

Proto-Indo-European expansion, rise of English, and the international language order: a humanocentric analysis

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Abstract

International communication began some 6,000 years ago when Proto-Indo-European speakers left their homeland somewhere in the Pontic-Caspian region or the Caucasus to expand eastward and westward covering a geographical stretch from India to Iceland. This paper examines the historical ups and downs of the Indo-European family of languages, as well as several other widely used languages, within the framework of the world system theory and the associated Eastern philosophical concepts. It pays particular attention to the evolution of English, today's "global" language, and it relates the international language order to the core-periphery concept of the world system theory. The world system perspective provides new insights on language phenomena highly conducive to the emerging field of economics of language. Eastern philosophical concepts of codependent arising, part-whole interdetermination, dialectical completion of relative polarities, karma, and impermanence add new dimensions to the hermeneutics of the world system theory itself.

Introduction

The world system theory, in harmony with major Eastern philosophical traditions, presumes that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The evolution of a multiplicity of modern languages from a dozen or so language groups rooted in Proto-Indo-European, a retrospective identification assigned by linguistic paleontologists to a common tongue spoken in prehistoric Eurasia, illustrates this point. Indo-European expansion in Eurasia during the pre-Christian era, as well as the later expansion of Indo-European languages around the globe, shows that globalization has been going on from prehistoric times. The prestige of languages rose and fell with the rise and fall of hegemonic powers in the world system.

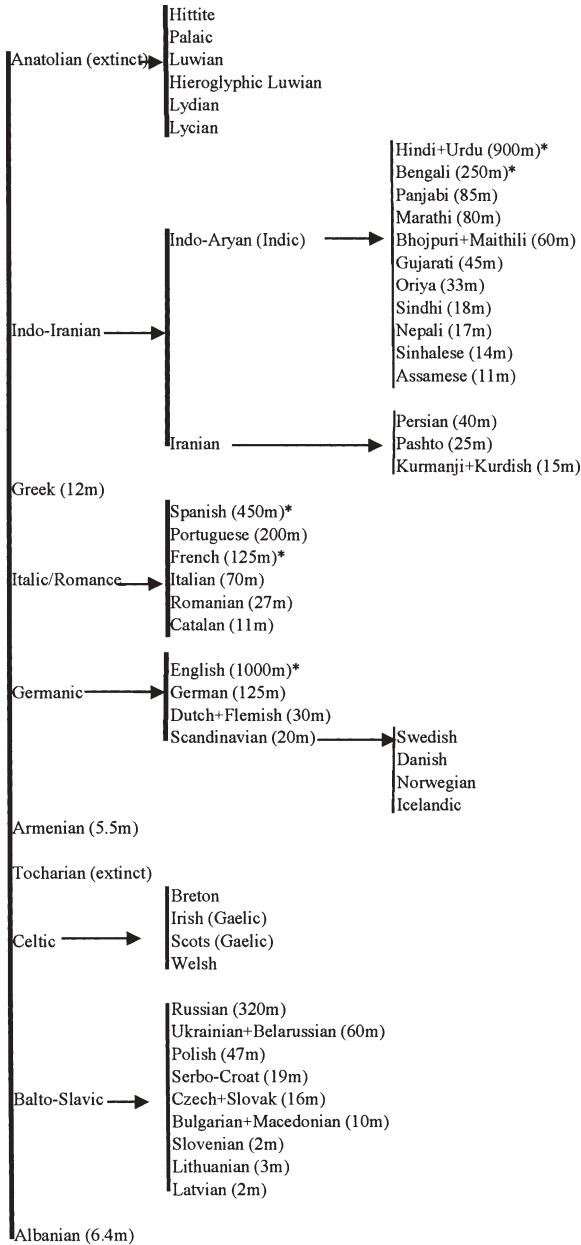
Moreover, in keeping with the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence (*anicca*), these languages went through numerous changes (rebirths?) or died (reached nirvana?) on the way to the present. The study of the expansion of root languages worldwide is important to trace the history of international communication.

The genetically determined Indo-European family of languages falls into ten main branches (Figure 1): Anatolian (extinct), Indo-Iranian, Greek, Italic, Germanic, Armenian, Tocharian (extinct), Celtic, Balto-Slavic, and Albanian — arranged according to the age of their oldest extant texts. (The languages in Europe that fall outside the Indo-European family are Basque, Hungarian, Estonian, Caucasian, and Finno-Ugrian. The principal language families spoken outside of Europe are Afro-Asiatic [Hamito-Semitic], Altaic, Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and Sino-Tibetan.)¹ Commerce, conquest, and religion determined the international language order from the time languages evolved. Throughout history, languages have moved up or down the center-periphery structure of the world system depending on the power fortunes of their speech communities.

Because tracing the history of all language families will be a book-length project, this paper will limit itself to analyzing the highlights of the evolution of the world's largest language family, the Indo-European, and pay particular attention to the evolution of English, the contemporary hegemon language of this family. Much material exists on the spread of the Indo-European family of languages across a vast geographical area stretching from Europe to the Indian subcontinent long before the fifteenth century geographical "discoveries." The attempt here is to recapitulate a smattering of the history of the Indo-European language family to facilitate the interpretation of the genesis, spread, dominance, and decline of languages within the framework of the world system theory, which, despite its economic-materialist emphasis, has a remarkable congruence with Eastern philosophy. In this hermeneutical exercise, this paper will also pay attention to non-Indo-European languages.

Proto-Indo-European expansion

Linguistic, historical, and geographical considerations suggest that a relatively homogeneous community of Eurasians who spoke Proto-Indo-European went through significant expansion and fragmentation² around 4000 BCE. Some scholars identify this community with the bearers of the Kurgan or Battle-Axe (Barrow) culture of the Black Sea and the Caucasus, west of the Urals (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998: 588). Some identify this area as the Pontic-Caspian region (Mallory 1989). The migrations of



* Includes translinguals
 Source: Linguasphere Observatory, 1999 <www.linguasphere.org>

Figure 1. The Indo-European language family (Key: m = million speakers)

these warlike peoples spread the family of Indo-European languages through conquest of relatively passive farming populations. A more recent alternative view is that the initial spread of farming out of the Near East was the main event that propelled the spread of the western branch of these languages. The spread of farming initiated a population “wave” that swamped the non-Indo-European languages of the original hunter-gatherer groups in the area (Adams and Otte 1999). Renfrew (1987: 205) has hypothesized that central and eastern Anatolia were the key areas where an early form of Indo-European language was spoken before 6500 BCE. Over some 3,500 years, these Proto-Indo-European speakers stretched southeastward as far as the Indian subcontinent, and westward into other parts of Europe (Mallory 1989; Wolpert 1993).³ In the process of this long expansion, Proto-Indo-European split “into the dialects that were to become the first generation of daughter languages” (*New Encyclopedia Britannica* 1998: 588). These developments marked the beginnings of “global/international” communication.

– *Anatolian*. Spoken in Anatolia (Asia Minor) before the Greco-Roman period, the defunct Anatolian family of Indo-European languages comprised Hittite, Palaic, Luwian, Hieroglyphic Luwian, Lydian, and Lycian. Although no archeological data exist as to when the Indo-Europeans entered Anatolia, “dead reckoning” has established this to have occurred around or shortly after 2000 BCE. Two non-Indo-European languages were already in use in Anatolia — Hattic in the north, and Hurrian in the east — at the time of the Indo-European entry. (Urartian replaced Hurrian in the first millennium BCE.) Because of certain grammatical features in common with Caucasian languages, linguists have postulated that the Indo-Europeans entered Anatolia via the Caucasus. Hittite, known from the approximately 25,000 tablets preserved in the Bogazkoy-Hattusa archives, was the official language of the Hittite New Empire, which flourished between approximately 1400 and 1190 BCE. (Hattic had become a dead language by the time of the Hittite Empire.) The oldest Hittite texts date from the seventeenth century BCE, the latest from about 1200 BCE (*New Encyclopedia Britannica* 1998).

– *Indo-Iranian*. This language family comprises two subbranches: Indo-Aryan (Indic) and Iranian, which share characteristics that set them apart as an Indo-European subgroup although they also differ from each other in several linguistic features. The original homeland of the Indo-Iranian group was probably an area in central Asia (now identified as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) from where some Iranians migrated to the south and west, while the Indo-Aryans migrated to the south and east. Evidence attesting the Indo-Iranian family appears

in Middle Eastern cuneiform texts of the period from 1450–1350 BCE (*New Encyclopedia Britannica* 1998).

The oldest record of an *Indo-Aryan* (Indic) language is the Vedic Sanskrit of Rigveda, traceable to about 1000 BCE. It is generally accepted that the Indo-Aryans entered the subcontinent at the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Historical records are not available to verify whether the Mohenjodaro-Harappan civilization of the Indus valley (c. 2500–1500 BCE), associated with Elamo-Dravidians, was still in existence at the time of the Indo-Aryan arrival. Stevenson (1983: 18) writes, “Once established, the Indo-Aryans carried their language across the rich alluvial plains of the Ganges, shedding their migrant ways and adopting the settled farming techniques of those they had overcome.” Vedic Sanskrit, the fecund parent of Indic languages, and classical Sanskrit represent the Old Indic period. Prakrit, the speech of the masses, originated from the same remoter sources as Sanskrit, the language of the literati. Middle Indic is associated with three language groups: Pali, the language of Buddhist literature; Middle Prakrit, the language of Jainist religious writings; and Apabhramsa, a later language (Baldi 1983). Modern Indic, which began to emerge from about the tenth century CE evincing the influence of the non-Indic languages (e.g. Dravidian) of the region, is categorized into the eastern group (Assamese, Bengali, and Oriya); the northwest group (Dardic, Lahnda, Pahari, Punjabi, Sindhi, etc.); the west and southwest group (Divehi, Gujarati, Konkani, Marathi, and Sinhalese); and the midland group (Bhili, Bihari, Hindi-Urdu, Khandeshi, Rajasthani, and Tharu).

The Iranians, who split from the Indo-Aryans, spread out quite early (c. 1500 BCE) over a large territory reaching not only the Iranian plateau, but also parts of China and southern Russia (Baldi 1983). Iranian languages also fall into three categories: ancient, middle, and modern. Avestan, the language of the religious poetry or *Gathas* of Zoroaster, and Old Persian, the language of the official inscriptions of the Achaemenid rulers, are the two ancient languages known from texts or inscriptions dating from the sixth century BCE. The most important language of the middle Iranian period (c. 300 BCE–900 CE) was Middle Persian or Pahlavi, the official language of the Sassanid dynasty (224–641 CE). In the northeast and northwest, the language spoken was Parthian. Other languages of this period were Bactrian, Khwarezmian (Chorasmian), Sogdian, and Saka. The most important languages of modern Iranian are Persian (Farsi), spoken in Iran; Pashto, the national language of Afghanistan; Tajik, spoken in Central Asia; Baluchi; and Kurdish. Other smaller languages include Gorani, Ossetic, Talishi, and Tati. Setting aside the extensive borrowing of Arabic words in modern Persian, “the Iranian languages

have scarcely been affected by unrelated languages,” with the exception of Ossetic (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998: 609).

– *Greek*. The Indo-European ancestors of the Greeks (the Proto-Greeks) arrived on the Greek peninsula in the first half of the second millennium BCE. These first Greeks, who made their way through the northern Balkans or perhaps across the Aegean Sea from Anatolia in a series of waves, “encountered a material culture greater than anything they themselves knew” — the high Minoan civilization centered at Knossos in Crete (Stevenson 1983: 14). In the second quarter of the first millennium, the Greeks extended their linguistic area by colonizing various cities around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Latin replaced Greek in these cities during the Roman period. However, Alexander the Great’s (356–323 BCE) conquest of Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt resulted in the adoption of Greek as the rulers’ language in these countries until the Arabic and Turkish invasions. Greek flourished as the official language of the Byzantium Empire, which ended with the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

The Greek language, as with Anatolian and Indic, is first attested in the late Bronze Age. Some 4,500 unbaked clay tablets dated from about 1400–1200 BCE, and associated with Mycenaean and late Minoan civilizations, are written in a primitive form of Greek termed Mycenaean. Thereafter, following the Dorian invasions, evidence for written Greek disappears until the introduction of the alphabet, borrowed from the Phoenicians, between 825 and 750 BCE (Mallory 1989). The Greek alphabet became the direct or indirect model for other alphabets, notably Latin. In the early years, the Greek language lacked unity. Baldi (1983) has placed the Greek dialects into two major groups: East Greek (Attic-Ionic, Aeolic, and Arcado-Cyprian), and West Greek (Northwest Greek and Doric). By the age of Pericles (c. 495–429 BCE), Attic was on its way to becoming the common (*Koine*) language of Greece, and it became the administrative language of the Byzantium. Modern Greek derives from the *Koine* via the local varieties that developed during the Byzantine period (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998).

– *Italic/Romance*. The Proto-Indo-European speakers crossed the Alpine passes and occupied the Apennine Peninsula — an area already inhabited by a variety of different tribes, including the Etruscans who controlled most of Latium and probably founded Rome — sometime before the first millennium BCE (Baldi 1983). They were the progenitors of the Italic languages spoken in Italy, including Latin, Faliscan, Osco-Umbrian, South Picene, and Venetic. Latin, the earliest known documents of which date to the sixth century BCE, became the language of Latium and of Rome. Latin was the source of all the Romance languages and dialects: French (first attested in mid-eighth century); Italian (tenth century); Spanish, Catalan,

and Portuguese (tenth and eleventh centuries); Franco-Provençal (eleventh century); Romanian (sixteenth century); Occitan; Rhaetian; Sardinian; and Dalmatian (extinct). The name *Romance* suggests the ultimate connection of these languages to Rome.

—*Germanic*. The area of northern Germany and southern Scandinavia was probably the birthplace of Germanic, which produced two major groups of languages. The larger West Germanic group comprises English, German (High and Low), Yiddish, Frisian, and Dutch and its derivative Afrikaans. The smaller North Germanic or Scandinavian group comprises Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Faeroese. The earliest known text, however, is in the extinct East Germanic Gothic language—a translation of the Bible made in the fourth century CE. The oldest monuments of the Germanic languages are the 100 or so Runic inscriptions that date from about the same period (Baldi 1983; Mallory 1989).

—*Armenian*. Although Armenian was spoken as far back as the sixth century BCE, the oldest Armenian texts date from the fifth century CE. The Indo-Europeans, who came to the Transcaucasian region through the northern Balkans in the latter part of the second millennium BCE, settled around Lake Van, which earlier belonged to the Urartian kingdom. These invaders were the progenitors of Armenian, a single language like Greek. Armenian, which originally used a 36-letter alphabet to produce its written form called Grabar, seems to have replaced the original languages of the area by the seventh century BCE (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998).

—*Tocharian*. Linguists have given the name Tocharian to the easternmost group of the Indo-European languages spoken in the Tarim River Basin in Chinese Turkestan (now the Uighur Autonomous Region) during the latter half of the first millennium CE. Documents dating from 500–700 CE attest to two of these languages—simply called Tocharian A (Turfanian or Agnean) and Tocharian B (Kuchean)—written in northern Indian Brahmi characters. Tocharian literature, primarily the work of Buddhist monasteries, largely comprises Sanskrit translations, tracts on magic and medicine, and occasionally matters related to trade along the Silk Road. Linguistically, Tocharian is closer to Italic and Germanic (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998; Mallory 1989). Pulleyblank (1974: 503) has drawn attention to the “possible linguistic connections of great antiquity between proto-Sino-Tibetan and Proto-Indo-European . . . even before the emergence of archaeologically attested neolithic cultures.” He contends that the classification of Old Chinese as an “isolating” language is illusory because of its typological similarities to Indo-European. These two language families had apparent connections well before the arrival of Tocharian on the western doorstep of China. Voegelin and Voegelin (1973:

140) point out that even though languages may not be genetically related, “they are not necessarily unrelated historically.”

–*Celtic*. Although the Celts today represent the smallest surviving group of Indo-European speakers, their Iron Age ancestors once dominated Western and Central Europe, occupied a vast area of Eastern Europe, invaded the Apennines and Greece, and colonized central Anatolia. The Continental Celtic languages include Gaulish, Lepontic Hispano-Celtic, and Eastern Celtic—all recorded in the first century BCE. The Insular Celtic languages found in Britain, Ireland and Brittany (viz., Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish, and Breton) are recorded from the eighth century onward. The expansion of Celts occurred in the La Tène⁴ period of Western Europe that flourished during the last five centuries before Christ (Mallory 1989).

–*Balto-Slavic*. Old Prussian, the major western Baltic language, disappeared around 1700, leaving only the two east Baltic languages—Lithuanian and Latvian. Other extinct Baltic languages include Selonian, Semigallian, Curonian, and Yotvingian. Lithuanian shows a close relationship to Sanskrit. The old Baltic-speaking territory was reduced to one-sixth of its original area because of Slavic and Germanic expansion. Although the oldest written Baltic texts date to the sixteenth century, the Balts were probably established as an independent linguistic group by about 2000 BCE. Evidence suggests that in the first millennium BCE, Balts occupied the area west of the Vistula’s mouth east to Moscow and the upper Volga, and south to Kiev (Baldi 1983; Mallory 1989).

The collapse of Common Slavic and its fission into different modern Slavic languages is believed to have occurred during 400–900 CE. Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian became the languages of the eastern Slavs; Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbo-Croatian, and Slovenian became the languages of the southern Slavs; Polish, Czech, Slovak, Kashubian, Wendish, and the extinct Polabian became the languages of the western Slavs. The earliest Slavic texts date only to about ninth century when the missionaries Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius created the Cyrillic alphabet to translate biblical material into Old Church Slavonic. Evidence indicates that a Slavic geographical center stretched between the Vistula and Dnieper from about 1500 BCE (Baldi 1983; Mallory 1989).

–*Albanian*. Although Albanian is considered the sole modern representative of a distinct branch of the Indo-European language family, in very early times its nearest of kin was most likely the Balto-Slavic group. It has two principal dialects—Gheg in the north, and Tosk in the south. The first written record in Albanian is a baptismal formula from 1462. Before 1909, the little literature available in Albanian was written in make-shift Italianate or Hellenizing orthographies or even in Turko-Arabic characters (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998).

Evolution of English

English evolved from the West regional group of Germanic, a language group that branched off from the ancestral Proto-Indo-European. Thus, original English was most closely related to German, Dutch, Flemish, and Frisian. Several historical episodes shaped the evolution of English.

Old English. Although Britain became part of the Roman Empire during the years 55 to 410, imperial Latin, the “official language,” had little influence on the native Celtic tongues (Stevenson 1993: 84). Both Celtic and Latin were the offspring of Proto-Indo-European, but the birth of English had to await the arrival of the Germanic branch of their common ancestral tongue. The pioneer Jutes, led by Hengist and Horsa, who arrived on the Isle of Thanet in 449 probably in response to an appeal for military help by the British king Vortigern, planted the first Germanic roots. Jutes later settled in Kent and the Isle of Wight. Kentish became their dialect. The Saxon invaders settled in the rest of England south of the Thames and in modern Essex and Middlesex. West Saxon became their dialect. The Angles, the third group of invaders, settled elsewhere as far north as the Firth of Forth and in the Scottish Lowlands. Northumbrian (north of the Humber) and Southumbrian or Mercian became their dialects. The home of these three Germanic tribes, the progenitors of Englisc or Old English, became “Engla land.” These Germanic invaders took little from the language of the Celts whom they drove westward and northward. With the conversion of England to Latin Christianity after the arrival of St. Augustine in 597, Latin words associated with religion (e.g. angel, candle, disciple, epistle, hymn, priest) entered the Englisc vocabulary.

Viking invasions started in 793–794 with the sacking of Jarrow and Lindisfarne on the Northumbrian coast. First, the Danes in 865, and then the Norwegians, landed in strength. The Viking settlements resulted in the passing of cultural leadership from Northumberland to Wessex during the reign of King Alfred at the end of the ninth century, with Winchester becoming the center of learning and West Saxon becoming standard Old English. Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon vocabulary intermingled to shed some of the complicated Germanic endings to nouns and pronouns. “Beowulf,” the heroic poem composed in the first half of the eighth century and considered to be the highest achievement of Old English literature, is unintelligible to modern English speakers.⁵

Middle English. William of Normandy, who was crowned king of England on Christmas of 1066, did not speak English. Norman French (Anglo-Norman), the language of government, became “a serious competitor to the indigenous English and Celtic languages” (Wardhaugh 1987: 67). Latin continued as the language of scholarship, record-keeping, and liturgy. However, the masses used English, which was “deemed unsuitable

for writing” (Wardhaugh 1987: 68). The Norman Conquest resulted in all four Old English dialects being placed on a level playing field. London replaced Winchester as the center of culture and learning. The Northumbrian dialect split into Lowland Scottish and Northern. The Mercian dialect split into West Midland and East Midland. The West Saxon dialect, which became slightly diminished in area, was named the South Western. The Kentish dialect, which accrued an expanded area, was named the South Eastern. The West Midland dialect, which was the least affected by the French and Viking intrusions, emerged as standard English. The Norman Conquest, however, imposed the continent’s Carolingian script on writing English. Norman scribes also changed the spelling of English in the process. Thousands of Norman and Francien words, as well as Latin, entered the vocabulary during this period. The façade of “French” officialdom collapsed in 1362—almost 300 years after the Norman invasion—when Parliament passed the Statute of Pleadings, which required “English to be the language of the courts but leaving Latin as the language of legal record” (Wardhaugh 1987: 69). This signified the Normans’ recognition that they were no longer French but English. Following the loss of Normandy to France in 1204, English barons had forced King John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215; and Edward I became the first Norman king to speak English.

The death of Chaucer, the author of “The Canterbury Tales,” at the close of the fourteenth century marked the beginning of the transition from Middle to early Modern English. This transitional period witnessed the rise of London English, the impact of the printing press, and the fervor of the Renaissance. The Great Vowel Shift changed the entire vowel system of London English. Caxton’s printing press, introduced in 1476, helped the wide dissemination of standard English. The revival of classical learning evoked a new interest in Latin and Greek, and the Renaissance scholars borrowed liberally from these classical languages both directly and indirectly.

Modern English. The early Modern phase of English begins about 1500 and ends with the return of the monarchy in 1660. English prose moved toward modernity as evident in Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament and the subsequent publication of the King James Bible in 1611. The Tudor Golden Age (1525–1611) culminated in the remarkable works of Shakespeare. Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and John Milton were also among the luminaries of this period. Following the Restoration, English writers again looked to France. Dryden compared “elegant” French against “barbarous” English. In 1712, Jonathan Swift proposed “correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English tongue” (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998: 661). Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755) reflected the full maturity that modern English had reached by mid eighteenth century.

The colonization of the Americas in the seventeenth century followed by further expansion into India, Australia, and New Zealand in the eighteenth century laid the foundation for English ultimately becoming the “global” language. The spread of English went hand in hand with British military and mercantile expansion. Horsman (1976: 401) documents the rise of Anglo-Saxon racism in the mid-nineteenth century as evident in Thomas Arnold’s boast that the English race and language had overrun the world, and together with the Germanic peoples had dominated the world, with “half of Europe, and all America and Australia [being] German more or less completely, in race, in language, or in institutions, or in all.” Colonialism, as well as the developments in mass communications, ensured the standardization of written English, except for minor variations in spelling, and the formalization of British Received Pronunciation. English literature and science followed the path of imperial English. After the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, American English began to replace imperial English when the United States replaced Britain as the dominant English-speaking power. Today English has some special status as official or second language in more than 70 countries. Computer technology has further strengthened the global use of English, which has become the language of online communication.

The spread of English, according to Coulmas (1992), is a reflection of the five dominant tendencies associated with highly developed and adapted languages:

- Popularity as a foreign language. English is the most widely studied foreign language and the most popular vehicle of international communication;
- Representing the superstratum for pidginization. Contact with English has produced more pidgins and creoles than with any other modern languages;
- Serving as donor in linguistic borrowing. English has become the most prolific donor language of the world;
- Serving the codeswitching routines in the domains of public, formal, and technical communication. English is increasingly used for codeswitching in higher communication domains — science, technology, government, law, finance, etc.;
- Furnishing the goal of language shift. English has become the goal of language shifts on all continents (Coulmas 1992: 284–291).

McCallen (1989: 117) points out that English has become “a commodity” that has “developed into a very large and frequently lucrative international market.” Competition in the world market has enabled English to reach the top. That being so, a need exists to study the economic dimension of languages.

Theoretical analysis

Scholars have recently begun to use economic approaches to language issues. Grin (1996) has espoused the application of the core paradigm of economics, which focuses on resource allocation, to a broad range of language problems to embark on a new field called *economics of language*. Economic processes, he argues, influence language processes. After a survey of the major lines of research, and of theoretical and empirical results in the economics of language, Grin (1996: 32) calls for the “development of an integrated economic theory of language-in-society.”

Coulmas (1992) has documented the connection between language and economy. He argues that competition describes the relationship between languages, which emerge and disappear, shrink and expand in interrelated processes. He attributes the genesis of pidgins and creoles (e.g. Sranan Tongo, an English-based creole) to trade links that European merchants established with people on other continents. He also attributes the historical spread of particular languages (e.g. Hindi, Arabic, Latin, Pali, Low German, Malay, Swahili, Hausa) to the interaction of several social factors—conquest, mass migration, colonization, proselytism, official language planning, traffic and trade. In his view, the marginal utility and prestige of a language determine the direction of language shifts in language contact situations. After English, the next contenders to economic status are French, German, and Japanese, because of the substantial trade volume associated with the countries of their primary speakers. Thus, he says, these languages have superseded the languages of major demographic expansion—Arabic, Hindi, Bengali, Spanish, and Chinese. Wardhaugh (1987: 11) too recognizes the very important role economic factors play “in influencing how languages come to relate to one another.”

The link between language and economy can be examined more systematically within the framework of the five components of the world system theory—the world system itself, capital accumulation as its motor force, its core-periphery structure, its alternation between hegemony and rivalry, and the effect of ascending and descending phases of economic cycles. Elsewhere, I have outlined the relevance of the world system theory to international communication research (Gunaratne 2001b). Because language is the principal tool of communication, this theoretical framework is quite relevant to analyze the sociology of language. Moreover, the world system theory has close parallels to Eastern philosophical concepts (Table 1), which enable us to connect language phenomena with non-Western epistemology and hermeneutics.

The five components of the world system theory are not discrete. They are inextricably interconnected. Thus, the Eastern philosophical concepts

Table 1. *Components of the world system and the comparable Eastern philosophical concepts (adapted from Gills and Frank [1993])*

Components of the world system	Explanation	Comparable Eastern philosophical concepts
1. World system itself	Principal features of the world political-economic system, identified below, stretch back to several thousand years. It long predated the rise of “capitalism” in Europe and Europe’s hegemony in the world. The feudalism-capitalism-socialism transition process is inconsistent with world system theory	– The (Chinese) principle of part-whole interdetermination, and the (Hindu) principle of oneness of things – The (Buddhist) discourse on causality and causally conditioned phenomena — the process of “codependent arising” (<i>paticca samuppada</i>)
2. Process of capital accumulation as the motor force of (world system) history	Capital accumulation — the imperative of ceaseless accumulation — has played a central role in the world system for several millennia. Capital = surplus transfer through infrastructural <i>investment</i> in agriculture and livestock; industry and new technology; transport; commerce; military; legitimacy; education and training of “human capital.”	– The (Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain) concept of karmic accumulation as the engine or motive force of the samsaric lineage
3. Core-periphery structure in and of the world (system)	Core-periphery structure of world system is applicable to pre-modern and ancient history, as well as prehistory.	– The (Chinese) principle of the dialectical completion of relative polarities — <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> forces
4. Alternation between hegemony and rivalry	Hegemony-rivalry = political-economic predominance by a center of accumulation, which alternates with periods of rivalry among several such centers of accumulation. Shifting systems of economic, political, and military alliances create, maintain, and dismantle hegemonic imperial power.	– The (Buddhist) theory of impermanence (<i>anicca</i>) — continuously changing universe
5. Long (and short) economic cycles of alternating ascending (A) phases and descending (B) phases.	Process of capital accumulation, changes in core-periphery position within world system, as well as hegemony and rivalry within it, are all cyclical and occur in tandem with each other	– The (Buddhist) universal principle of causation that functions automatically and spontaneously

associated with them are pertinent to the theory as a whole even though, for convenience, I have placed them alongside the most relevant theoretical component. One should keep these interrelationships in mind when reading the ensuing analysis.

First, let us examine language using the *world system* as the unit of analysis. As Goonatilake (1998: 228) points out, systems theory—along with biology, engineering, and physics—sees “the whole as greater than its constituents, with properties that can be described.” The major Eastern philosophical schemes “also assume an interconnected system in their conceptions of the world” (Goonatilake 1998: 228–229). Systems theory is also consistent with the Buddhist theory of codependent arising (*paticca samuppada* in Pali). From both perspectives, “everything undergoes fluid, dynamic change, a perpetual flowing—with no experiencer in the stream of experience” (Goonatilake 1998: 229). Both theories assert that “things arise and change through the operation of reciprocal action,” both agree that “the boundary between an organism and its environment is porous,” and both focus on the how of things rather than the why of things (Goonatilake 1998: 229). It is not surprising that some early linguists who intuitively recognized the part-whole relationship (e.g. Schleicher 1873) likened languages to natural organisms. The early Buddhist discourses explain the principle of codependent arising thus (Kalupahana 1976: 28):

When this is present, that comes to be;
 From the arising of this, that arises.
 When this is absent, that does not come to be;
 On the cessation of this, that ceases.

Buddhist philosophy explains all physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual phenomena in terms of the law of codependent arising, which recognizes “not only the momentariness of the arising of aggregates but also the entire edifice of causality—the circular structure of habitual patterns, the binding chain, each link of which conditions and is conditioned by each of the others” (Varela et al. 1991: 110). As Crawford (1991: 189–190) further clarifies, the law of codependent arising illustrates the interrelationship and interdependence of all life: “that every event, mental or physical, is dependent upon and conditioned by a universal principle of causation that functions automatically and spontaneously. Nothing in the universe happens capriciously or by divine fiat. This means that interrelationships constitute the essential nature of things that, in their own way and to their own degree, give rise to other things.”

At the world system level, some 6,000 languages exist, although more than three-fourths of the world’s inhabitants use only about 100 languages

as their mother tongue. The top ten languages spoken as first languages are Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, German, and Wu Chinese (Grimes 1996). Except for Chinese and Japanese, the others are Indo-European languages. These ten constitute the first language of 40 percent of the world population. However, what determines the international language order is not the number of primary speakers but what Coulmas (1992: 78) has identified as “the commodity nature of languages” — an attribute reflected today in the demand for foreign language learning and teaching in the world market. This demonstrates that the part-whole interaction adds an extra dimension to the totality of languages that is more than the sum of each component. Such interaction also explains the rise and fall (e.g. Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit), the birth and death (e.g. Hittite and Akkadian), and the multiplication (e.g. Proto-Indo-European) or decimation (e.g. Australian Aboriginal) of languages over time and space—a phenomenon that illustrates the operation of the law of codependent arising. Thus, we see the compatibility of Eastern philosophy with the primary building block of the capitalist-materialist world system theory.

Ample evidence in language evolution exists that demonstrates the operation of the law of codependent arising and part-whole interdependence. Attesting to this is the demise of languages as a result of reciprocal forces affecting the life cycle of different speech communities, each of which invariably goes through constant dynamic change. Examples abound: the demise of Hattic and Hurrian because of the intrusion of Anatolian; of the Anatolian group of languages itself (Hittite, Palaic, Luwian, Lydian, and Lycian); of Tocharian; of Old Prussian, a Baltic language; of Polabian, a Slavic language; of Dalmatian, a Romance language; of Prakrit and Apabhramsa, both Indo-Aryan languages; and of many others.

The interaction of reciprocal forces also produced the splitting and multiplication of languages. As noted earlier, Proto-Indo-European split into dialects that became the first generation of daughter languages. In turn, the ten principal branches of the Proto-Indo-European family produced a multiplicity of “pidgins” that evolved into numerous sophisticated languages. For instance, Indo-Iranian bifurcated into Iranian and Indo-Aryan. Both branches went through ancient, middle, and modern stages of language flux producing more “pidgins” in the process: the ancient languages of Avestan and Old Persian; Middle Persian and Pahlavi, as well as Bactrian, Khwarezmian, Parthian, Saka, and Sogdian; and the modern languages of Baluchi, Persian (Farsi), Kurdish, Tajik, and others. Other daughter languages produced their own progeny. Latin produced the Romance languages of Europe (e.g. Catalan, French, Galician, Italian,

Portuguese, Romanian, and Spanish). They began as Latin “pidgins” when Latin gained prestige as the imperial language of the Roman Empire and the liturgical language of the Christendom.

Second, we can relate languages to the phenomenon of capital accumulation, the motor force of the world system. The equivalent Eastern philosophical concept common to all the main South Asian philosophical traditions — Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain — asserts that karmic accumulation (the totality of good and evil thought and action) is the engine or “motive force for the samsaric lineage” — the chain of rebirths (Goonatilake 1998: 236). If we construe karmic accumulation as a metaphor for capital accumulation, and the samsaric lineage as a metaphor for the world system, the comparison becomes clearer. Capital accumulation is indeed a part of one’s totality of actions. It can be good or bad depending on the motive (*cetanā* in Pali) for which the action is done. Good capital accumulation can bring about a better existence in the world system. Harvey (2000: 237) points out that “Buddhism’s emphasis is on a moral framework for economic activity,” and that “Buddhists are more at ease with capitalism when it contributes to the public good rather than just to private gain.”

The rise and fall of languages has a close connection with capital accumulation as the motor force of the world system. An excellent example is the spread of Arabic during the golden age of Islam “under a capitalist trading system, well ahead of its time, that extended as far as China and India, the Persian Gulf, Ethiopia, the Red Sea, Ifriqiya and Andalusia” (Braudel 1994: 71). Another example is the spread of Aramaic, “the vehicle of international commerce from India to Ethiopia” (P. Hitti cited in Mousa 2001: 479), during the first millennium BCE even after the advent of Persian hegemony. From an Indian philosophical perspective, the pecking order of languages — globally, regionally, and nationally — may well reflect the karmic accumulation of the multitude of the world’s speech communities.

Languages have historically facilitated the process of capital accumulation as vehicles of communication enabling international traffic and trade. Coulmas (1992) has described how contacts between European traders and native peoples elsewhere produced a multiplicity of pidgins, some of which evolved into more refined creoles and eventually into sophisticated languages. Capital accumulation was also the motive behind conquest, mass migration, colonization, and even proselytism — the most important social factors contributing to language spread. The spread of imperial languages (e.g. Latin in the Roman Empire, Greek in the Byzantium, and Chinese in the Far East) is very much a part of capital accumulation associated with trade between the imperial center and the subjugated

periphery. Mandarin Chinese (viz. the Beijing dialect), which became the Chinese official language during the Yuan dynasty in the thirteenth century, has survived the competition from the various Chinese dialects and other “barbarian” languages, although its prestige also waxed and waned in the process of capital accumulation.

Coulmas (1992) explains what I have called “the karmic accumulation of speech communities” in terms of the economic value of languages. Referring to the contemporary world, he says the economic environment or profile of a language, which is an integral part of the interrelationships and interconnections inherent in the Buddhist concept of “codependent arising,” encompasses the following:

- The communicative range of a language as expressed in the demographic strength of the community using it as a first and a second/foreign language;
- The level of development of the functional potential of a language as a societal means of production and the opportunity for its employment;
- The total amount of investment made in a language in terms of lexical recording, bilingual dictionaries, translations, electronic processibility, etc.;
- The demand for a language as a commodity on the international market of foreign languages and the size of the industry it supports, as well as the shares of the national GNPs spent worldwide for its acquisition;
- The balance on the current account of a language for its speech community (Coulmas 1992: 89).

Third, the international language order clearly reflects the core-periphery structure of the world system. What Coulmas (1992) identifies as the economic and “commodity value” of languages is more pertinent to the determination of this order than the number of primary speakers alone. The languages of the core countries (currently English, French, German, and Japanese) command a higher commodity value than those of the periphery countries. Coulmas points out that economic factors outweigh political, cultural, and other factors in determining the market value of a language at a given point in time — a proposition that is congruent with the world system theory. The language of the hegemon power (currently English) commands the highest economic or commodity value. Huntington (1996: 62) has observed that throughout history “the distribution of languages in the world has reflected the distribution of power in the world.” However, Huntington’s observation would have been more accurate had he limited his generalization to prestige languages with high economic value.

The Linguasphere Observatory (www.linguasphere.org) has compiled a catalogue of the world’s most widely spoken languages — each spoken by

more than 100 million people, including the native speakers. These languages are English and *Mandarin Chinese* (each with 1 billion speakers); Hindi-Urdu (with 900 million); Spanish (450 million); Russian (320 million); *Arabic* and Bengali (each with 250 million); Portuguese (200 million); *Malay-Indonesian* (160 million); *Japanese* (130 million); French and German (each with 125 million). Of those languages with fewer than 100 million speakers, Punjabi and *Yue Chinese* (each with 85 million speakers) take the lead. All of the most widely spoken languages, except those in italics, belong to the Indo-European language family. The Chinese dialects belong to the Sino-Tibetan family, and Malay-Indonesian to the Austronesian family. Japanese, which has some affinity to Korean, stands on its own.⁶ The international language order clearly does not follow this sequence. No great demand worldwide exists for Chinese “because the potential for its economic exploitation is limited” (Coulmas 1992: 79).

Just as clusters of nation-states make up the world system (Gunaratne 2001a, 2001b), clusters of languages make up the world language system. The relative power of these language clusters is unequal; just as much as the relative power of the endogenous languages within each cluster. If one were to identify the center-periphery structure of languages based on the number of speakers alone, the Indo-European language family would occupy the center cluster because more than two-thirds of the world population speaks one or more of its languages. The Sino-Tibetan language family would occupy the semiperiphery cluster because more than one-fifth of the world population speaks one or more of its languages. The other language families would occupy the periphery cluster. Considering that from two to six percent of the world population speaks one or more languages that belong to the Afro-Asiatic, the Austronesian, the Niger-Congo, the Dravidian, the Japanese-Korean, and the Altaic language families, one could even elevate them to a second level semiperiphery cluster. Such a model, however, would not correctly reflect the current international language order.

The large majority of the languages are in the periphery. The pecking order of the languages is based on the economic-political-cultural-military power position of the primary speakers rather than on the number of speakers. An intra-cluster analysis of the major language families provides further illumination. Within the Indo-European cluster, the Indo-Iranian language group (with 1.5 billion speakers) beats the Germanic group (1.2 billion speakers) although the latter includes English, the “global” language. Next in rank order are the Romance group (894 million), the Balto-Slavic group (472 million), and Greek (12 million). Within the Indo-Iranian group, the Indic-language speakers outnumber Iranian-language speakers by 19 to 1. Hindi-Urdu is far ahead of the other languages in this

group. Spanish leads the Romance group; English, the Germanic group; and Russian, the Balto-Slavic group. (The Linguasphere estimates are based on languages spoken by at least 10 million.) Even though the Indo-European language family dominates the world today, one has to separate the languages spoken in poor countries from those spoken in the rich countries to determine the international language order. Thus within the Indo-European family, the Germanic and Romance group would constitute the center; the Balto-Slavic group and Greek, the semiperiphery; and the Indo-Iranian group, the periphery.

Mandarin Chinese heads the *Sino-Tibetan* language family, followed by Wu (85 million), Yue or Cantonese (70 million), Min-nan (55 million), Xiang (48 million), Hakka (35 million), Burmese (33 million), Gan (20 million), and Min-bei (12 million). Thai (with 45 million speakers) leads the *Tai* language family, followed by Lao and Isan (30 million), and Zhuang and Buyi (15 million). Vietnamese (with 75 million speakers) leads the *Austroasiatic* language family. Malay-Indonesian leads the *Austronesian* language family, followed by Jawa (80 million), Tagalog (45 million), Sunda (30 million), Cebuano (17 million), Madura and Malagasy (13 million each). Telugu (with 70 million speakers) leads the *Dravidian* language family, followed by Tamil (65 million), Kannada (45 million), and Malayalam (35 million). Japanese (with 130 million speakers) and Korean (with 75 million) are isolates unaffiliated with any language family.

Arabic leads the *Afro-Asiatic* (Hamito-Semitic) language family, followed by Hausa (with 40 million speakers), Amharic (25 million), Oromo (14 million), Manding (13 million), Berber (12 million), and Somali (10 million). Turkish (with 70 million speakers) leads the *Altaic* language family, followed by Uzbek and Uyghur (25 million), Kazakh and Kirghiz (20 million), and Tatar and Bashkir (10 million).

Swahili (with 60 million speakers) leads the *Niger-Congo* language family, followed by Zulu-Xhosa (30 million), Yoruba (25 million), Sotho-Tswana (20 million), Igbo (19 million), Runyankore-Luganda (18 million), Fula (16 million), Rundi-Rwanda and Lingala (each 15 million), Kongo (14 million), Luba (12 million), and Kikuyu-Kamba (11 million).

The principle of the dialectical completion of relative polarities of universal forces—whether conceptualized as the yin-yang complements of the Chinese philosophical tradition, or the thesis-antithesis antinomy of the Hegelian dialectic—could be associated with producing a variety of outcomes. These would include splitting a single language (e.g. Proto-Indo-European) into a multiplicity of languages within identifiable groups (e.g. Indo-Iranian, Italic, Germanic, Celtic, Balto-Slavic, etc.), relegating parent languages (e.g. Sanskrit and Latin) into relative obscurity, or in producing synthesized pidgins and creoles. The universal forces set all the

languages in the world system at a given conjuncture of time and space to clash with one another for survival, rejuvenation, or dominance. The inevitable syntheses and continuous change resulting from this ongoing process mirror the Buddhist concept of impermanence (*anicca* in Pali). Economic power and the resulting political-military-cultural hegemony of the speakers of that language largely determine language dominance (Table 3). The dominant language in the world system (e.g. English) or within a larger region (e.g. Mandarin Chinese) influences the languages in the periphery while also being influenced by the latter to a lesser degree. This phenomenon, again, reflects the operation of the universal forces, as well as the part-whole interaction.

Fourth, we can examine languages as a reflection of the alternation between hegemony and rivalry inherent in the world system. This phenomenon illustrates the operation of the Buddhist concept of impermanence (*anicca*)—the natural law that all conditioned things are transient. History provides ample evidence of the transient nature of hegemony. The “karmic accumulation” of a hegemon speech community (the core or center) enables it to dominate the languages of the rival speech communities until the “karmic accumulation” of a rival speech community takes over in a perpetual cycle of the “samsaric lineage.” Thus, English has edged French and all other languages as the current global hegemon; Arabic had edged all other Middle Eastern and North African languages during the height of the Omayyad-Abbasid caliphate; and Chinese had edged all other East Asian languages, particularly during the Han and Tang dynasties.

When China was the center of world trade—“the most economically developed and technologically advanced place on earth” (Holcombe 2001: 64)—in the medieval and the early modern periods (before the industrial revolution shifted the center to Europe), the spoken Chinese based on Central Plain norms—and subsequently Mandarin Chinese—became the privileged language of the Far East. Holcombe (2001: 67) states that fourteen distinct spoken language systems existed in the early Han dynasty in China even though “a kind of standard spoken lingua franca, based on Central Plain norms, seems to have existed” from the late Zhou era. However, despite the mutual unintelligibility of the spoken language systems and the very different language stocks in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, all of East Asia during the Tang dynasty adopted the Chinese writing system that the Japanese called *kanji* (*hanja* in Korean, and *hanzi* in Chinese)—“the writing of the Han” (Holcombe 2001: 61). Because *kanji* are “tied inextricably to a particular set of ideas,” unlike the letters of an alphabet, the use of *kanji* throughout East Asia created an “empire of ideas”—a powerful glue that bound the region (Holcombe 2001: 66). The impact of *kanji* has been such that 30 to 60 percent of each of the modern

Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese lexicons consists of “borrowed Chinese vocabulary” (Holcombe 2001: 75). Therefore, Holcombe (2001: 103) says, the Sinification of East Asia was “more complete and permanent than the so-called Indianization of Southeast Asia.” As China’s economic power waned, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese began to de-emphasize the use of Chinese as a prestige language.

The periods of rapid economic growth associated with the rise of these hegemony were conducive to the spread of their languages among those with whom they traded or brought under control. Thus Latin, the official language of the Roman Empire, spread throughout the imperial domains eventually spawning the Romance languages. The Achaemenid Empire spread the use of Persian, in addition to Aramaic, in the Middle East while the Abbasids and the Ottomans spread Arabic and Turkish respectively to compete with Iranian. Tang China’s attempt to push its culture into Central Asia met with resistance when the powerful Omayyad-Abbasid Caliphate (which had become the super-accumulator of the world system following the unification of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Central Asia) defeated the Chinese at the Battle of Talas in 751. Holcombe (2001) says that Sinification—adoption of *kanji* or “standard” spoken Chinese—may have extended as far west as the Oxus River (Amu Darya) at the peak of Tang authority in the seventh century. By the eleventh century, “Arabic had become the chief medium of everyday use from Persia to the Pyrenees, superseding the old culture languages like Aramaic, Coptic, Greek, and Latin” (Almaney and Alwan 1982: 77). Eighth to twelfth centuries marked the golden age of Islam—from the reign of Māmūn to the death of philosopher Averroës in 1198. Braudel (1994: 71–72) states that during this period, when the Islamic world turned into a vast capitalist trading system, classical Arabic “became the idiom common to all Islamic countries, as Latin was to their Christian counterparts.” Mongol conquests spelled the decline of Islamic power, as well as of Arabic. However, because the Ottoman Empire was based upon Islamic faith rather than upon Turkish nationality, Arabic language continued its liturgical role under the Ottomans.

Under the Maurya and the Gupta dynasties, “classical and sophisticated” Sanskrit became “the vehicle of a princely civilization in contrast to the culture of the masses” (Braudel 1994: 225) throughout the Indian subcontinent. Holcombe (2001: 99) points out that, from the pre-Christian times, Buddhist merchants from the subcontinent were instrumental in the “Indianization” of Southeast Asia and the creation of a vast “Sanskrit cosmopolis” where Sanskrit was “the international language of public political expression.” Thus Sanskrit enjoyed “a limited, if privileged, place amid a huge profusion of tongues.”

Fifth, we can relate the vicissitudes of languages to the long (and short) economic cycles of alternating ascending (A) phases and descending (B) phases of the world system. Wardhaugh (1987: 1) says it is a “historical fact that languages are born and die and experience periods of ascendancy and decline.” Long economic cycles result in the dethroning of hegemons, as well as their languages. Nested within these long cycles are Kondratieff cycles (viz., waves of economic prosperity and decline that last on the average about 50 years), and cycles of shorter duration. These nested cycles may explain regional variations to the general A and B phases of the long worldwide cycles. Such phenomena are consistent with the Buddhist universal principle of causation that functions automatically and spontaneously.

The phenomena of *core-periphery*, *hegemony-rivalry*, and ascending and descending *phases of economic cycles* are recurring structures and processes of the world system. So are “multiple political hegemonies (or cores) in general configurations, which are in political economic competition with each other in a wider world economy and system” (Gills and Frank 1993: 188). From about 500 BCE to the end of the medieval period, Gills and Frank have noted the appearance of 400- to 500-year-long economic cycles with up and down phases lasting approximately 200 years each. The up phases are associated with the emergence of regional and transregional hegemons or “even world system wide super-accumulating super-hegemons” (Gills and Frank: 188). Bosworth (1995) found support for these economic cycles in his study of the rise of cities.

Using Gills and Frank’s analysis of A/B (up/down) economic phases of the world system, we see the rise of major empires during the “up” phase of world economic cycles—the Roman Empire in Europe; the Assyrian, Achaemeses, Omayyad-Abbasid, and Ottoman empires in the Middle East; the Sui and Tang Empire in China; and the Mauryan Empire in India (Table 2). It was also during an “up” phase that Alexander the Great conquered Egypt and the Middle East and entered India in the fourth century BCE. Even though his empire disintegrated after a decade, Hellenistic culture, including the Greek language, had a long impact on the area. Holcombe (2001: 101) suggests that, from about 670, the trading prowess of Srivijaya, a heavily Indianized Buddhist trading community in Sumatra, helped promote Malay as the predominant language of the region. The period from 500 to 750/800 was another “up” phase of a world economic cycle (Gills and Frank 1993).

The economic success of the former empires was instrumental in spreading their respective languages in the subjugated territories. Thus, Sumerian had to give way to Akkadian after Sargon the Great (2335–2279 BCE) conquered Mesopotamia and founded the Akkad dynasty. Moreover,

Table 2. *Level of support for Gills and Frank's A and B phases of long economic cycles (Gills and Frank [1993]; Bosworth [1995]; Chandler [1987])*

A and B phases		Level of support in Chandler's data	Rise of imperial languages
Ancient and Bronze Age periods			
A1	2000–1800/1700 BC	Inconclusive/ insufficient data	Rise of Akkadian
B1	1700–1500/1400 BCE	Mild	
A2	1400/1200 BCE	Moderate	Rise of Hittite
B2	1200–1000 BCE	Moderate	
The Iron Age			
A3	1000–800 BCE	Strong	Rise of Aramaic
B3	800–550 BCE	Contradictory	
The Axial Age			
A4	550–450 BCE	Strong	Rise of Persian (Avestan)
B4	450–350 BCE	Mild	
A5	350–250/200 BCE	Strong	Rise of Sanskrit and Greek
B5	250/200–100/50 BCE	Mild/inconclusive	Rise of Chinese?
A6	100/50 BCE–CE 150–200	Strong	Rise of Latin
B6	CE 150/200–500	Strong	
The Medieval and Early Modern periods			
A7	CE 500–750/800	Strong	Rise of Arabic; resurgence of Chinese and Greek
B7	CE 750/800–1000/1050	Strong	
A8	CE 1000/1050–1250/1300	Strong	
B8	CE 1250/1300–1450	Moderate	Rise of Mongolian?

Table 3. *Select imperial languages in ancient and medieval periods (New Encyclopedia Britannica [1998]; Wolpert [1993]; various)*

Hegemon	Rulers	Territory at peak	Hegemon language
Neo-Assyrian Empire Early 9th century to 612 BCE (200 years)	Ashunasirpal II (884–859 BCE) to Ashurbanipal (669–627 BCE)	Included Mesopotamia, Egypt, Judah, Samaria, Phoenicia, Syria, Urartu, part of Media, and Elam	Aramaic supplants Akkadian or Assyro-Babylonian (Semitic)
Achaemedes Persian Empire 539 BCE–337 BCE (200 years)	Cyrus the Great, Darius I (521–486 BCE), and Xerxes (486–465 BCE)	Indus River in the east to the Mediterranean in the west, and included Libya, Egypt, and Asia Minor	Aramaic (Semitic) and Old Persian or Avestan (Indo-Iranian)
Alexander's Empire From 334–323 BCE (one decade)	Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), king of Macedonia and Greece	Indus River in the east to the Aegean Sea in the west, and around the Mediterranean to Egypt	Hellenistic Greek or Koine (Indo-European)

Table 3. *Continued*

Hegemon	Rulers	Territory at peak	Hegemon language
Parthian Empire 248 BCE–CE 226 (500 years)	Arsaces (reigned c. 250 – c. 211 BCE), Mithradates II (123–88 BCE), Phraates III (70–58/57 BCE), Vologases III (148–192), Artabanus V (c. 213–224)	All of the old Persian empire as far west as the Euphrates River	Parthian (Indo-Iranian)
Sassanid Empire 224–641 (400 years)	Ardashir I (reigned 224–241), Khosrau I (531–579), Khosrau II (590–628)	All of modern Iran and parts of Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and the Gulf Coast of the Arabian peninsula	Pahlavi (Middle-Persian written in Aramaic characters)
Omayyad Caliphate 661–750 (90 years)	Muamayah (661–680)	Syria (Damascus as capital), North Africa, and Spain	Arabic (Semitic)
Abbasid Caliphate 750–1238 (490 years)	Harun al-Rashid (789–809), Maimun (813–833), Motassem (833–842)	Iraq (Baghdad as capital). In the 750s, the empire extended from the Atlantic Ocean to Central Asia, but by 950 this state had vanished.	Arabic (Semitic)
Mongol Empire 1206–1368 (160 years)	Genghis Khan (reigned 1206–1227), Ogodei Khan (1229–1241), Guyuk Khan (1246–1248), Mongke Khan (1251–1259), Kublai Khan (1260–1294)	Four khanates: Empire of the Great Khan (Mongolia, China, Korea), Chaghatai Khanate (Central Asia), Ilkhanate (Middle East), Golden Horde (Southern Russia to European Pontiac)	Middle-Mongolian (Altaic)
Ottoman Empire 1301–1922 (600 years)	Selim I (reigned 1512–1520), Suleiman the Magnificent (1522–1566), Osman II (1618–1622), Salim III (1789–1807), Mahud II (1803–1839)	Included a vast area of the Middle East (Turkey, Syria, Mesopotamia, and western Iran), southeastern Europe and North Africa	Turkish (Altaic) and Arabic (Semitic)
Roman Empire 27 BCE–CE 476 (500 years)	Augustus (reigned 27 BCE–CE 14), Caligula (37–41), Nero (54–68), Marcus Aurelius (161–180), Constantine the	Until the division of the empire into west and east in 284, the territory included North Africa, the Levant, Assyria,	Latin (Indo-European)

Table 3. *Continued*

Hegemon	Rulers	Territory at peak	Hegemon language
	Great (306–323), Romulus Augustus (475–476)	Armenia, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, the Balkans, and most of Western Europe	
Byzantine Empire 330–453 (1100 years)	Justin (518–527), Justinian (527–565), Heraclius (610–641), Leo III (718–741), Basil I (867–886), Alexius I Palaeologus (1081–1118), John VIII (1425–1448), Constantine XI (1449–1453)	Eastern part of the original Roman Empire comprising the prefectures of Illyricum and the East with Constantinople as capital	Byzantine Greek (Indo-European)
Holy Roman Empire 962–1806 (800 years)	Otto I (936–973), Saxon; Conrad II (1024–1039), Franconian; Conrad III (1138–1152), Hohenstaufen; Albert II (1438–1440), Hapsburg; Francis II (1792–1806), Lothringen	Political counterpart of Roman Catholic Church comprising German states and principalities, and northern Italy	Latin + (later) German (Indo-European)
First Chinese Empire 221BCE–CE 220 (440 years)	Qin and Han dynasties	Lingnan (incl. North Vietnam) in south to Liaodong in north, and Chinese Turkestan in west.	Central Plain Chinese (<i>kanji</i> script) (Sinitic)
Second Chinese Empire 589–907 (320 years)	Sui and Tang dynasties	Tang expansion in west up to Oxus River (Amu Darya)	Central Plain Chinese (<i>kanji</i> script) (Sinitic)
Mauryan Empire 326–184 BCE (140 years)	Chandragupta (reigned 326–301 BCE), Bindusara (301–269 BCE), Ashoka (269–232 BCE)	All of the Indian subcontinent except the three Dravidian “kingdoms” — Kerala, Chola, and Pandya — in the south	Sanskrit (Indo-Aryan)
Gupta Empire 320–550 (230 years)	Chandra Gupta I (320–335), Samudra Gupta (335–375), Chandra Gupta II (375–415)	East-central Gangetic plain — from Punjab in the west to Bengal in the east	Classical Sanskrit (Indo-Aryan)

the Hittites of the Old Kingdom (in the late seventeenth century BCE) imposed their language over the Hattic in Anatolia. Their New Kingdom that arose about 1430 BCE and dominated the Middle East for some 150 years established the supremacy of Hittite in the region. Similarly, the neo-Assyrians adopted Aramaic, which succeeded Akkadian, as the language of their empire in the first millennium BCE. These hegemon languages of the ancient period failed to survive the economic forces that subsequently emerged. In the modern period, the colonial powers now constituting the formidable European Union have pushed their languages to the top of the international language order—English, French, and German in particular. Economic supremacy of the United States has ensured the hegemony of English over the other European languages, particularly French, which had greater prestige until World War I. The economic strength of Japan has promoted the learning of Japanese internationally.

Among the hegemonies that emerged during the “down” phase of world economic cycles were the first Chinese Empire and the Parthian Empire of the third century BCE; the Sassanid Empire of the third century CE; the fourth century Gupta Empire of India, and the thirteenth century Mongol Empire. Gills and Frank (1993: 189) explain that these hegemonies and perhaps others “developed their hegemony over rivals who had been weakened by their own conflicts.” The underlying economic downturn enabled these hegemonies to defeat their rivals even though those very conditions made these empires relatively unstable. Thus, the Mongol language failed to achieve long-term hegemonic status. However, as Middle Mongolian spread during the empire, its various dialects survived as Moghol in Afghanistan; Daghur in the east; and Monguor, Bao’an, and Santa in the south. The Byzantium, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Catholic Church also helped preserve three ancient Indo-European languages. Although Greek has survived as a distinct language for several millennia, and played the role of hegemon in Alexander’s empire and the Byzantium, it has ceased to be a prestige language. The Byzantine Empire gave archaic Greek prestige status as its official language from mid-seventh century. Even though Byzantine Greek continued to be the liturgical language of the Greek Orthodox Church, the fortunes of the language changed with the stages of the decline, the revival, and the demise of the empire in 1453. Although Latin dominated the early phase of the Holy Roman Empire (Bryce 1961: 94), the Reformation pushed the vernacular German to be the everyday language of what had become a loose confederation of primarily German-speaking political units.

The historical development of English, the current “global” language, also fits into these A/B phases and serves as an excellent example of the operation of the law of impermanence. The progenitors of Old English

— the Germanic tribes identified as Jutes, Angles, and Saxons — entered England at the end of the “down” phase of a long economic cycle, and consolidated themselves in their new land during the “up” phase, which was also propitious for St. Augustine to spread Latin Christianity in the land. The Viking invasions of England occurred in the “down” phase that set in at the end of the eighth century. Old English was a synthesis of Low German (e.g. Kentish, West Saxon, Northumbrian, and Mercian) and Old Norse, the dialects of two waves of invaders on whom the missionaries imposed some Latin as well. The Celtic tribes, whom the invaders had driven to the western and northern edges of the land, simply could not compete with the economic power of the invaders. The greatest challenge to Old English came with the Norman Conquest during the “up” phase of a world economic cycle. Norman French pushed back Old English, which became an endangered language (Crystal 1997), for 300 years. Middle English that developed during the Norman rule, was a synthesis of Old English and Italic, particularly Latin and its derivative French. Modern English was born during an “up” phase, which saw the impact of the printing press. English absorbed more Latin and Greek during the sixteenth century renaissance of classical literature. The economic power of the British Empire propelled English to the global level. English beat French as the “undisputed medium of diplomacy and civilization” (Mitchell 1986: 169) following the emergence of the United States as the economic power center of the world at the end of World War I. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles “was the first major international treaty in the modern era not to be in French only” (Mitchell 1986: 163).

Old English is unintelligible to the contemporary English speaker while Middle English may seem too archaic or “primitive.” The law of impermanence is evident in the constant changes that languages undergo because of interaction with the totality of languages in the world system fuelled by capital (or “karmic”) accumulation. English almost died during the Norman occupation of England. It was “reborn” to dominate the world eventually. English has actually gone through several rebirths—most obviously from Old English to Middle English, from Middle English to Modern English, and from Modern English to Global English. English has been the beneficiary of enrichment from other languages during its early history as a periphery language. Because of its dominant global status today (Barker et al. 2001), it has had a great impact on other languages, even producing a variety of “World Englishes” or pidgins, such as Sranan Togo, Tok Pisin, Chinese English, Japanese English, Indian English, and so on. The study of such Englishes has emerged as a sociolinguistic sub-discipline. Language structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation operate in a state of flux. Wardhaugh (1987: 2) asserts, “All languages are constantly in a state of change.”

Conclusion

The world system theory, in its humanocentric form (Gills and Frank 1993), provides a congenial framework for analyzing the sociology of language. The main components of this theory, as demonstrated in this essay, are also congruent with Eastern philosophical concepts. The theory's emphasis on capital accumulation as the motor force of the world system makes it a powerful tool of analysis for scholars venturing into the new field of *economics of language*. Its congruence with Eastern philosophy makes it eminently suitable for analyzing language phenomena in philosophical terms. Because of this double-edged power, the findings derived through its application are likely to possess a high degree of reliability and validity.

Taking the *world as a single unit of analysis*, one can clearly see the operation of the part-whole interaction that explains the genesis, spread, domination, and decline of languages. The philosophical concept of codependent arising lends it further support. Competitive *capital accumulation* at any juncture of time and space enables the languages of the top accumulators to achieve dominance. The philosophical concept of karmic accumulation proffers it added backing. The international language order is a clear manifestation of the *core-periphery structure* of the world. The philosophical concept of the dialectic viz., the yin-yang complements or Hegel's thesis-antithesis) helps us understand the clashes of universal phenomena that produce centers and central languages, and peripheries and peripheral languages. The *alternation between hegemony and rivalry* is clearly congruent with the philosophical concept of impermanence. Lastly, the role of long *economic cycles* in affecting the status of the hegemons and hegemon languages is consistent with the philosophical concept of the automatic and spontaneous functioning of causation.

In the international language order, English reigns as the "global" language even though more people speak Mandarin Chinese than English. French, German, and Japanese have emerged as the other center languages because of their commodity value. Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Portuguese possibly constitute the semiperiphery. Economic power of the countries or the economic blocs associated with these languages, as well as the number of speakers, give them a higher status than the others. Languages spoken widely in highly informatized countries probably fall into the semiperiphery cluster as well. However, Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, and Malay-Indonesian, which are associated with relatively poor countries though spoken by large numbers, belong to the periphery cluster. Even though Arabic-speaking countries are economically weak, their oil cartel has given them some power. Moreover, Arabic remains the liturgical language of the Islamic world (Anshen 1956).

Russian thrives on the laurels of the former Soviet bloc despite the relatively weak Russian economy.

Dixon (1997) points out that in every part of the world, people use the prestige language or dialect of the area relegating the non-prestige languages to the backwater. For example, within Brittany, people prefer to speak French more often than Breton. In global communication, however, English has become “the language with the greatest international prestige” (Dixon 1997: 145). Dixon says that every non-prestige language is gradually being used less and less in a slow but inexorable process. He laments that all over the world “regional and social dialects are converging on the ‘standard’ form of the language” (Dixon 1997: 146). The languages that will survive, Dixon argues, are the prestige languages of each nation. He concludes, “If things don’t change, the ultimate end to the period of linguistic punctuation that we are now in will be a single world language—that which has the greatest prestige” (Dixon 1997: 148). Crystal (1997), Ostler (1999), and others have expressed concern about the possibility of the disappearance of at least half of the world’s 6,000 or so languages by the middle of this century. Ostler says that languages are becoming extinct at twice the rate of endangered mammals and four times the rate of endangered birds. Crystal, however, points out that the loss of languages, which may have accelerated recently, is hardly a new problem. Derbyshire (2000), on the other hand, sees computer translation as a larger threat to the supremacy of English as a second language and to multilingualism in general.

The component elements of the world system theory and the associated Eastern philosophical concepts lead us to conclude that the problems relating to language supremacy or loss are not peculiar to the contemporary Information Age. The survival of languages depends on their ability to compete with one another in the world system. This ability, in turn, depends on the competitive capital-accumulation skills of their respective primary speakers. History provides examples of the decline and demise of imperial languages. Impermanence or continuous change is the most noticeable characteristic of the international language order as with all other facets of the world system. If history provides a reliable guide, then English is unlikely to be the “global” language for more than the duration of a long economic cycle. The fate of Latin may befall English despite the optimism of some Anglophiles that “any parallels with the linguistic fragmentation of Latin after the fall of the Roman empire have become unrealistic” (Mitchell 1986: 167). The microchip may well play a role in dethroning top languages when people could use computer technology for instant translation of one major language to another. Nevertheless, the language of the next hegemon power will most likely dethrone English.

Coulmas (1992) too points out that the dominance of English is unlikely to last forever because many factors not directly related to language can cause the decline of its speech community. However, he says, a top language such as English “will follow such a decline only with great delay, because on account of the structural properties it has acquired by being adapted to so many purposes, such a language is extraordinarily valuable of and in itself” (Coulmas 1992: 291).

A language scholar, though, has already warned:

Trying to account for the rise and fall of a particular language is a complicated matter. Attempting to predict the future may also be equally foolhardy. It is simply not possible to devise some kind of mechanical formula that takes into account all the factors affecting how languages prosper and decline and use it to predict trends. (Wardhaugh 1987: 16)

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Notes

1. Other language families include Andamanese; Austronesian; Australian Aboriginal; Khoisan; Korean, Japanese, and Ainu; Niger-Congo; Nilo-Saharan; North and Central American Indian; Paleo-Siberian; Papuan; South American Indian; Tai and Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien); and Uralic (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1998).
2. Sir William Jones, an Oriental scholar who served as a High Court judge in Calcutta, told the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786 that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin had more than an accidental affinity “both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar” (Renfrew 1987: 9). His observations led scholars to trace the languages of the Indo-European family and laid the groundwork for pursuing historical linguistics.
3. An abundance of additional sources provide greater details, for example, Birnbaum and Puhvel (1966), Cardona et al. (1970), Meillet (1967).
4. An archaeological site at the eastern end of Lake Neuchâtel, Switzerland, the name of which has been extended to distinguish the Late Iron Age culture of European Celts.
5. The change in the English language over the last millennium is evident in the translation of the 23rd Psalm from Old English (“Drihten me raet, ne byth me nanes godes wan. And he me geset on swythe good feohland. And fedde me be waetera stathum . . .”) to Modern English (“Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In meadows of green grass he lets me lie. To the waters of repose he leads me. . .”).
6. Hane (1991: 10) says that Japanese has links with both the Polynesian and Altaic languages. Reischauer and Craig (1989: 4) also link Japanese, as well as Korean, with Altaic languages.

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