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The Great River of Mainstream Civilizations Led with Major *Linguae Francae*

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Why have some civilizations and their cultures emerged to have a major influence on the world while others have not? This paper will attempt to show that “the major languages (linguae francae) have formed the great river of mainstream civilizations” in the history of humankind.

A lingua franca in this paper means a language used in common in a region with other languages.

The Rivers of Original Civilizations

We know of four major civilizations in Eurasia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, India and China, as well as several Meso-American civilizations. In the case of Egyptian civilization, it left huge architectural structures and a gorgeous culture, but we can see no language “river” issuing from it except a culture of hieroglyph, which influenced the Phoenician writing system. This means the Egyptian civilization had no successor.

The early Indus Valley civilization helped create Indian civilization. From this civilization emerged Hinduism, Buddhism, and higher mathematics. The advancements in mathematics especially diffused to other civilizations. Buddhism was conveyed through Sanskrit and spread to other parts of Asia, including Japan. However, most of the Indian cultural heritage expanded no further.

In the case of the Yellow-River civilization in China, it developed a complex civilization using the Chinese language and the philosophy of Confucianism. It transferred
its cultures to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam but little expansion beyond that was seen.

Meso-American and Andean Civilization also produced a short “river” in their respective regions, but they could not expand further. In the end they were destroyed by Spanish civilization in the 16th century.

The only exception to this pattern was Sumerian civilization. It made a short “river” in the beginning but gradually grew wider and longer with major linguae francae, which eventually had a global impact.

**Sumerian and Mesopotamian Civilizations**

*Homo sapiens sapiens* emerged in East Africa about 200,000 years ago. Some groups migrated from there to the Middle East about 100,000 years ago. The Middle East was a real paradise for them because of the availability of many kinds of wild wheat and barley; equally important were wild sheep, goats, asses, and cattle, as Jared Diamond described in his book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*. About 10,000 years ago, people began to cultivate wheat and barley and to domesticate those wild animals. When agriculture developed, people began to build cities. One of the oldest cities was Jericho in today’s Israel (the Palestinian West Bank), which had about 2,000 to 3,000 people as early as 8000 BCE.

Although their origin is unknown, Sumerian settlements in southern Mesopotamia began about 4000 BCE. The Bronze Age in this area began about 3000 BCE. This enabled them to dig and plow with bronze tools on the Mesopotamian alluvium, which was soft sand without stones or rocks. Further, they invented such methods as yoked, harnessed animals to pull plows and a cart to carry cargo. They also invented an irrigation system and achieved high production
in agriculture. The villages and towns were gradually integrated into cities and they became city-states.

In Sumerian society, religion permeated their civic lives and temples served as both religious and administrative centers. The temple was the work place of priests, scribes, and skilled artisans. Through their works and activities, they invented a writing system with cuneiform characters, which promoted and developed various aspects of their culture such as education, a system of law, and literature.

Sumerian Civilization was formed using the Sumerian language, which was almost extinguished when the Sumerians were conquered by the Akkadians, about 2300 BCE. The Akkadians were Semitic and their language belonged to a different family of language from Sumerian. However they learned Sumerian and borrowed almost all of its culture. This meant that the Akkadians became the successors to Sumerian civilization.

The main process of this transfer of civilization was carried on using a cuneiform alphabet. The Akkadians did not have their own writing system; therefore they adopted the cuneiform system for their language and promoted this system to other people in Mesopotamia. Akkadian became a lingua franca in Mesopotamia and had a major influence in the region for about 200 years.

The Babylonians also adopted the Sumerian cuneiform writing system, and the famous Hammurabi's Code was written in cuneiform about 1700 BCE. It was the first written set of laws in human history and one of the highlights of Mesopotamian civilization.

The first major lingua franca in human history was Aramaic. The Aramaeans were desert nomads from northern Syria who built Damascus in the 10th century BCE. They adopted the Phoenician writing system and applied it to their
language. This was the birth of the Aramaic alphabet and the glorious start of a major \textit{lingua franca}.

Nicholas Ostler wrote, “Twenty-two simple signs could now do the work previously requiring over six-hundred.” In the cuneiform system, they had to use more than 600 complicated characters. But with the Aramaic alphabet, only 22 simple signs could do every writing job. Therefore, Aramaic was used mainly for trade in the whole region of the Middle East, including Mesopotamia, replacing Akkadian as a \textit{lingua franca}.

Andrew Bosworth’s \textit{The Genetics of Civilization: An Empirical Classification of Civilizations Based on Writing Systems} mentioned that the role of writing system was not only to mark borders of civilizations, but also as creators of civilizations, as mentioned above.

\textbf{Achaemenid Persian Civilization and Aramaic}

Proto-Iranian tribes arrived on the Iranian plateau in the third and second millennia BCE, where they were later divided into eastern and western tribes. The Median dynasty (728-550 BCE) culminated in the first Iranian Empire; next, the Persian Cyrus the Great built a unified empire of the Medes and Persians, giving rise to the Achaemenid Empire (648-330 BCE). Under Cyrus and his son Darius, the Achaemenid Persian Empire eventually became the largest and the most powerful empire in human history until that time. The borders stretched from the Indus River (India) in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, extending through Anatolia (later to become Turkey) and Egypt.

One of the most important elements of the empire’s culture was its Zoroastrian religion, which began as early as 1000 BCE and as late as 700 and 600 BCE. It taught the people to tell truth, to have good thoughts and good words,
and to do good deeds. The rules and ethics emanating from Zoroaster’s teachings were strictly followed by the Achaemenids, who introduced and adopted policies based on human rights, equality, and the banning of slavery. It became the de facto religion of the empire. When they constructed Persepolis, which still stands as the ruins of a royal city, they employed paid workers.3

One of the highlights of this empire, from a historic viewpoint, was that King Cyrus the Great freed the Jewish people (previously forced into exile) when he conquered Babylon in 538 BCE. Cyrus supported and financed the return of Jews to Jerusalem and helped restore their temple and kingdom. This helped them to continue the development of Judaism, from which Christianity and Islam were born later.

Zoroastrian concepts such as monotheism (one God of the universe), angels and devils, the messiah, life after death, final judgment, and heaven and hell entered into Judaism, Christianity and Islam.4

The next emperor, Darius the Great, revolutionized its economy by placing it on a silver and gold coinage system to facilitate the exchange of commodities across its vast empire.5 This policy promoted prosperity for the whole region of the Middle East and raised the living standard of its people.

In addition, Darius adopted Aramaic, not Persian, as the official language of the Empire, because the writing system of Aramaic was quicker and easier than that of Akkadian, Persian, or Elamite. Those languages were expressed in the cuneiform writing system.6 With those choices, silver and gold coinage and Aramaic lingua franca, Achaemenid Persian civilization developed and conveyed Mesopotamian and Persian cultures to the Mediterranean seacoast, including Judean, Israeli, and Palestinian (Philistine) cultures.
The Persian Empire collapsed in 330 BCE, but more than 300 years later, Jesus of Nazareth and his people were speaking Aramaic as their vernacular. This means that Christianity was created in Aramaic, and shows that if a lingua franca is useful enough, it will become vernacular for the people who were speaking it.

Greek Civilization and Greek Language

Geneticists have traced the original Europeans as migrants from the Middle East. Greeks too arrived in the Balkan peninsula through the Bosporus or Aegean Sea, including the islands. A variety of civilized cultures also came to Greece through this route. The classical Greeks were influenced by various Middle Eastern cultures that were formed and transferred mainly in Aramaic at an early period. But the most important “functioning cultures”7 that they received from the Phoenicians were the technology and skills for shipbuilding and navigation.8

The total amount of arable land of Greece was only 20 percent, so their economy had to depend on other industries such as trade, navigation, and shipbuilding. Phoenicians, an early rival of the Greeks, absorbed various Middle Eastern cultures in Aramaic, but Greeks adopted their technologies from Phoenicians in the Phoenician language.

Phoenician vessels sailed and traded along the Mediterranean as early as 1500 BCE. In the 9th century BCE, they exerted hegemony in foreign trade and shipping over Babylonia, Assyria, Israel, and Egypt. For trade and shipping, Phoenicians employed Greeks, whose population was growing whereas the Phoenician population was not. Using this opportunity, the Greeks quickly learned the crafts of shipbuilding and seamanship from them. By about 700 BCE, the Greeks developed faster vessels than Phoenicians
and mastered new techniques to navigate by night. Over time, the Greeks defeated the Phoenicians and established hegemony in the Mediterranean world.

A dialect in Attica (the region of Athens) became the common language of Greece when Athens unified the whole country. It was called “koine” and was used as a lingua franca for about 400 years, from the 4th century BCE onward, throughout the Hellenistic world. Although the entire Hellenistic world was conquered by Rome in 30 BCE, Greek was still used in the Eastern Mediterranean. It became “God’s language,” was adopted by the Greek Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire, and served as a lingua franca until Constantinople was captured by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE.

Greek civilization, including the Hellenistic world, developed philosophy, mathematics, science, shipbuilding and navigation skills as their functioning (key and stem) cultures. Greek as a major lingua franca transferred these cultures in two directions: east to Byzantium and west to the Roman civilization.

Byzantine civilization also transmitted its culture to Russian civilization, using a variant of the Greek alphabet (Cyrillic). But this eastern-stream stopped flowing in the 20th century. However, the flow to the west, to Roman and Western Europe, continued. Therefore, we can say that Greek language made the watershed for the Great River of the Mainstream Civilizations toward the West.

Roman Civilization and Latin

Modern scholars believe that in the 8th century BCE, inhabitants of some small Latin tribes settled on hills in the Tiber valley, united, and established a common meeting place, the Forum, around which the city of Rome and later
Roman civilization grew. But about 625 BCE, Rome was conquered by Etruscans, earlier settlers in that land, and under their tutelage Rome became an important city-state. Etruscan culture was borrowed primarily from the Greek colonies in southern Italy, and much of this, including the alphabet, was passed on to the conquered Romans.

The origin of Latin language was similar to that of Greek; a dialect of Latium (around Rome) became the common language of Rome. Latin spread throughout the Roman Empire when Rome expanded. Romans were primarily farmers and soldiers, and their culture was less developed than was Greek culture. The Romans adopted and imitated much of the higher Greek culture. As a result, Classical Latin borrowed nearly half of its vocabulary from the Greeks.

The economic foundation for Roman Civilization was based primarily on agriculture, especially in the beginning of the empire. As the Romans expanded in the Mediterranean world, they acquired most of their food, raw materials, and handicrafts from their colonies and trade and commerce became much more important. In order to manage their colonies, the Romans developed laws and military systems (major elements of Rome’s higher culture). As a communication medium, Latin became the lingua franca in the Empire and contributed to promoting Roman civilization.

In 313 CE, Christianity was designated by Constantine as the state religion of the empire and Latin became the official language of the Roman Catholic Church, becoming then “God’s language.”

Unlike the Greeks, the Romans constructed no original system of philosophy, invented no major new literary forms, and made few outstanding scientific discoveries, except for an extraordinary talent in engineering. They certainly excelled
in the art of government. The Romans created a workable world-state and developed a skill in administration, law and practical affairs.  

One of the most important contributions the Romans left was their language. After the collapse of the empire, Latin worked in two ways: one was to become those vernaculars of French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian; the other was to be the *lingua franca* of the educated in Western Europe. It played a very important role as a network language for Christian monasteries, where most intellectual activity was carried on during the Middle Ages. Even during the period of the scientific revolution in the 17th century, Western scholars could exchange information in Latin. This was one of the main factors leading to the birth of modern civilization in Western Europe.

**French Civilization and French Language**

As previously noted, Greek created a watershed between the East and the West. When the Roman Empire collapsed, it revealed that the West was declining and Byzantium and later Islam were rising in the East. However it was not a simple decline for the West. In a real sense, the West was preparing for the emergence of new civilization. Out of the decayed Roman Empire, France rose as a leader of Western Civilization.

The Franks, one of the Germanic tribes, moved into the Roman Empire in the 5th century and built a kingdom. However, they abandoned their own language and religion and accepted Latin and Roman Catholic Christianity. The Franks’ Latin changed into French in the middle of the 9th century and it became a major language in Western Europe in the 11th century.
One of the main reasons why the French were so successful was that a new method of farming, the three field system, was invented in France and greatly contributed to its productivity. French Civilization grew more prosperous, and its population doubled.

During the Middle Ages, the French established a monastery network in Europe, built many cathedrals, and infused Christianity into West European cultures. The 13th century was one in which the French demonstrated great activity in religion and academics. Also in the 13th century, France became a leader of the Crusades and sent out many Crusaders to the Middle East.

Through these movements, French became the *lingua franca* in Western Europe. The French established an *Academie Francaise* in 1635 which was tasked with polishing French. The elegant and beautiful French language was welcomed in such European courts as Prussia and Russia, and it was used as a *lingua franca* in most international negotiations. The French Revolution in 1789 gave birth to a modern state model and standardized the national language, eliminating most rural dialects. Other countries in the world, including Japan, adopted this French “nation-state model.”

At the end of the 19th century, France entered into imperialistic competition with other European countries, especially England, and built the Suez Canal in Egypt. It also acquired many colonies in Asia and Africa. The French played a role of *lingua franca* in those colonies and helped modernize their civilizations. However, when France was defeated by Prussia in 1870, its glory began to fade, and French language also began to decline in use in the international community. The documents of the Versailles Treaty after the World War I were written in French and English. This meant that British
English was on the rise and French was falling in use by the beginning of the 20th century.

**British Civilization and British English**

British English was born in the British Isles in the middle of the 5th century, but when Britain was conquered by the Normans in 1066, English faced the crisis of vanishing. In Britain, Old English (an Anglo-Saxon language) was replaced with Norman-French and it was the primary language of the elite for about 300 years. The common people continued to speak their British language, but over time it was augmented by a vocabulary of French and Latin-based words. By the time of Chaucer in the 13th century, medieval English was in general usage.

Britain was a minor power in Europe until it defeated the massive Spanish fleet, the “Invincible Armada,” in 1588. English was never a *lingua franca* in Europe, but its use spread through the acquisition of empire around the world (United States, Canada, Africa, Australia, China, and India). Britain’s economic importance burgeoned during the Industrial Revolution, which had a crucially important global impact.

If a country could succeed in industrializing, it could become a major economic power and develop a strong military. Britain did this and succeeded in establishing the largest empire in history in the 19th century. The strength of industrialized Britain came from industries such as cotton weaving, iron and steel production, coal mining, shipbuilding, foreign trade, marine insurance and finance. All these industries were modernized by Britain and their drawings, production methods, manuals, technology, skills, and know-how were written in British English.
In order to industrialize, some countries had to learn to use English, especially those who engaged in international business. Almost all international business, including shipping, marine insurance and foreign exchange, was carried on in British English.

However, an equally important factor for English as a lingua franca was the use of the Pound Sterling. Because of the economic strength of Britain, the Pound Sterling became the key international currency. Almost all international economic activities were settled with Pound Sterling. Wherever the British Pound was used, British English was also spread, not only in business but also in other cultural and political activities. As a result, British culture spread worldwide and the English language was used as a lingua franca not only in British colonies but also among world specialists such as diplomats, businessmen and scholars.

The peak of British prosperity came in the 19th century and the decline began in the 20th century after two World Wars. Why did Britain decline? One of the most important foundations of British civilization was its imperial colonialism, which became outmoded and crushingly expensive by the middle of the 20th century. The other reason was that Britain lost its competitive power in new technology and industries.

What was the British contribution to world civilization? We must say that it was truly remarkable, though there were numerous colonial tragedies. Britain provided the world with the Industrial Revolution, which facilitated the transition from agrarian to industrial society. Further, it made possible the beginnings of globalization.
American Civilization and American English

After World War II, America replaced Britain as the dominant economic power and raised the "Freedom and Democracy" principle as a global ideal. In the case of Britain, freedom and democracy were domestic principles and applied mainly to the British Isles. American civilization, however, began to transfer the idea of a free and democratic society to others, including Germany, Japan, and developing nations. Also, American civilization began to provide advanced technology to other civilizations with American English and the U.S. dollar.

In industrialized societies, a stable and universally accepted currency becomes very important worldwide.

Similar to the British case, America has been supplying its currency to the world economy and worldwide economic development greatly increased. The U.S. dollar sphere expanded globally, and in this dollar sphere American English began to play the role of lingua franca from the middle of the 20th century to today. Especially after information technology (IT) spread world-wide, American English has dominated the international media for communication.

In almost all nations of the world, governments teach English in their schools. English has now become the major lingua franca on earth. When we have a lingua franca, civilizations can more easily communicate with each other. In the case of American English, however, it distributes American culture everywhere in the world. In many instances it greatly influences other cultures and civilizations and some think it might even dominate the globe.

Sooner or later the U.S. dollar will decline just as the Pound Sterling did. The whole world might suffer initially from serious economic disorder because the present currency supply system to the world would stop. In order to solve
this problem, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) may take on the role of a central bank for the world and begin to issue an international currency. It might be the SDR (Special Drawing Right), which would be a true international currency. A global civilization would be taking its first step.

Then, what about an international language? We do not have any international organization for language such as IMF is for currency. In the case of the European Union (EU), they have a similar problem; that is, they could establish a common currency (the Euro) to be adopted by member states, but the EU does not have a common language. It has been a fundamental problem for the EU from the beginning of this organization.

In 2001, UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity was adopted by the General Assembly. This means that UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has the responsibility for preserving cultural diversity worldwide. In this case, however, cultural diversity must include language diversity in the world, since a language is a core element of culture.

In the case of Papua New Guinea, for example, there are more than 800 languages (www.ethnologue.com), so they are sustaining their cultural diversity but have no way of communicating. But they have decided to choose English as their official language and are teaching it in their schools in order to modernize their civilization. A similar language policy was adopted in many African countries. As we know, English is a language backed by mainly British and American cultures. Will it work well in Papuan or African cultures?

In order to promote a global civilization, we need a new common language or *lingua franca*. But at the same time, we must protect Language Diversity. This is a really major...
contradiction but we must solve it if humankind is to realize peace and stable civilizations on the earth.

**Integration by the Great River of Mainstream Civilizations**

David Wilkinson, in an article entitled "Central Civilization"\(^{13}\) examines political-military viewpoints in world history. In this present paper, however, the viewpoint is with respect to major languages, *linguae francae*.

The great river of the mainstream civilizations led by major *linguae francae* began to flow from the Sumerian civilization and has reached America at the beginning of the 21\(^{st}\) century.

A question arises: what about other civilizations such as the non-mainstream or the once-mainstream? The answer is this: other civilizations made their own creeks, streams, or rivers in their respective periods and regions. But when the great river of mainstream civilizations approached them, the majority were flooded, that is, assimilated, merged or absorbed. It was a process necessary for integrating civilizations.

In many cases, integration by the great river of mainstream civilizations was carried out through wars and conquests. However, we must remember that the winner’s civilization or culture is not necessarily transferred to the loser; that is, the loser’s civilization is sometimes accepted by the winner.

For example, the Franks conquered the Roman Gallia in the 5\(^{th}\) century CE, but they accepted Roman Catholic Christianity and Latin, abandoning their own religion and language. Also, Mongolia conquered China in the 13\(^{th}\) century CE and replaced the Chinese government with its systems. However, it eventually accepted much Chinese culture.
Therefore, the truth is this: the more advanced civilization survives, whether it is the winner’s or loser’s.

The majority of people in all ages and places have hated war, but we still have it. War seems as though it is a built-in device throughout the history of civilization. Why is it built into history? One reason is that human history seems to have as a principle the drive to integrate all people from the villages to nations and the wider world. Therefore, the great river of mainstream civilizations played the role of integrator of civilizations, regardless of whether for good or ill.

Matthew Melko made a great effort to study general wars in world history in his *General War Among Great Powers In World History*. But this book does not mention the integrating role of general wars. In other words, if integration is realized, even the Cold War in the latter half of the 20th century should be called a “general war.”

We can recognize that the first stage of globalization began when human civilization emerged about two million years ago. But full globalization means the integration of all civilizations on the earth. Contemporary globalization is being advanced by the great river of the mainstream civilizations with mainly American English and the US dollar. The promoters of this movement are the developed countries, and the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) are trying to join it.

However, we cannot continue this type of civilization, because it destroys the natural environment. Therefore, the great river of mainstream civilizations today must move in a direction that is much less destructive to our mother earth. We must fight against this environmental threat. Otherwise our civilizations will stop flowing completely.
Endnotes:


6 Ostler, p. 67.


9 Ibid. p. 22.


