Nonfiction review: 'Globish' by Robert McCrum

"English," John Adams declared in 1780, "is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age."

Adams was right. Big time. As Robert McCrum, associate editor of The Observer in London and co-author of the television series "The Story of English," indicates in his informative new book, "Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language," the language of the "Anglo-American imperium" became even more influential in the 19th and 20th centuries than its political principles or economic practices. These days, thanks in no small measure to the Internet, English is spreading like a virus at warp speed, serving as the default option for a world that is increasingly "flat."

In "Globish" (his name for the "virus"), McCrum provides a lively history of English from its Anglo-Saxon origins to its brilliant articulation in Chaucer and Shakespeare; from its migration to North America to its colonization of India, Australia, South Africa, Hong Kong and the Falkland Islands to its elucidation on T-shirts and in Hollywood movies. He argues, provocatively, that English has not dominated because it's easy to learn. It isn't. Like liberty, it's a work-in-progress, flexible, efficient, populist and, on occasion, even subversive. That's why exotic and expressive vocabulary (like coolie, mantra and pundit) from anywhere and everywhere have insinuated themselves so easily into the language.

McCrum makes a compelling case that "a global information network and a global market require a global language," and that the personal computer created the environment in which English, shorn of its connections with colonialism, could flourish as the language of Generation Y. Of the 40 billion indexed pages on the World Wide Web, McCrum reports, about 80 percent are in some kind of English. Texters use "lol," "gr8" and "u," no matter what their native tongue. Little wonder, then, that Chile and Mongolia intend to become bilingual in English, as Singapore has already done. Or that by 2020, a third of the world's population will be trying to learn English.

Global English, McCrum predicts, will become the great connector. Acknowledging that global English is in its early days, McCrum hopes, a bit naively, that as the people of the world use words like "freedom," "individuality" and "originality," they'll begin to aspire to "a free commons of the mind."

Even if they don't, Globish, in all likelihood, will challenge billions to engage their imaginations and express them, on a global scale. And that's no mean feat.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler, special to The Oregonian
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