



Babel: Around the World in Twenty Languages

Gaston Dorren

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English is the world language, except that most of the world doesn't speak it--only one in five people does. Dorren calculates that to speak fluently with half of the world's 7.4 billion people in their mother tongues, you would need to know no fewer than twenty languages. He sets out to explore these top twenty world languages, which range from the familiar (French, Spanish) to the surprising (Malay, Javanese, Bengali). *Babel* whisks the reader on a delightful journey to every continent of the world, tracing how these world languages rose to greatness while others fell away and showing how speakers today handle the foibles of their mother tongues. Whether showcasing tongue-tying phonetics or elegant but complicated writing scripts, and mind-bending quirks of grammar, *Babel* vividly illustrates that mother tongues are like nations: each has its own customs and beliefs that seem as self-evident to those born into it as they are surprising to the outside world. Among many other things, *Babel* will teach you why modern Turks can't read books that are a mere 75 years old, what it means in practice for Russian and English to be relatives, and how Japanese developed separate "dialects" for men and women. Dorren lets you in on his personal trials and triumphs while studying Vietnamese in Hanoi, debunks ten widespread myths about Chinese characters, and discovers that Swahili became the lingua franca in a part of the world where people routinely speak three or more languages. Witty, fascinating and utterly compelling, *Babel* will change the way you look at and listen to the world and how it speaks.

Babel: Around the World in Twenty Languages Details

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From Reader Review Babel: Around the World in Twenty Languages for online ebook

mia moraru says

fascinating, complex, instead of satiating my desire for language learning...a tenfold increase

Anastasia says

I was excited to be reading this book. It introduced many linguistic concepts with which I was not familiar –from differences in writing systems, scripts, tonality and so on; it prompted sporadic research (that admittedly didn't go further a Wikipedia page) on more interesting topics; and above all reminded how diverse and infinitely rich our common human heritage of language is.

I liked it that the book was written as neither a grammar book with an overview of all languages' grammar structure, nor as a history textbook, interweaving history and linguistics.

Each chapter was an individual endeavour and highlighted the aspects that neither of the two previous book concepts would have done. For example, while in Farsi chapter I had a pleasure of learning the rise and development of Persian Empire, in the Bengali one I got a good (albeit brief) introduction to script systems. While in Arabic and Japanese chapters I learnt about different writing systems, the French chapter provided more of a socio-cultural aspect of the language.

(Truth be told, I found some chapters being charged with a task that proved to be more than they could chew. In the Portuguese one, I saw an attempt to reduce the whole history of colonialism to just a handful pages. The ultimate question in that chapter – as to why Portuguese caught on in former territories while Dutch didn't, - was not, - and I believe *could not* – be answered in so few pages).

I noticed that some of the comments of the book point out at this lack of homogeneity as a major drawback; I personally find it a witty tool to make the book entertaining enough to keep reading it as a collection of short stories. Written with ultimate cultural sensitivity, wit and ingenuity, I am happy to recommend this book.

Melissa says

I very much enjoyed Lingo (Dorren's tour through 60!languages of Europe) and so was definitely looking forward to Babel, where Dorren does a deep-dive into the 20 most-spoken languages of the world. What's nice about Dorren's writing is the way he constructs each chapter to serve the point he wants to make in the chapter, one might be a Q&A, another a history of the region, another a recounting of his attempt to learn a serviceable amount of the language. This is a much more nuts-and-bolts of language book but he still keeps it readable.

Bandit says

Babel was supposed to be a great linguistic adventure. Around the world in 30 languages Sounds exciting, doesn't it. And I do have a serious interest in linguistics, so it seemed right up my alley. Until it wasn't. At least, not quite what was expected. It's a literary equivalent of meeting someone at a party and they tell you they are really into books and you're really into books so you think you'll have this awesome stimulating conversation, but turns out what really gets them going is fonts and paper. They are talking about what you both love, but not quite about the main things you love about it. Much like this book. Technically it does deliver, the author presents 20 chapters for 20 most popular languages in the world, culminating, of course, with the modern lingua franca English and some meditative contemplation of the future of it and future of sharing a language in general, since quite possibly the need is going to be taken care of with the translation gadgets soon enough. The language chapters varied very much in tone and context, it seemed like the author was trying to find a different approach each time, but it did create a certain lack of uniformity. What was uniform throughout is his attention to peculiar details and minute quirks of grammar and syntax as oppose to spending more time on the cultural and historical aspects of the specific languages. He did cover both, but in the proportions I was hoping for. And he did try to infuse the narrative with personality, but it often ended up reading like a jazzed up textbook as oppose to compelling account of linguistic adventures. There was a lovely amount of photos, though, to balance it out somewhat. And I did learn a lot, so in a way this book served its purpose. What really messed up this reading experience for me, though, were the publishers. And mind you, this won't affect the final product, but the Netgalley ARC of it was horrid, apparently the great irony of putting out a crappily formatted version barely readable at times book on languages eluded Grove Atlantic, so they thought they'd offer this version with words clumped together, some letters omitted, moreover about 90% of all numerical data omitted and so on. So in theory these advance reading copies are offered in advance so that they can be hyped up by the reviews, right? Well then why wouldn't someone present something actually presentable to be judged by? Would a restaurant offer an almost but not quite cooked meal to a reviewer and expect praise? It's the same thing, really. If you can't present a product in a way that is ready to be enjoyed, just don't do it. There isn't a scarcity of books out there to create desperation interest in the inferior product. Or at least have a decency of warning the readers beforehand about the dismal quality of the ARC they are about to download. This won't matter for anyone who actually buys the book or takes it from the library, but anyone considering a Netgalley download...beware. So I enjoy nonfiction with the main goal of self edification and I did learn a decent amount of information, although the frustration of the actual reading experience made the worthiness of this read questionable. The entire thing was very much like a chore to get through with some, but not enough, informational delights and treasures along the way. Thanks Netgalley.

Jeff says

A look at the 20 most spoken languages in the world, through 20 (21, really) essays about topics related to those languages.

Some of these essays will be more engaging than others, depending on your interests. While I was less interested in the author's personal anecdotes about his failure to learn Vietnamese, the story of how Turkish underwent a drastic and arguably disastrous enforced modernization in the 20th century was entertaining. Bengali inspires a look at the many scripts of India; Swahili, a celebration of the "nonchalant multilingualism" of the average sub-Saharan African; and Spanish, a look at how complex the rules for "be" verbs can be from one language to another.

Katie says

Babel is an ambitious undertaking by linguist Gaston Dorren to explore the top twenty languages spoken in the world from the #20 to #1 spoken language (in which this review is written). As a native English speaker who has difficulty becoming more than monolingual, I enjoyed learning new things about the history and grammar of these different languages. However, I felt that at some time the book became too technical about linguistics and at other times would go off on tangents. It felt like the author was trying to pour all of his knowledge out of his head into one book. The chapters were in such different styles that the book lacked unity. Overall, I am glad I read it.

Thanks to NetGalley, Grove Atlantic, and the author Gaston Dorren for an electronic review copy.

The Captain says

Ahoy there me mateys! I received this non-fiction eARC from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. So here be me honest musings . . .

Even though English is the "world language," the fact of the matter is that most of the world doesn't speak it. This book explores the idea that to speak fluently with half of the people in the world, ye would need to speak 20 languages. This book set out to explore those 20.

The concept of this book be fascinating. The execution was sadly not to me taste. Part of the problem is that the book didn't feel like a cohesive whole. The chapters varied in style and focus. There were often long tangents, that while interesting, made following the arguments being made difficult. Other parts went into details of linguistics which were frankly over me head. In addition, the review copy that I received was missing dates and figures.

I do believe that the author was enthusiastic and I did find many of the facts, like the formation of Turkish, to be amazing. I so wanted to love this book but the presentation was muddled. It was irksome and so I only read up to 54%. Other readers may find this style worthwhile so I hesitate to condemn the book altogether. I do hope this book finds its proper audience. I am just not it.

So lastly . . .

Thank you Grove Atlantic!

Side note: from Amazon - "Gaston Dorren is a linguist, journalist, and polyglot. He speaks Dutch, Limburgish, English, German, French, and Spanish, and reads nine more languages." How awesome is that?

Check out me other reviews at <https://thecaptainsquartersblog.wordpress.com>...

David says

Pretty nearly perfect reading for a nerd like me, as it turns out. Could be a good read for fans of *Atlas Obscura*. I saw a review of this just before Xmas, so when the inevitable question came ("what do you

want..."), this was on my list. Hopefully some publisher is feeling justified right now because lots of other nerds like me did the same thing.

It's not a great book, in the sense that you absolutely need to read it for any reason. But it's a fun and fascinating read, which is all I was expecting, and it delivered. I enjoyed the way it wandered all over the landscape, as the author made various points about language and languages. Happy to have on my shelves, no doubt I'll dip back in to remind myself of one fact or another from time to time. Well worth a look, if your local library has it.

I'd love to meet the author, he seems like a great person. Wish I could study languages with him along to guide me!

Nóri Góreczky says

As an amateur language enthusiast/wannabe polyglot, a book like this is heaven for me. I'm constantly in the mood for starting to learn a new language, and then I never actually do it, but I have *plans*, you see. Before reading this book, my plans were, in a nutshell: touch up (basically re-learn) my German and my Spanish, really lay into my Swedish (so that I won't start forgetting it like the other two), and start either Welsh, Russian, French, Finnish, or maybe all of them at the same time, who cares, languages are fun! Then I read this book and basically it went like this:

Chapter 20: Oh hell **Vietnamese** seems really interesting! Sure all those diacritics look complicated as hell but it makes the language look so fun, and it would be way more unique to learn Vietnamese than Mandarin. Might give this a look later.

Chapter 19: I never in my life thought about learning **Korean** but now that I'm reading about it, I'm loving this concept of 'ideophones' (basically words that imply their meaning just by how they sound, kind of like onomatopoeias but not exactly). Maybe it would be worth a try?

Chapter 17: Turkey and Hungary have a lot of history together, so I already knew that we have a lot of loanwords from **Turkish**, but somehow I never thought about how much easier that could make learning the whole language. Plus, I do want to go to Istanbul at one point, so maybe it's not such a crazy idea.

Chapter 13: **Japanese** used to be on my list back when I was briefly really into anime (I know, typical), and I never completely lost my interest in the language, even though now I only *occasionally* watch anime. I never knew about this really weird distinction between male and female Japanese, however, and that seems like the kind of challenge I would like to take on. Maybe I should put it back on my list.

Chapter 8: **Russian** was already on my list but this chapter was one of my favourites. I love etymology, and this short breakdown of how some complicated-looking Russian words actually have cognates in English was brilliant, and it only reinforced my belief that I need to learn Russian one of these days.

Chapter 6: Both the look of **Bengali** and its system of indicating vowels by attaching different tiny marks onto its consonants remind me of Sindarin. If I ever bring myself to learn an Indian language, I'm now almost certain it's gonna be Bengali.

Chapter 5: The chapter about **Arabic** was actually a short dictionary of loanwords that made it into English,

but I made tons of notes about words that are even more apparent in Hungarian. For example, the Arabic word for parrot is apparently 'babagá', which somehow morphed into 'popinjay'. But in Hungarian, parrot is actually 'papagáj', which is much more similar. Same with kahwa – coffee – kávé, and a few others I can't recall right now. Did I mention I love etymology?

Chapter 2: Yep, **Mandarin** is exactly as complicated as I suspected. But I got enamored by the part about compound characters, how one half of them is a clue about meaning and the other about pronunciation. It makes learning the characters a bit like solving riddles, and I love a good riddle.

So yeah. It was a journey, with a lot maybes and mights in there, and I know myself well enough to know that there's a 90% chance nothing will ever come of this. But that doesn't make my time reading this book any less meaningful or amazing. Even if I don't actually learn any of these languages, I sure learned a lot *about* them from Gaston Dorren's *Babel*.

(Review cross-posted to my blog)

A thousand thanks to Edelweiss for my review copy!

Yvonne (It's All About Books) says

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Some of you might already know I'm actually a philologist and linguistics has always been one of my favorite areas of study. Therefore I thought **Babel** would be perfect for me... I mean, traveling the world through twenty languages that together can make you communicate with at least half of the world popula

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Books about English language, such as those by John McWhorter and David Crystal are some of my favorites, and I also like the "deep dive" into other languages, such as the books about French and Spanish by Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoit Nadeau. Then there's the books that dip a toe into many languages, such as this one by Gaston Dorren. *Babel* looks at the twenty languages that are spoken by the most people in the world. Dorren starts with some statistics to get you grounded, how many native speakers, where spoken, etc., and then takes off on whatever interests him most about that language. He discusses his difficulties in learning to speak Vietnamese, talks about how Japanese is spoken differently by men and women, looks at the history of the written Turkish language and how politics is inextricably linked to its development. It's just fascinating and it touches on many topics. Even if you aren't interested in 20th century Turkish politics (but you might be surprised to find that it is quite interesting), for instance, you might very well find yourself captivated by the astonishing number of words in English that derive from Arabic. (Thanks to Atlantic Monthly Press and NetGalley for a digital review copy.)

Mandy says

If you love words, you'll love this, and if you love languages, then you'll love it even more. Dorren takes the 20 languages with the most speakers – out of the estimated 6000 languages that exist in the world today – and explores their origins and peculiarities. The expected ones are of course English, Arabic and Mandarin, but Tamil and Javanese are included in that 20 too – who'd have thought? Each chapter is devoted to a different language (although Japanese merits two) and the approach differs in each one, sometimes stressing the history, sometimes exploring tonality, sometimes exploring politics. It's comprehensive and endlessly fascinating, and written in a clear and accessible (if sometimes random) way. I enjoyed it immensely. And I definitely won't be deciding to learn Vietnamese....

Natalie says

I was a huge fan of Dorren's first book, *Lingo*, and this one does not disappoint. Each chapter explores a concept related to one of the "Babel" languages, twenty languages one would have to know to speak to half the world. Each chapter is different from the last, covering a wide variety of subjects from the history and politics of the language to the intricacies of verb tense and script. Because each chapter was so different, I inevitably ended up finding some more enjoyable than others. But Dorren manages to teach things about languages I never more than thought about before reading, and he does it with a nice mix of linguistic jargon and layperson's terms.

Tamar says

Basically an introduction to linguistics through the lens of the 20 most spoken languages today. An excellent read that helped clear up a lot of questions I had about other languages, especially Mandarin!

Dan Ust says

Reads more like a collection of mostly unrelated articles each on a different language. On the plus side, I learned a lot — even about languages I knew something about already. But the book lacks overall coherence... making it feel more like a jumble.

This goes all the way through. For instance, you might learn something of the intricacies of the Bengali script, but little else about it. Ditto for loan words from Arabic. Or Spanish grammar... I get that the author has to find something interesting to say about each language, but each language felt isolated. The overall effect is best described as disjointed.

I was also reading along with a close friend. He bailed on the book, skimming the last third or half. I'd hoped reading along with something else would make for discussions to reinforce what I'd read. Perhaps this book is best as something you pick up and read at random — not as a read through.
