

Rosemary Salomone – What Happen Next
Sunday, March 6th, 2022

Larry Bernstein:

Why did English become the world's dominant language?

Rosemary Salomone:

It started with the British Empire. The British Empire covered about a quarter of the globe. And just as that empire was unraveling, the United States became a world leader, and the United States was able to use its economic and political power and its cultural influence to spread English. It also came from international organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the British Council that all promoted a pro-English agenda in many of these post-colonial countries.

Larry Bernstein:

How important is American culture like film, TV, and sports to the spread of English?

Rosemary Salomone:

Certainly, Hollywood has been a very powerful force. Young people around the world absorb anything English because it sounds cool to them. American culture spread through social media has had a profound influence on young people around the globe. English to young people represents cosmopolitanism.

Larry Bernstein:

If TV and film are critical, do you think the success of Bollywood means that Hindi could become more prevalent in use outside of India and the Indian diaspora?

Rosemary Salomone:

The influence of India is growing throughout Asia, but I don't think Hindi is going to overcome English. Chinese has a more powerful influence than Hindi does in the East. The current government in India is very pro-nationalist and very pro-Hindi, and has really tried to impose Hindi on the country. In the south of the country, there's been a lot of resistance to it, and they see English as the bulwark against Hindi. I don't think it's going to take off as a regional lingua franca.

Larry Bernstein:

I think what is fascinating is that the choice of a second language is an individual or a parental decision based on a forecast of future use. These language learning decisions are made every day by millions of people. And for the most part, the choice is English. What do you make of this decentralized decision making?

Rosemary Salomone:

In some of these post-colonial countries, very poor parents are going to extremes, selling family property to raise the funds to send their children to an English language school. Parents are

very eager to have their children learn English to give them a leg up in the global economy. We've seen some pushback, in some of the Nordic countries and even in Netherlands. And those are countries with very high proficiency in English.

Perhaps it's had somewhat of a negative effect on the national language and perhaps on national identity. Universities have progressively moved toward English-taught courses and programs in the name of internationalization, but part of that is to recruit students from other countries. It raises revenue, their international rankings, and their reputation.

Larry Bernstein:

Recently, Italy's top technical school announced that it planned to use English exclusively in its graduate school. This English-only requirement resulted in litigation. What happened?

Rosemary Salomone:

In 2013, the Polytechnic Institute in Milan, which is the equivalent of our MIT, very prestigious. And they decided to transfer all their graduate programs into English within two years.

Upwards of 100 faculty members opposed the plan. They ultimately took the institute to court. In the end, the Constitutional Court held that Italian is the national language of the country, and students have the right to learn and professors have the right to teach in their national language.

The institute could not change 100% of their graduate courses into English, but if you go on their website now, you will still find that by far the majority of their courses are taught in English, it's just not 100%. The power of English for the students is just amazing.

I remember sitting in one class where there were a number of students from other countries, some were Chinese, some were from Eastern Europe. Their English was halting. It wasn't very strong, but they couldn't speak Italian either.

I had to wonder what in the world were these students doing and how much knowledge were they really absorbing? Was it only a small fraction of what they could learn in their native language?

Larry Bernstein:

Many American and foreign students attend overseas educational programs each year. I think the purpose is to learn a new culture, expand your horizons, have a lot of fun, and maybe learn something. I guess your point is that when a course isn't taught in your native tongue it won't be that productive.

Rosemary Salomone:

Some of these students were coming into a program where they were getting less than they bargained for in terms of the quality of the education, given their limited language skills.

Larry Bernstein:

The Nordic countries and Eastern Europe seem to have gone all-in with English, but Italy, France and Spain are going at a slower pace with English as a second language.

Rosemary Salomone:

Italy, France and Spain were somewhat slow in jumping onto the English bandwagon. They have stepped up their programs in more recent years, but the politics behind it are very different. You started off in terms of Eastern Europe. Those countries, after the fall of the Soviet Union, did not necessarily have French in their skillset as other educated individuals from Western Europe, and so they chose English as their second language.

The Nordic countries knew they had to adopt a global language to function. France has resisted English historically. France was the language of diplomacy and literacy and high culture for many years. The French language is so tied to French national identity, and that's what has made it so difficult for France to accept English as the global lingua franca. But they're getting a lot of pushback from young people and from parents.

Italians don't have a strong attachment to the Italian language as the French do because Italy unified quite late. Italy was speaking a variety of vernaculars until the mid-1800s and compulsory education was very slow taking off in Italy as well. Italians don't have this passion for Italian as representing the nation as the French do. In the past 10 years, all children from the lower elementary grades on up are required to learn English.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you mention that most French Speakers live in Africa in the former French Colonies. I suspect that these individuals do not associate themselves with classic French culture and literature. I wonder what the clash will be like for the post-colonial francophones with the French. I suspect that France really wanted other Europeans to speak French and are less interested in the Africans. Will that change?

Rosemary Salomone:

That's a real conflict for the French. Emmanuel Macron, the president, has tried to reset the colonial narrative in Africa because he understands that there's a huge population of young people in Africa. 60% of the population in Africa is under the age of 25.

Most French speakers are going to be living outside of France at some point and largely in Africa. France is still using its language to maintain a foothold on the continent. When you look at a country like Morocco, there's been a lot of tension there because not only do you have French and English, French being the colonial language and many Moroccans feeling ambivalent about it because of that history, but then you have English coming in. You also have the Arabization of Morocco, while the language that's spoken by most Moroccans is Tamazight. The linguistic terrain in Morocco is very complicated. The French would like to maintain influence there, and it's being swamped by all these other forces.

Larry Bernstein:

How are the Chinese trying to increase the use of Mandarin outside of China especially in Africa?

Rosemary Salomone:

We should be mindful of the way China is using language and what we call knowledge diplomacy in Africa. China's very mindful of bringing students from Africa to China to attend universities. 81,000 African students are studying in China. Within 15 years, it grew from 1800 to 81,000, so it's a huge explosion. There also are Confucius Institutes. There are 60 of them in Africa. And those are joint programs between the Chinese government and African universities.

Larry Bernstein:

Carol Spahn runs the Peace Corps and she spoke on What Happens Next to discuss how this government agency helps poor people in Africa with education and technical support. Do you think our government's engagement with Africa is successful?

Rosemary Salomone:

China is very aggressively using language and education, influencing the values of young African people. I'm concerned that the United States is not mindful of that. We see the political and economic importance of maintaining a foothold in Africa, but we're not understanding how important it is in terms of developing these young people, where China is very actively going down that road. I think it's a real blind spot in American diplomacy.

Larry Bernstein:

In your opening remarks you encouraged Americans to learn a foreign language for economic reasons. I struggled learning French. In my finance career I worked in my company's Emerging Markets department making investments in Russia, Argentina, Brazil, and Indonesia. In my work, I conversed in English with my local trading partners. Later, when I was responsible for managing the proprietary trading department at Salomon Brothers in Tokyo, I spoke English with all of my colleagues. When I met with the older senior finance professionals at various Japanese banks, they often did not speak English so I used a translator. But the communication seemed good enough. I think it would have been a mistake to spend a decade learning the language only to speak pidgin Japanese in these business meetings.

Rosemary Salomone:

I'll put the question to you, okay? (laughs) Do you feel that you were able to communicate as effectively as you could have if you had spoken Japanese? By working through an interpreter? Sometimes, words cannot be translated accurately from one language to another, so you lose certain idioms, you lose nuance, you lose humor, and that could be very effective in a business environment. You lose the give and take of ordinary conversation. While it may have been somewhat effective, you were able to get business done, it could've been a smoother experience for everybody if you were communicating in a common language.

Upwards of 23 million jobs in the US are tied to international trade in goods and services. You have languages that are spoken in these emerging economies, China and a number of Latin

American countries. They become a significant part of the corporate skillset. Business is conducted in many languages. Not everyone out there does speak English, and by speaking a common language, you communicate in a much more effective way.

Larry Bernstein:

In America, most students are taught 4 to 10 years of foreign language and have nothing to show for it. This seems like a waste of time and money that could be better spent learning another subject with higher economic returns.

Rosemary Salomone:

Americans really believe that we lack the DNA to learn languages. It's the failure of the education system, where we don't teach children to learn another language from day one. For you as an adult to try to learn Japanese, you would have to go into one of these immersion programs for maybe two months or so, go to Middlebury College over the summer. I've seen it happen. I've seen adults do it. But it's extraordinarily time consuming. What we should be doing is teaching children from preschool a second language, perhaps in dual immersion programs. They're very effective.

You're putting it into this cost/benefit analysis here. (laughs) It's purely economic. But there are many benefits to speaking another language beyond just the value in the marketplace, okay? When you think of human flourishing. When you think of the experience of reading poetry or a novel in the original language, it's very different from a translation. In my youth, I read Dante's Divine Comedy in the Tuscan vernacular. In later years, I went back to it, reading parts of it in English. It totally lost all the beautiful rhythm and rhyme of Dante. It was just a pale shadow of the original.

Larry Bernstein:

I think it is wonderful that you read Dante in the Tuscan vernacular and that you found it meaningful, but I am not sure that justifies spending 20% of every child's school day learning a foreign language that most of us will likely not learn well, forget immediately, or not apply productively.

Rosemary Salomone:

There is something about just the human spirit in being able to access another language. And you cannot put a price tag on that. I believe that some people are more talented at learning languages than others and some people are more talented at learning math than others. And I really do believe that learning how to read English is certainly important for students, but I don't think it has to be an either/or, and public schools should give at least some time to teaching world languages to all children.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that in foreign countries, not everybody learns English and this creates inequities. What is going on?

Rosemary Salomone:

I discuss in the book the inequities of English, and the inequities of foreign languages in this country. In Europe, for example, it's largely more privileged students who are taking English language courses in the universities. And they're students who attended well-resourced schools. Many parents now, around the globe, are providing tutors for their children to learn English. There are these inequities as to who gets English and who doesn't.

English is very valuable in the global marketplace. In the United States, disadvantaged students so often receive a steady diet of math and English. And that's important. But very often they're denied what we call enrichment subjects, foreign languages historically. Those students, are being denied career opportunities that other students from more privileged schools are getting.

Larry Bernstein:

Who should decide whether students allocate 20% of their education to a foreign language or alternatively use that time to learn another subject like computer science, additional math, science, history, business, whatever?

Rosemary Salomone:

World languages, whether it's English abroad or another language here, I do believe that is a skillset that students should have when they finish compulsory schooling. It's what we really value as a society. As much as I support parental decision making and parental choice, I do believe there's an importance for the state to come in and say, "Well, these are the skills that students need to function in our society." And I believe foreign languages are one of those skills.

Larry Bernstein:

Rosemary, I end each session on a note of optimism.

Rosemary Salomone:

I'm optimistic. First of all, in the United States, dual-immersion programs have served as a blueprint for the country moving forward in promoting multilingualism as the norm. There has been both a national and grassroots push for promoting multilingualism.

I'm also optimistic about English abroad. It's also important for students abroad to balance the teaching of English with the preservation of national languages.