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Review: BABEL: Around the World in Twenty Languages

Babel: Around the World in Twenty Languages by Gaston Dorren (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2018)

Gaston Dorren gained recognition with his *Lingo: Around Europe in Sixty Languages* (2015). It is quite a feat to make a general public interested in matters of language, apart from those who deal with it professionally. Mr. Dorren, a Dutch linguist, whose native tongue is Limburgian, has done that by developing a formula in which a reader is caught by a catchy title, expecting a rather lighter fare, and then is slowly drawn into quite arcane linguistic considerations on such a familiar phenomenon. Encouraged by the success of his first book he ventured into a global dimension and came up with the *Babel: Around the world in twenty languages* (2018). But his choice of those languages is dictated by the number of users they enjoy. There are at least several thousand languages functioning in the world today. His European tour involved sixty tongues, so why there are only twenty on a global excursion. He chooses to discuss only the

twenty languages with the highest number of users. To make matters even more intriguing he starts with the tongue that has the least number of speakers in the group, Vietnamese, and thus starts with chapter 20 in order to reach the end with chapter 1, English. In the process, when we are drawn into the matter by a rather unsystematic discussion of each language, the author manages to focus on the less obvious purpose of his presentation. The reader slowly discerns that the main theme of the book is to show that intrinsic nature of the language, be it simple or complex, does not determine its potential as a lingua franca. The spread and use of the language is a multi faceted phenomenon, much more related to non-linguistic factors associated with the activities and dynamics of the group that is the language user. That approach combined with the insights offered by Jared Diamond in his *Of Guns, Germs and Steel* (1996) shows the potential of the language spread, as a means of communication, being an element of a larger cultural complex. One important but not a decisive factor is the population size of the language users and their geographic location, i.e. ease of communicating across physical distance and the frequency of contact. The author has chosen to use the language popularity expressed by the number of users and therefore he demonstrates, that the most used ones (i.e. having the greatest number of those speaking it), do not correspond to the development level of those societies today, but have historic relevance as to their position in the past. Henceforth, the ubiquity of English is the result of the influence of the Anglo-American civilization rather than the characteristics of the English language. The book is constructed in a manner that, by reversing the numerical order of chapters, starting with the number 20 and going to 1 shows the developmental character of the process. Some of the influential languages in the past are no longer spoken by many, while others gained in popularity. As Latin has split into a number of its varieties with the development of the Roman empire,

consequently a continental language, Latin, remained a language of the Roman-Catholic Church and science, while the community of users split into a number of offspring tongues. That might happen to English in the future, when the local variants become less and less comprehensible to each other. Potentially, English may remain the language of airlines, space programs and AI because of the traditional use (view the failure of the French to francophonize computerese), but no longer a communicating tool for billions of users (similar to the use of Latin in medicine). It is probable that with the global reach of Chinese civilization, the everyday communication will be a basic Chinese, aided by the digital communication revolution, when the 'smart-phone' will take care of the problems associated with Chinese script (as it is already evident with the native Chinese use of the technology). Therefore the book should not be treated as a superficial treatment of the linguistic matter, but rather a cultural theory approach to the way the basic, and 'all too human' tool of communicating, is shaped by the changing way humans function in their environment. This is most probably the reason, why after reading the first, i.e. the 20th chapter of the book, a linguist might be disappointed with a fragmentary description of the given tongue (Vietnamese in this case). However, it is enough to delve into a few more chapters and the design reveals itself and we get more and more involved with the plodding to Chapter One, and the 'post-preface' discussion of the English language phenomenon, in comprehending the author's ploy. In effect Gaston Dorren achieves his goal of informing a public in the Western world, which produced linguistic theories from brothers Grimm, through de Saussure and Chomsky to corpus, that only a fourth of global population is using the languages that were the basis for those concerns. There is a lot food for thought and a galore of intriguing details that the book is packed with and thus provides us with more afterthought than it promises.

