outweigh the disadvantages. A lot depends on the perception of monolingualism in the local community, personal attitudes and readiness to take risks. Age is also a major factor. The prevailing myth of “being too old to learn a language” prevails and may even be inadvertently encouraged by those who associate success with achieving near-native standards. Scenario two is definitely more optimistic.

scenario two: *balanced user*

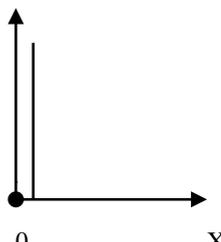


Interlanguage expansion, perceived here as the growth of linguistic resources available to the learner, is accompanied by an expansion of sociocultural awareness. Without a doubt, this is a target for CLIL (content-and-language-integrated-learning) methodology, communicative language teaching and Michael Lewis’s Lexical Approach. The question of *how much culture* vs. *how much language* will depend, to a great extent, on the definition of culture (see section 3), textbook selection, individual preferences of the teacher, students’ needs and expectations, etc. Generally speaking, learning progress is measured against a set of more or less precisely defined native standards and does not promote the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (in the sense of Byram 1997), because no systematic deviation from the commonly

accepted L2 norm counts as optimal attainment. For better or for worse, most language teaching courses aspire to this model. Certain difficult issues (e.g. the fluency-accuracy dichotomy) tend to be swept under the carpet, without getting the attention they deserve.

The remaining two scenarios illustrate extreme cases, with one parameter dominant and the other neglected.

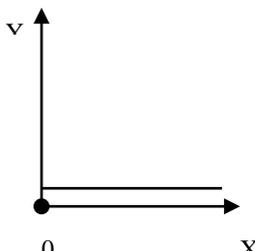
scenario three: *target culture explorer*



This scenario rests on the assumption that the approval of / vivid interest in the target language culture is independent of the ability to use the target language itself. It is about tolerance, broad horizons and open-mindedness, but definitely a monolingual environment. One may be fascinated by Chinese culture and want to learn more about it without even attempting to master the language. Important aspect of the Chinese cultural patterns will obviously remain uninterpretable and major primary sources inaccessible, but there is still a lot to be gained for the learner in terms of his or her personal growth, interaction with the community, attitudes towards otherness. As pointed out in Krashen's (1996: 6) discussion about Russian immigrants in the USA, "when immigrants are knowledgeable about the world around them, they adjust more easily and (...) providing information in the first language is very efficient". Needless to say, that is hardly a reason not to attempt L2 acquisition. After all, a culture knower could become a learner of the relevant language at a later stage. He or she would be an asset to any language course.

The last scenario relates directly to the main theme of the paper, in being a mirror image of scenario three – the development of linguistic skills, without the corresponding awareness of the L2 culture.

scenario four: *culture monster*



It has been argued above that the separation of strictly linguistic and sociopragmatic threads might be a reasonable move for an international language which spreads via macroacquisition. In this context let me reiterate that the rationale for the separation is not to teach language in a sociocultural vacuum (which is certainly a futile and counterproductive endeavour), but to offer the learner an efficient vehicle for the expression of his/her own cultural values, objectives and preferences. One might envisage other learner profiles here as well – a researcher doing comparative synchronic study of the phonological or morphological properties of a language group, or a diachronic study of the evolution of a specific system feature across a number of languages, a student who likes the challenge of acquiring a new language system as a cognitive puzzle or an involving academic task. We are looking at learners who are ready to appreciate what Strozer (1994: 213) calls “the intrinsic intellectual interest of the investigation of linguistic structure”.

### **5. The culture-language interface**

Given that there is a need to separate language teaching from culture-related instruction in a number of well-defined cases, is the separation feasible? Is there any sensible interpretation of “doing language” without “doing culture” in the classroom? In other words, is the fourth scenario achievable for modern languages like English?

The answer to the last question hinges on our interpretation of the term *linguistic competence* and our readiness to accept (1-2) below.

1) Linguistic competence is not reducible to / motivated by / dependent on sociopragmatic competence, although it will serve as a starting point for pragmatic operations.

2) Linguistic competence is composed of system rules at four basic levels, and a mental lexicon, comprising, inter alia, meaning specifications [but NOT the sociopragmatic entanglements] for individual words and word sequences.

Let us consider a simple illustration. Does *bird* / *oiseau* / *ptak* mean one and the same thing?

Up to a point they do, insofar as the images conveyed by these words share a number of crucial features in the UK, France or Poland. The cross-linguistically shared core contains enough features to sanction the *dictionary equivalence* of these words.

Pragmatic equivalence (e.g. associative meaning) does not have to be the same, however, since the concepts have been culturally processed for centuries (different prototypicality effects, formulaic ranges, etc.). In every language, idiomatic expressions will present a challenge to the learner. To illustrate, consider the French formula *un oiseau de mauvais augure*. It derives its meaning from the practices of ancient fortune-tellers and the present-day association (the foreboding of bad news) is merely additive in the sense of expanding and modifying the message encoded at the linguistic level. All idioms have this property. The fact that they are non-transparent to present-day speakers may be used to argue that idiomatic language should not feature prominently in international exchanges based on a *lingua franca*.

Sociopragmatic/cultural superstructure is like an extension of an existing structure above a baseline. The baseline (the footing) consists of a series of representations resulting from the operation of narrowly conceived linguistic

competence; only in that sense may the cultural superstructure be perceived as secondary or derivative. The superstructure maintains coherence and cohesion across individual utterances. It includes culture, institutions, power structure, roles, and rituals of the society as they are represented in native discourse. It effectively enables discourse to be transported to a higher level, where the user is free to accept or modify the constraints of linguistic rules, with a view to controlling discourse and manipulating the interlocutor. Let us look at the two examples below to see how crucial the superstructure / baseline distinction is in processing natural language discourse.

Speaker A: *What do you think about Anne's new boyfriend?*

Speaker B: *Well, Mel Gibson, he is not.*

To activate our encyclopedic knowledge about Mel Gibson and then - via a series of more or less complicated inferences - reach the conclusion that Anne's new boyfriend is not particularly handsome or not too macho, we need to start at the baseline, we need to process system information which is quite independent of our beliefs about Mel Gibson: the structure of a declarative negative clause, topicalisation, subject vs. subject complement, etc.

The mundane and surprisingly unenlightening information that Anne's new boyfriend is not called Mel Gibson, which can be gathered from the literal reading of the sentence (i.e. the one constrained by the rules of our linguistic competence), triggers off pragmatic processing. The *uninformative load* of the message is a signal that pragmatic processing is necessary.

Let us now take just a brief look at another example which can be analysed along the same lines.

Speaker A: *Si tu m'embrasses, je te révélerai un petit secret.*

Speaker B: *J'ai horreur du chantage.*

Sentence A is a conditional clause. That information and the mechanisms generating/recognizing conditional clauses are part of the linguistic footing. On the other hand, conditional clauses are used in everyday French to phrase face-saving, polite requests. This is superstructure at work. Speaker B finds it convenient to ignore the illocution and in his response attends only to the "baseline-generated" reading, i.e. to the conditional form of A's utterance. The fact that B's response could be pragmatically interpreted as either a joke or a menace will not go unnoticed by A, who will have to decide on the best superstructure reading, and act accordingly.

It is reasonable to conclude that the success of everyday discourse rests on two independent, separate sources that nevertheless interact, only one of which (the linguistic system) must be overtly taught to foreign L2 users. The other (sociopragmatic awareness) derives from the learner's lifelong exposure to L1 culture, the newly acquired foreign culture, or a combination of both, as in the case of Byram's ICC.

Sociopragmatic references, involving our encyclopedic knowledge, beliefs, political orientation, and so forth, are the building blocks of the superstructure, but crucially not of the language baseline. This becomes clear when one tries to analyse reading passages from textbooks. To round up the discussion in this paper let us have a look at an example from an English teaching manual.

Many of the greatest scientists of the 20th century worked in Germany before 1933. But after Hitler came to power, a lot of

them moved to the USA. When they got to the USA, they began to write in English. (The most famous of them was Albert Einstein, who became an American citizen in 1940.) They helped to make English the international language of science. English is the international language of the Internet, too. More than half of the world's Web sites are in English. So if you can't understand English you'll never be a really great surfer.

(P. Dayan, P. Dominique and B. Lacoste, *Move up. Anglais langue 1*, part four, Paris: Nathan 2002, p. 19)

The fragment is embedded in culture in a trivial way by reflecting numerous cultural artefacts. To fully appreciate the text it is necessary to understand the reference to the Internet, websites and a new generation of cyber surfers. Furthermore, learners unfamiliar with European history, values and system of beliefs will find the text incoherent as it abounds in uninterpretable concepts such as Germany, the second World War, post-war immigration. These learners need intensive intercultural training. Throughout this paper, however, we have been mainly preoccupied with another category of learners, a group with a common cultural heritage, a legacy of what Cooper (1917) called *the Greek genius*. That is a most powerful vehicle of cultural identity, resulting in a considerable overlap among the superstructures of European languages. So, if that group of learners can now adopt a common linguistic footing by appropriating and modifying an already existing code, such as international English, we may make Ludwik Zamenhof's dream come true.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

It has been my intention in this paper to show that lingua franca English may be stripped of cultural values – not because they are unimportant, but because they are all-important and every user deserves a chance to bring his own sociopragmatic competence into a speech act. The fact that native varieties have established their own patterns of encoding history, tradition or social norms in English is relevant only with respect to these native varieties. The strength of a lingua franca is that it stands a chance of becoming a neutral communication tool between people of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds – a code that will preserve the essential communicative core of the English linguistic system while ignoring the inessential features of the periphery (some idiosyncratic system features, formulaic patterns, most sociopragmatic superstructure features).

Given the distinction between the linguistic footing and pragmatic superstructure, *the culture monster* option is possible. Standard EFL (English as a foreign language) courses do not acknowledge the emergence and dynamic growth of a new language in the world, a functional variety that is no longer seen as transitional or corrupt, but as a language in its own right.

The far-reaching consequences of a shift like this are almost impossible to envisage. Undeniably, however, anything that helps us move about the present-day Tower of Babel is a step in the right direction.

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