

Speaking of English: a BBC Interview with Anthony Burgess (around 1987)

Interviewer : " Anthony Burgess is noted as a brilliant user of language, indeed he recently said that Britain's greatest contribution to civilization was the English language. I asked him what he meant. "

A.B. : " This language has spread all over the world, of course, not through any intrinsic merit, people have not said " What a great language, let us choose it. " It's just an accident of history but it is a language worthy to spread all over the world, far more worthy, say, than the German language. "

Interviewer : " Why ? "

A.B. : " Well German is an ingrown language with an excessive grammatical apparatus, we have to learn ' der, die, das' when we start and we always get them wrong ; when in doubt say ' das', even the Germans say that.

Whereas English is a curiously chameleon-like language, it imitates Chinese. You can speak English in monosyllables, as a Chinese does speak his own language, it's a Latin language, it's a an Anglo Saxon language, it's a Scandinavian language ; it's an infinitely adaptable language, it has an immense vocabulary. "

Interviewer : " So it's the vocabulary for you ? "

A.B. : " The vocabulary is vast, the nuances that are possible in using the language are immense, the grammar becomes increasingly simple, it's the ideal language and this is not just a linguistic patriotism saying that. This is our great achievement, to have produced a language of that kind.

The production of the language, of course, has a lot to do with history, it hasn't happened in a void. When, in 1066, the Anglo Saxons faced two enemies at the same time, the Danes and the Norman French, there was an almost overnight modification of what had been a very complex language. There was an almost immediate simplification of grammar in order to meet these two inimical forces, you see, we had to make contact with them and this was done by a kind of overnight simplification of grammar. English became a Creole, they say, at that time, not a real language at all. This has gone on, the simplification of grammar has continued and the enrichment of vocabulary has continued too. "

Interviewer : " The importance of English lies then in its adaptability to users of other languages and its enormous vocabulary, through its historical development even its grammar has been simplified. But Anthony Burgess feels that this wonderful heritage is not appreciated at home in Britain. "

A.B. : " It's produced a great literature and this is not appreciated by our rulers in England. Politics has nothing to do with literature, politics, of course, never can and it grieves me that the English, the British, the inheritors of these islands, do not appreciate what they have.

Often you find Indians, Malays, Chinese, who appreciate it, Germans who appreciate it, but the English don't know what they've got. "

Interviewer : " You also say that the younger generation is in the process of throwing away their heritage. "

A.B. : " I feel that is true. They're taking a view of language which, I suppose, is significant of the age ; you know, that human contact should be more elemental. With the Permissive Age in which sex becomes a means of communication there is no need for language.

Pop music, Rock music, is a genuine over-simplification of language. The appreciation of literature is dying out in our schools and we have a kind of system of government which extolls the utilitarian , the creation of things for sale rather than the pursuit of knowledge for it's own sake. This is not a humanistic culture we're living in and this is bound to diminish the value of language. "

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