1. THE WORLD'S LANGUAGE

MORE THAN 300 MILLION PEOPLE IN the world speak English and the rest, it sometimes seems, try to. It would be charitable to say that the results are sometimes mixed.

Consider this hearty announcement in a Yugoslavian hotel: "The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid. Turn to her straightaway." Or this warning to motorists in Tokyo: "When a passenger of the foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet at him melodiously at first, but if he still obstructs your passage, then tootle him with vigor." Or these instructions gracing a packet of convenience food from Italy: "Besmear a backing pan, previously buttered with a good tomato sauce, and, after, dispose the cannelloni, lightly distanced between them in a only couch."

Clearly the writer of that message was not about to let a little ignorance of English stand in the way of a good meal. In fact, it would appear that one of the beauties of the English language is that with even the most tenuous grasp you can speak volumes if you show enough enthusiasm—a willingness to tootle with vigor, as it were.

To be fair, English is full of booby traps for the unwary foreigner. Any language where the unassuming word fly signifies an annoying insect, a means of travel, and a critical part of a gentleman's apparel is clearly asking to be mangled. Imagine being a foreigner and having to learn that in English one tells a lie but the truth, that a person who says "I could care less" means the same thing as someone who says "I couldn't care less," that a sign in a store saying ALL ITEMS NOT ON SALE doesn't mean literally what it says (that every
item is not on sale) but rather that only some of the items are on sale, that when a person says to you, “How do you do?” he will be taken aback if you reply, with impeccable logic, “How do I do what?”

The complexities of the English language are such that even native speakers cannot always communicate effectively, as almost every American learns on his first day in Britain. Indeed, Robert Burchfield, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, created a stir in linguistic circles on both sides of the Atlantic when he announced his belief that American English and English English are drifting apart so rapidly that within 200 years the two nations won’t be able to understand each other at all.

That may be. But if the Briton and American of the twenty-second century baffle each other, it seems altogether likely that they won’t confuse many others—not, at least, if the rest of the world continues expropriating words and phrases at its present rate. Already Germans talk about Ein Image Problem and das Cash-Flow, Italians program their computers with il software, French motorists going away for a weekend break pause for les refueling stops, Poles watch televizja. Spaniards have a flirt, Austrians eat Big Macs, and the Japanese go on a pikuniku. For better or worse, English has become the most global language, the lingua franca of business, science, education, politics, and pop music. For the airlines of 157 nations (out of 168 in the world), it is the agreed international language of discourse. In India, there are more than 3,000 newspapers in English. The six member nations of the European Free Trade Association conduct all their business in English, even though not one of them is an English-speaking country. When companies from four European countries—France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland—formed a joint truck-making venture called Iveco in 1977, they chose English as their working language because, as one of the founders wryly observed, “It puts us all at an equal disadvantage.” For the same reasons, when the Swiss company Brown Boveri and the Swedish company ASEA merged in 1988, they decided to make the official company language English, and when Volkswagen set up a factory in Shanghai it found that there were too few Germans who spoke Chinese and too few Chi-

nese who spoke German, so now Volkswagen’s German engineers and Chinese managers communicate in a language that is alien to both of them, English. Belgium has two languages, French and Flemish, yet on a recent visit to the country’s main airport in Brussels, I counted more than fifty posters and billboards and not one of them was in French or Flemish. They were all in English.

For non-English speakers everywhere, English has become the common tongue. Even in France, the most determinedly non-English-speaking nation in the world, the war against English encroachment has largely been lost. In early 1989, the Pasteur Institute announced that henceforth it would publish its famed international medical review only in English because too few people were reading it in French.

English is, in short, one of the world’s great growth industries. “English is just as much big business as the export of manufactured goods,” Professor Randolph Quirk of Oxford University has written. “There are problems with what you might call ‘after-sales service’; and ‘delivery’ can be awkward; but at any rate the production lines are trouble free.” [The Observer, October 26, 1980]

Indeed, such is the demand to learn the language that there are now more students of English in China than there are people in the United States.

It is often said that what most immediately sets English apart from other languages is the richness of its vocabulary. Webster’s Third New International Dictionary lists 450,000 words, and the revised Oxford English Dictionary has 615,000, but that is only part of the total. Technical and scientific terms would add millions more. Altogether, about 200,000 English words are in common use, more than in German (184,000) and far more than in French (a mere 100,000). The richness of the English vocabulary, and the wealth of available synonyms, means that English speakers can often draw shades of distinction unavailable to non-English speakers. The French, for instance, cannot distinguish between house and home, between mind and brain, between man and gentleman, between “I wrote” and “I have written.” The Spanish cannot differentiate a chairman from a president, and the Italians have no equivalent of wishful thinking. In Russia there are no native words
The Irish have very few words for different snow, fresh snow, old snow. To them there is only snow. What is well known is that every word for a snow — though commonly that last word — is well known. There are a few words for a snow — the Irish, as of course, every language has areas in which it needs to break.

The Irish language, like any others, is not unlike a world of information. The word for a snow — though commonly that last word — is well known. There are a few words for a snow — the Irish, as of course, every language has areas in which it needs to break.

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lence, worship, copy, blame, comfort, bend, cut, reach, like, dislike, and so on. Other languages sometimes show inspired flashes of versatility, as with the German auf, which can mean "on," "in," "upon," "at," "toward," "for," "to," and "upward," but these are relative rarities.

At the same time, the endless versatility of English is what makes our rules of grammar so perplexing. Few English-speaking natives, however well educated, can confidently elucidate the difference between, say, a complement and a predicate or distinguish a full infinitive from a bare one. The reason for this is that the rules of English grammar were originally modeled on those of Latin, which in the seventeenth century was considered the purest and most admirable of tongues. That it may be. But it is also quite clearly another language altogether. Imposing Latin rules on English structure is a little like trying to play baseball in ice skates. The two simply don't match. In the sentence "I am swimming," swimming is a present participle. But in the sentence "Swimming is good for you," it is a gerund—even though it means exactly the same thing.

A third—and more contentious—supposed advantage of English is the relative simplicity of its spelling and pronunciation. For all its idiosyncrasies, English is said to have fewer of the awkward consonant clusters and singsong tonal variations that make other languages so difficult to master. In Cantonese, hae means "yes." But, with a fractional change of pitch, it also describes the female pudenda. The resulting scope for confusion can be safely left to the imagination. In other languages it is the orthography, or spelling, that leads to bewilderment. In Welsh, the word for beer is cwrw—an impossible combination of letters for any English speaker. But Welsh spellings are as nothing compared with Irish Gaelic, a language in which spelling and pronunciation give the impression of having been devised by separate committees, meeting in separate rooms, while implacably divided over some deep semantic issue. Try pronouncing geimhreadh, Gaelic for "winter," and you will probably come up with something like "gem-reed-uh." It is in fact "gyeereee." Beaudhchais ("thank you") is "bekkas" and Ó Séaghdha

("Oh-seeg-da?") is simply "O'Shea." Against this, the Welsh pronunciation of cwrw—"koo-roo"—begins to look positively self-evident.

In all languages pronunciation is of course largely a matter of familiarity mingled with prejudice. The average English speaker confronted with agglomerations of letters like tchst, sthm, and tchph would naturally conclude that they were pretty well unpronounceable. Yet we use them every day in the words matchstick, asthma, and catchphrase. Here, as in almost every other area of language, natural bias plays an inescapable part in any attempt at evaluation. No one has ever said, "Yes, my language is backward and unexpressive, and could really do with some sharpening up." We tend to regard other people's languages as we regard their cultures—with ill-hidden disdain. In Japanese, the word for foreigner means "stinking of foreign hair." To the Czechs a Hungarian is "a pimple." Germans call cockroaches "Frenchmen," while the French call lice "Spaniards." We in the English-speaking world take French leave, but Italians and Norwegians talk about departing like an Englishman, and Germans talk of running like a Dutchman, Italians call syphilis "the French disease," while both French and Italians call con games "American swindle." Belgian taxi drivers call a poor tipper "un Anglais." To be bored to death in French is "être de Birmingham," literally "to be from Birmingham" (which is actually about right). And in English we have "Dutch courage," "French letters," "Spanish fly," "Mexican carwash" (i.e., leaving your car out in the rain), and many others. Late in the last century these epithets focused on the Irish, and often, it must be said, they were as witty as they were wounding. An Irish buggy was a wheelbarrow. An Irish beauty was a woman with two black eyes. Irish confetti was bricks. An Irish promotion was a demotion. Now almost the only slur against these fine people is to get one's Irish up, and that isn't really taken as an insult.

So objective evidence, even among the authorities, is not always easy to come by. Most books on English imply in one way or another that our language is superior to all others. In The English Language, Robert Burchfield writes: "As a source of intellectual
We possess countless examples of this. Perhaps the most famous is the Tale of Fable, "The Ant and the Grasshopper.

In English, "If you don't work, you don't eat." In most other languages, we have stories about the wise harvesters. We have worked hard, we have saved up, and when the good times come, we can enjoy them.

Our language reflects this idea, with the concept of a good harvest. Not only do we appreciate the fruits of our labor, but we also acknowledge the importance of planning and saving for the future.

In French, for example, the phrase "la moisson" is used to express the idea of a bountiful harvest. It is a time of abundance and prosperity, and it is a reminder of the importance of hard work and planning.

In German, the word "ерnte" is used to express the same idea. It is a time of celebration and joy, and it is a reminder of the importance of hard work and perseverance.

But in Chinese, the concept of a good harvest is expressed differently. The Chinese word for harvest is "秋收", which is a reminder of the importance of hard work and preparation.

In other languages, the concept of a good harvest is expressed differently. It is a reminder of the importance of hard work, planning, and saving for the future.

But in English, the phrase "If you don't work, you don't eat." reminds us of the importance of hard work and planning. It is a reminder of the value of our labor, and it is a reminder of the importance of working hard to achieve our goals.

In French, the phrase "la moisson" is a reminder of the importance of hard work and planning. It is a reminder of the value of our labor, and it is a reminder of the importance of working hard to achieve our goals.

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On Speaking of Language

There is nothing at all wrong with the English language, so far as I can see, but that may only be because I cannot see ahead. I'll never place in charge of it, as chairman, say, of a National Academy for the Improvement of Language. I would not lay a finger on English. It suits every need that I can think of. Flexibility, clarity, subtlety of metaphor, ambiguity where it is needed (which is more often than is generally acknowledged), and most of all, changeability. I have no doubt that all past changes were for the better, I have no doubt that today's English is a considerable improvement over Elizabethan or Chaucerian talk, and miles ahead of Old English. By now, the language has reached its stage of ultimate perfection, and I'll be satisfied to have it this way forever. But I know I'm wrong about this. English is shifting and
mental word indicating the inability to speak: "infancy." Ster was a root meaning to stiffen; it became stern in Germanic and steafan in Old English, meaning to die, and then turned into "starve" in our speech.

The changes in language will continue forever, but no one knows for sure who does the changing. One possibility is that children are responsible. Derek Bickerton, professor of linguistics at the University of Hawaii, explores this in his book *Roots of Language*. Sometime around 1880, a language catastrophe occurred in Hawaii when thousands of immigrant workers were brought to the islands to work for the new sugar industry. These people, speaking Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and various Spanish dialects, were unable to communicate with one another or with the native Hawaiians or the dominant English-speaking owners of the plantations, and they first did what such mixed-language populations have always done: they spoke Pidgin English (a corruption of "business English"). A pidgin is not really a language at all, more like a set of verbal signals used to name objects but lacking the grammatical rules needed for expressing thought and ideas. And then, within a single generation, the whole mass of mixed peoples began speaking a totally new tongue: Hawaiian Creole. The new speech contained ready-made words borrowed from all the original tongues, but bore little or no resemblance to the predecessors in the rules used for stringing the words together. Although generally regarded as a "primitive" language, Hawaiian Creole was constructed with a highly sophisticated grammar. Professor Bickerton's great discovery is that this brand-new speech could have been made only by the children. There wasn't time enough to allow for any other explanation. Soon after the influx of workers in 1880 the speech was Hawaiian Pidgin, and within the next twenty-five or thirty years the accepted language was Creole. The first immigrants, the parents who spoke Pidgin, could not have made the new language and then taught it to the children. They could not themselves understand Creole when it appeared. Nor could the adult English speakers in charge of the place either speak or comprehend Creole. According to Bickerton's research, it simply had to have been the work of children, crowded together, jabbering away at each other, playing.

Bickerton cites this historic phenomenon as evidence, incontrovertible in his view, for the theory that language is a biological, innate, genetically determined property of human beings, driven by a center or centers in the brain that code out grammar and syntax. His term for the gift of speech is "bioprogram." The idea confirms and extends the proposal put forward by Noam Chomsky, almost three decades ago, that human beings are unique in their possession of brains equipped for generating grammar. But the most fascinating aspect of the new work is its evidence that children—and probably very young children at that—are able to construct a whole language, working at it together, or more likely playing at it together.

It should make you take a different view of children, eliciting something like awe. We have always known that childhood is the period in which new languages as well as one's own can be picked up quickly and easily. The facility disappears in most people around the time of adolescence, and from then on the acquisition of a new language is hard, sloggin labor. Children are gifted at it, of course. But it
requires a different order of respect to take in the possibility that children make up languages, change languages, perhaps have been carrying the responsibility for evolving language from the first human communication to twentieth-century speech. If it were not for the children and their special gift we might all be speaking Indo-European or Hittite, but here we all are, speaking several thousand different languages and dialects, most of which would be incomprehensible to the human beings on earth just a few centuries back.

Perhaps we should be paying serious attention to the possible role played by children in the origin of speech itself. It is of course not known when language first appeared in our species, and it is pure guesswork as to how it happened. One popular guess is that at a certain stage in the evolution of the human skull, and of the brain therein, speech became a possibility in a few mutant individuals. Thereafter, these intellectual people and their genes outcompeted all their speechless cousins, and natural selection resulted in *Homo sapiens*. This notion would require the recurrence of the same mutation in many different, isolated communities all around the globe, or else one would have to assume that a lucky few speakers managed to travel with remarkable agility everywhere on earth, leaving their novel genes behind.

Another possibility, raised by the new view of children and speech, is that human language did not pop up as a special mutation, but came into existence as a latent property of all human brains at some point in the evolution of the whole species. The environment required for expression of the brain centers involved in the process was simply
Our Marvelous Native Tongue
The Life and Times of the English Language

Robert Claiborne
By the Author of The Birth of Writing
I. THE IMPORTANCE OF SPEAKING ENGLISH

A Most Extraordinary Language

The miracle of our land's speech—so known
And long combined, none marred when its shown.
—Rudyard Kipling

You English words, I know you:
You are light as dreams, rough as an oak.
Pretense as gold, as pepper and corn.
Or an old clock
—Edward Thomas

By any standard, English is a remarkable language. It is, in begin with, the native tongue of some 300,000,000 people—the largest speech community in the world except for Mandarin Chinese. Even more remarkable is its geographic spread, in which it is second to none: its speakers range from Point Barrow, Alaska, to the Falkland Islands near Cape Horn; from the Shetland Islands north of Scotland to Capetown at the southern tip of Africa; from Hong Kong to Australia's island state of Tasmania. It is the predominant language in two of the six inhabited continents (North America and Australia), and possesses a large block of speakers in a third (Europe) and a sizable one in a fourth (Africa).

English is also by far the most important "second language" in the world. It is spoken by tens of millions of educated Europeans and Japanese, in the most widely studied foreign tongue in both the U.S.S.R. and China, and serves as an "official" language in more than a dozen other countries whose populations total more than a billion—a medium of communication in political and intellectual life for peoples speaking different tongues under the same flag. Of these, only a small fraction speak it with any fluency—but even a percent of a billion adds up; a recent survey estimated that those using English as a second language considerably outnumber its native speakers. English is the lingua franca of scientists, of air pilots and traffic controllers around the world, of students hitchhiking around Europe, and of dropouts meditating in India or...
Nepal. There has never been a "world language," nor is there likely to be, but English is the nearest thing to it that has ever existed.

The expansion of English around the world has been matched by the infiltration of English words into the vocabularies of dozens of other countries. Japanese sports fans talk knowledgeably of *beisuboru* and *garafu* (golf) over glasses of *koka-kora;* Spanish speakers, sometimes stimulated by too many *cocteles,* wax frenetic over *futbol,* while their newspaper columnists deplore the spread of *gangsterismo.* West German newspapers run *Reporten* of legislative *Hearings* on *das Fallout* and *die Recessi* on, and cover *Press Konferenzen* complete with *no Komment* and *off die Rekord;* in France, *teenagers* (pronounced "teenahzhair") wearing blue *djins* buy *hot dogues* from street vendors.

The size of this linguistic infiltration—some would say invasion—has never been measured; one French savant has claimed, with considerable exaggeration, that some five thousand common English words, plus tens of thousands of technical terms, passed into French between 1953 and 1963 alone. Predictably, the influx has evoked denunciations from self-appointed guardians of linguistic "purity" in several countries. A few years ago, for example, a Soviet journalist, one Vladimir V. Vasilyev, deplored Russian adoption of such English terms as *referi,* *offis,* *servis,* *boss* and *plantatiya* (plantation), and urged a declaration of war on "the torture of the Russian tongue"; similar viewings-with-alarm have come from Germany, Spain and Greece. Most violent of all has been the reaction of some French intellectuals. In 1963, Prof. René Etiemble, denouncing "français"—*françois* contaminated with *anglais*—declared that unless something was done, "in forty years' time the French language will have ceased to exist." Soon after, the *Académie Française*—which has a strong claim to being the world's sturdiest academic body—set about preparing a list of linguistic no-no's *impropriés à la langue.*

The truth is that if borrowing foreign words could destroy a language, English would be dead (borrowed from Old Norse), deceased (from French), defunct (from Latin) and kaput (from German). When it comes to borrowing, English excels (from Latin), surpasses (from French) and eclipses (from Greek) any other tongue, past or present. Well over half of our total vocabulary is foreign; of the five English words cited by Tovarish Vasilyev as "torturers" of the Russian tongue, not one is "pure" English ("boss" comes from Dutch, "plantation" from Latin and "referee," "office" and "service" from French). Likewise, of the thousand or two recently borrowed English words that are allegedly destroying French, I'd give long odds that a large proportion were not only borrowed earlier into English, but borrowed from French. Nor is there anything new about this: earlier words that crossed the Channel from France to England and back again include *le rosbif* of Old England, *le sport,* and the useful verb *parquer,* as in "Parques l'auto!"

For centuries, the English-speaking peoples have plundered the world for words, even as their military and industrial empire builders have plundered it for more tangible goods. And linguistic larceny has this major advantage over more conventional types of theft: it enriches the perpetrator without impoverishing the victim. Nor have these centuries of linguistic peculation left English "faceless and clichéd"; on the contrary, they have given us the largest, most variegated and most expressive vocabulary in the world.

The total number of English words lies somewhere between 400,000—the number of current entries in the largest English dictionaries—and 600,000—the largest figure that any expert is willing to be quoted on. By comparison, the biggest French dictionaries have only about 150,000 entries, the biggest Russian ones a mere 150,000.

Our uncertainty over the size of the English vocabulary arises in part out of a longtime propensity among English speakers for making the same "word" serve several different functions. Thus "love" means something we feel, but also something we do—not to mention a zero score in tennis; do we count it as one word, or two, or three? Then, do slang words count, or dialect terms? If we include scientific and technical terms, most of them used by only a small percentage of English speakers, what about the special jargons and lingoes of various trades and subcultures: the newspaperman's "sidebar" (a subsidiary story running alongside the main story), the printer's "ems" (type spaces the width of a capital M) or the physician's "i.v." (intravenous) injection?

But no matter how one reckons up the numbers, the total is enormous. Of course, bigger isn't necessarily better; often it is a good deal worse. Words, on the other hand, are a kind of natural resource; it is impossible to have too many of them. Not, indeed, that any one of us will ever get around to using more than a fraction of our enormous thesaurus ("treasury"—from Greek) of words, not least because tens of thousands of them are intelligible only to specialists. But even the fraction in general use endows us with a uniquely rich assortment of synonyms on almost any subject under the sun: words that mean more or less the same thing, yet each of which possesses its own special qualities of sound and rhythm and shade of meaning. A couple of paragraphs back, I managed with no effort to include four different words referring to robbery in just three sen-
The Importance of Speaking English

Our American Name, Tangase

The story of the great empires of English, from ancient Egypt to modern France, is a story of how a few words, spoken and written, have shaped the world. The English language is a living, breathing entity, constantly evolving and adapting to new situations. It is the language of the arts, science, law, and politics, as well as the language of everyday communication.

In this context, some readers might question the value of our English education or the importance of speaking English. However, the importance of language cannot be overstated. English is the language of commerce, the internet, and global communication. It is a tool for understanding and connecting with people from all over the world.

The importance of English education cannot be understated. It is not just about reading and writing, but also about critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. English is a language that has been shaped by centuries of history, culture, and tradition. It is a language that has been used by some of the greatest minds in history, from Shakespeare to Einstein.

In conclusion, speaking English is not just important, it is essential. It is a tool for success and a bridge to understanding the world around us. So, whether you are learning English as a second language or improving your existing skills, keep a clear aim. The importance of English education cannot be overstated.
2. THE COMMON SOURCE

Indo-European and Its Speakers

What sang the sirens sang, and what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling matters, are not beyond conjecture.

—Sir Thomas Browne

all...sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists.

—Sir William Jones

The history of the English tongue is conventionally dated from around 450 A.D., when the people inaccurately called the Anglo-Saxons began migrating into Britain. The date is clearly arbitrary. If these migrating people were speaking English when they landed, they must have been speaking it when they embarked somewhere along the eastern shore of the North Sea. And that ancient English, in turn, must have been much like the language spoken by their grandparents, which in turn resembled that spoken by their grandfathers, as far back as one can trace the pedigree.

The ultimate roots of English, like those of every other language, lie deep, deep in the past, perhaps as much as a million years ago. It was about then—give or take a few hundred thousand years—that our still rather ape-like ancestors began engaging in activities requiring some degree of cooperation and foresight: the organized hunting of large animals, and controlled use of fire. And from everything we know about our species and its close relatives, activities of this sort required some system of communication employing vocal symbols—a language, in fact.

These first human languages must surely have been far simpler than any modern tongue. Their phonetics were limited by the anatomy of the primitive human vocal tract, which could produce fewer distinguishable sounds than our own. Their vocabularies were doubtless equally limited, with only a few hundred or even a few dozen words, and their syntax was surely of the simplest, with typical “sentences” including only two or three words, like the first sentences of young children today.
But that is all we can ever know or guess about humanity's first languages, unless somebody invents a time machine. A century ago, some scholars believed that somewhere on earth there must exist primitive languages resembling those spoken by our remote ancestors. Missionaries and explorers claimed to have encountered tribes possessing only a few hundred words, while the German philologist Max Müller alleged that even European peasants had similarly restricted vocabularies. There is no evidence, however, that Müller was closely acquainted with peasants. Subsequently, some Swedish philologists took the trouble to record the different words used by one of their rural countrymen over a period of several weeks; the total was around twenty-three thousand. Still later, a Japanese group found that a workman in their country used no less than fifteen thousand different words in a single day. Time and the facts have been equally unkind to the obviously racist theory that primitive languages can be found in "darkest Africa" or some equally remote region: every human language that has been studied has a vocabulary in excess of twenty thousand words—about the number Shakespeare used, and far more than we find in the Bible.

Languages of this degree of complexity may have originated nearly fifty thousand years ago. It is from this period that prehistorians have dug up skulls with fully modern vocal tracts, capable of producing the full range of sounds found in today's tongues. Since these people, as far as we can tell, also had fully modern brains, the odds are that they possessed, or soon developed, fully modern languages—one of which must be the ultimate ancestor of our own. But that, too, is lost beyond recall.

The first identifiable ancestor of English dates from no more than about eight thousand years ago. We owe its discovery to the labors of Sir William Jones, a British judge in India who around 1780 set out to learn the ancient Sanskrit tongue. Jones' original intention was merely to familiarize himself with native Indian law codes, some of which were written in Sanskrit, though it had long been extinct as a spoken language. However, like other educated Englishmen of his day, he had studied Latin and Greek in school, and to his surprise began encountering Sanskrit words that clearly resembled words of identical or similar meanings in the classical tongues. The Sanskrit for "three," transcribed from the exotic alphabets in which the language was recorded, came out trayas, close to Latin tres and Greek trias. Sanskrit panca, five, resembled Greek pente, while the numbers from seven to nine, saptam, astham and navam, equally resembled Latin septem, octo and novem. Sanskrit sarpa, snake, was surely kin to Latin serpens; raja, king, was close to Latin regem; and deva, god, resembled Latin divus, divine.

Jones was not the first European to note such resemblances, but he was the first to study them systematically and to draw the logical conclusion, which he presented in an address to the Asiatick Society in Calcutta on February 2, 1786. The Sanskrit language, he declared, bears to both Greek and Latin "a stronger affinity... than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists." Similar affinities, he added, suggested a link with the Celtic and Germanic tongues as well.

Jones' brilliant deduction has been fully confirmed by nearly two centuries of research. We now know, in fact, that the linguistic descendants of his "common source" include not only Sanskrit (ancestor of the majority of tongues currently spoken in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), Greek, Latin and its descendants (French, Spanish, Italian, etc.), and the Celtic and Germanic tongues, but also the Baltic and Slavonic languages, the Iranian tongues of western Asia, and various minor languages, both current and extinct, including Armenian, Albanian and ancient Hittite. Collectively, they are the native tongues of about half the human race. The common source itself is now called Parent Indo-European, Common Indo-European, or simply Indo-European.

This Indo-European language was evidently spoken at some time in the past by an Indo-European people. English, now used around the world, began as merely the language spoken in the eastern districts of Great Britain; Latin, whose linguistic descendants are almost as widespread as our own tongue, began as merely the language of Latium (modern Lazio), the district of Italy south of Rome. Indo-European, then, must once have been spoken by some tribe or group of tribes inhabiting an equally limited area, whence their multiplying descendants eventually carried their language, in scores of variations, around the world.

Just who were these linguistic founding fathers—and mothers—and where and when did they live? Finding answers to these questions involves putting together clues from a whole range of scholarly fields—linguistics, physical geography, ecology and archaeology—and seeing whether they can be maneuvered into any kind of plausible fit. Through linguistics, scholars have reconstructed much of the Indo-European vocabulary, including words referring to the natural environment and way of life of its speakers. Geography and ecology enable us to delimit regions which correspond to that environment; archaeology, finally, allows us—
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beginning with /m/, as well as those beginning with /n/ and (with one exception) those beginning with /r/ and /l/ (in Sanskrit, initial /r/ has in some cases been replaced by /l/, and vice versa).

For other sounds, the vote, though not unanimous, amounts to a landslide. The word for "father," for instance, begins with /p/ in all the older Indo-European tongues (e.g., Latin pater, whence "paternal"), except for Gothic and the other Germanic tongues, where /l/ occurs instead, and Old Irish, where the initial consonant has simply disappeared ("mother" is mabhair, but "father" is simply athair). The same rule holds for other words beginning with /p/-e.g., Latin piscis is cognate with Gothic fisks and English "fish."

When the philologist seeking to reconstruct Indo-European words finds that no majority rules, he falls back on other clues and inferences, but he will always be aided by a basic principle of historical linguistics: phonetic changes do not occur at random, but in patterns. That is, if a particular sound in a particular phonetic context (say, at the beginning of a word) changes in a given tongue, the change will affect not just some words, but all or nearly all words including that sound. The shift from Indo-European /p/ to Germanic /l/ affected not only "father" and "fish" but all other words beginning with /p/, including the ancestors of English "fire," "fight," "part" and hundreds more. Our tongue does, indeed, contain scores of apparent exceptions to this rule: words that have retained their original /p/. But these are invariably not native Germanic words; rather, they were borrowed from other tongues (e.g., Latin and French) in which this phonetic shift did not take place.

Nobody really knows why phonetic changes should follow these systematic patterns, but the principle has proved out in tens of thousands of cases. With it, the philologist can establish connections between words that would otherwise seem wholly unrelated. For instance, there is no obvious phonetic connection between "foot" and the learned (originally Greek) term "pedology" (the science of soils), and only a tenuous connection in meaning (the soil is what the foot walks on). The laws of phonetic change tell us, however, that "foot" must derive from an earlier *pōd-, whose connection with the "pedo-" of "pedology" is clear enough.*

Patterns of phonetic change in non-initial consonants, those which appear other than at the beginning of a word, are rather more intricate than those governing initial consonants. Patterns of vowel changes are more intricate still—in part because for some reason vowels are less "stable" than consonants over time. (English vowels have undergone three or four major shifts over the past five thousand years or so; its consonants, only one.)

Phonetically, Indo-European differed considerably from English, lacking half a dozen consonants that we use, and including at least three that we do not—notably, the "aspirated" consonants usually written bʰ, dʰ and gʰ (these were apparently pronounced like B, D and G followed by a puff of breath). As for syntax, nouns were inflected in no less than eight different cases (as against five for most Latin nouns, six or seven for a few), and were inflected differently not only for the singular and plural but also for the "dual," whose special set of endings denoted two of the things under discussion. Verb inflections were even more elaborate, showing person (I, you, he, etc.), and number (singular, plural, dual) but also voice (active, passive), tense, "mood" and various other refinements of meaning.

As an example of Indo-European wordmaking in operation, consider *kero[w], stag (whence the much altered and now archaic "hart"). It was formed from the root *kē-, horn (one of its English descendants, as is another kind of horn, the cornet). To this was added a suffix, -w-, making it into "the horned thing," while the inflectional ending -m showed that this particular stag was the object of a verb ("I killed the stag"); had it been the subject ("The stag got away"), it would have been *keros.

This aspect of Indo-European syntax is obviously pretty remote from our own; another, however, remains very much alive in English and most other modern Indo-European tongues: the formation of new words by combining two old ones. Some modern examples are "strip-teaser," "tape-recorder," "spaceman" and "radio-telescope," with "telescope" itself an earlier compound, from Greek roots meaning "far-look." Double-barreled words of this sort were specially common in Indo-European poetry, and a few have been reconstructed by comparing ancient Greek and Sanskrit epics. *Kle[e]os ngw[thi]om, imperishable fame, crops up in both Homer and the Rig Veda, and the poet himself was *wek[w]om telexo, word-weaver (as you have probably guessed, the root *telex- is the source of "textile").

Similar compounds were often used for Indo-European personal names, and continued to be in many of its linguistic descendants, such as the Persian Xerxes ("men's ruler"), the Greek Sophocles ("wisdom-