

THE STORY OF THE WORLD in the last five thousand years is above all the story of its languages. Some shared language is what binds any community together, and makes possible both the living of a common history and the telling of it.

Yet the history of the world's great languages has been very little told. *Empires of the Word*, by the wide-ranging linguist Nicholas Ostler, is the first to bring together the tales in all their glorious variety: the amazing innovations, in education, culture and diplomacy, devised by speakers of Sumerian and its successors in the Middle East, right up to the Arabic of the present day; the uncanny resilience of Chinese through twenty centuries of invasions; the charmed progress of Sanskrit from north India to Java and Japan; the engaging self-regard of Greek; the struggles that gave birth to the languages of modern Europe; and the global spread of English.

Besides these epic achievements, language failures are equally fascinating: why did German get left behind? Why did Egyptian, which had survived foreign takeovers for three millennia, succumb to Mohammed's Arabic? Why is Dutch unknown in modern Indonesia, given that the Netherlands had ruled the East Indies for as long as the British ruled India?

As this book splendidly and authoritatively reveals, the language history of the world shows eloquently the real character of peoples; and, for all the recent technical mastery of English, nothing guarantees our language's long-term pre-eminence. The language future, like the language past, will be full of surprises.