

THOMAS CHRISTIANSEN  
*The Multilingual Roots of English. The Birth of a Lingua Franca*  
Edizioni Dell’Orso, Alessandria, 2021, 460 pp.

In the episode “One Voice in the Cosmic Figure”, from the renowned TV series *Cosmos*, Dr Carl Sagan (1980) claims that we “have to know the past to understand the present”. This is true to promote our personal growth, but that attitude also suits the investigation of the reasons behind the evolution of English – and the possible paths that it may follow. In particular, the search for the historical hints of the ‘lingua franca’ role of English represents the main pivot around which Thomas Christiansen has built his latest research monograph.

As the title itself suggests, by acknowledging the “multilingual roots” of English it is possible to uncover the factors that have paved the way for its transformation into “the predominant world language”, into “the world’s lingua franca” (Christiansen 2021, p. 27). The pursuit of the interaction between historical linguistics and the studies of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) – which “have not typically been seen as complementary fields” (p. 421) makes this book a much needed attempt at integrating and improving the conventional views ascribing almost exclusively to economic and political factors the “birth” of ELF and its wide use in, among others, education and academia (e.g., Christiansen 2019; Jenkins 2014) and the institutional (Lacey 2015) and business contexts (Facchinetti *et al.* 2020). The author hence zooms in on the (hi)story of English evolution(s), maintaining that “the various resources” at disposal of lingua-franca speakers “can indeed be traced back to the origins of English” (Christiansen 2021, pp. 1-2). Accordingly, readers are provided with evidence from this multifaceted research in order to realize to what extent the linguistic, cultural and historical dimensions eventually combine and emphasize the fundamental multi-ethnic and intercultural nature of the English language.

The wide range of Thomas Christiansen’s research is appropriately reflected by the vast array of sources informing the monograph, as well as by its structure. In Chapter 1, the book defines the study’s interdisciplinary background and scope. In particular, the basic notions that the readers need to be familiar with so as to follow the other parts of the investigation are pointed out, such as outlining the notions of ‘language’ and ‘languages’ or comparing ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ features. In Chapter 2, the author comments on the state of the art of ELF Studies, thus creating a space that is essential for ELF researchers and scholars, as well as for students who are interested in getting more information about the international and cross-cultural uses of English. Particular emphasis is put on the speakers’ role at the time of shaping and re-shaping their common language, as can be seen from the dedication of two sections to the description of ‘translinguaging’ and ‘creativity’, which represent two of the key elements of the study of the international and intercultural adoptions of English. Due attention is also paid to the often overlooked contribution of people from all corners of the “British-Irish” isles in the evolution of English showing that, even in its earliest manifestations, this language cannot be associated with England alone. From Chapter 3 on, the book accompanies readers in the historical journey passing the milestones in the language’s evolution. Chapter 3 explores

the early history of the British-Irish isles, dealing with Anglo-Saxons, conventionally considered as “the first German settlers” (Christiansen 2021, p. 116), and the arrival of the Romans. Then, Chapter 4 illustrates the Celtic Britain after the Romans, revealing that “the destiny of language can depend on many diverse and unpredictable factors” (p. 117). Following the Celtic hypothesis (p. 143), it is argued that the contribution of Celtic languages, in particular Welsh and Cornish, in the evolution of Old and Middle English has been underestimated. In Chapter 5, the discussion of the role of Germans, along with the intention to identify who the Germans were precisely, help to uncover the diverse linguistic influences leading to the evolution of Old English. The same chapter talks about the Belgae, a Germanic people, some of whom settled Britain before the Roman conquest, and whose long-lost language may be one of the original components of the Old English, together with the various Anglo-Saxon varieties. Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate, respectively, what the Scandinavians and the Normans brought to the evolution of English, warning readers that the consequences of the conquest on the part of the Normans were “[s]ocially, culturally, and not least linguistically [...] huge” (p. 358). Finally, by shedding light on the shift from Old English to Middle English “and beyond” (pp. 393-408), the author looks at the present situation and projects his study on the future of the language, enquiring into its “Resilience and Resurgence” (pp. 361-ff).

The conclusion of the investigation by underlining the resurgence and resilience of English is a move that we praise, for those features have been – are, indeed – decisive in contributing to its success as *the* international language. Time passes, history repeats itself, humans evolve and – alas! – regress, and yet English, true to its ancient roots as a lingua franca, still succeeds in bringing people closer to each other. As Thomas Christiansen reveals in his book, to use a shared language demands the interaction between different linguistic contexts and cultural backgrounds. The co-creation of a lingua franca is a choice. It is a deliberate choice, for it forces speakers to put themselves in their recipients’ shoes, if they want to exchange messages. It is a historical choice, and *The Multilingual Roots of English* proves that the story of the history of English turns out to be, in fact, one of the most interesting stories of the history of each of us.

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## References

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