

“Thank a Teacher, and a German”

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By Frank T. Pool

AUSTIN—I once saw a sign in a sporting goods store that said, “If you can read this sign, thank a teacher. If you’re reading it in English, thank a soldier.”

Well, it’s certainly plausible to think that, if Sam Houston had led his army east to Louisiana instead of turning south to defeat Santa Ana at San Jacinto in 1836, Spanish might well be the official language of Texas.

Lots of other things could have resulted in different outcomes, and we’ll never know. It mighta, coulda happened.

Another reason we’re speaking English instead of some variety of Latin-based Romance language has to do with a German named Herman. More on him later.

Historically, languages have spread by conquest and by domination. They ebb and flow, depending on who is in charge. Sometimes indigenous languages are extinguished, or else they survive in small linguistic enclaves.

But war and language don’t always follow the same script.

Certainly some languages spread by conquest and domination. English and Spanish are spoken throughout the Western Hemisphere because of colonial expansion. Although substantial populations speak Mayan in several Central American countries, it is only in Paraguay where the indigenous language, Guaraní, is spoken by the majority, and where it is constitutionally coequal with Spanish.

Other languages have spread the same way around the world. Arabic replaced Greek, Aramaic, Berber and Coptic tongues in the lands conquered in the great Islamic expansions. Those languages are still spoken—and clearly the Greeks still have their Greek in their homeland—though Greek is no longer the widely used tongue that Paul and Luke and Plutarch and Marcus Aurelius wrote in.

Latin, of course, supplanted the local languages in the countries where the western part of the Roman empire ruled. Greek was dominant in the eastern provinces and in Egypt.

After the breakup of the western empire in the 5th century—those great Roman roads proved convenient for invaders to move around quickly—commerce and travel ended except for the most elite. People who could not talk to anyone outside their immediate areas soon began developing dialects that in turn morphed into the Romance languages like Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian.

Invasions continued. Some languages, like Hungarian, survived. Others, like Gothic, didn't.

Not all invaders imposed their languages on the conquered. In particular, the Norsemen from Scandinavia settled in many lands, often along coastlines and using rivers. The first Russian dynasty was founded around 860 by Scandinavians who rowed their way eventually even to Constantinople, where they were employed as mercenaries. They also dominated the northeast coast of Britain, part of what is today France, Normandy and Sicily.

In all these places, they settled in and started speaking the language of the locals. The French-speaking Normans who defeated the English at Hastings in 1066 were descendants of Scandinavians. William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy, led descendants of Vikings to claim the throne of England. After his victory, they called him William the Conqueror.

Though the Normans tried to keep their variety of French as the official state language, eventually—especially after they were pushed out of their French possessions—they began speaking English.

Conquerors adopting the language of their subjects is nothing new. The Aramaic language became the administrative tongue of the Persian empire from the 6th to the 4th centuries B.C. At home in their palaces, the ruling class spoke Persian, but, to rule their vast empire, they learned Aramaic, a Semitic language totally unrelated to Indo-European Persian.

Likewise, the Qing dynasty of China was ruled by ethnic Manchu people from 1644 to 1912. Although they insisted that their children learn and speak Manchu at home, they were not able to change the more populous and culturally dominant Han Chinese language. Before long, all the Qing spoke and read Chinese, though they never subjected their daughters to the foot-binding that literally hobbled women for centuries. Only the poorest peasants and the haughtiest Qing princesses evaded this deliberate deformation.

Some languages survived in a frozen written form, especially when literacy had been limited. They proved culturally useful and were conserved. Latin, Sanskrit, Classical Arabic and Hebrew became the property of the literate elite, while most people, even the writers of these languages, used vernacular local speech in their daily lives.

So it's not a sure thing that military domination leads to all the conquered eventually learning the language of empire.

That leads us back to Herman the German. He was a prince of a German tribe friendly to the Romans, was educated by them, served in the legions of Augustus Caesar and ultimately betrayed them to one of their great defeats, the complete destruction of three legions in 9 A.D. in the Teutoberg Forest.

The Romans called him Arminius. That's not a German name. Some suggest he got it because of his military service in Armenia. Martin Luther, though, said the origin of the name was "Herman." It's all a bit uncertain, but I'm with Martin on this.

What does that ancient history have to do with our speaking English? Well, it seems that Augustus had wanted to conquer Germania, with the Vistula River as its eastern border.

After their great defeat, they gave up on trying to take the whole country. Ultimately they had to settle for the Rhine as their frontier with the often-troublesome and unconquered Germans, who kept on *deutsche Sprache sprechen*.

If Rome had managed to defeat the Germans, it is likely that the conquered would have adopted a language based on Latin. Instead, German-speaking people migrated into Roman Britain as the empire fell.

By a long and yet familiar story, these Germanic peoples, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, become the English people, developing their own non-Romance language.

So, if you're reading this, by all means, thank a teacher. And, if you're reading this in English, thank Herman the German.