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A Not-So-Global Future?

Several decades into the digital age, it is clear we are living through a major turning point in the evolution of human civilization. Networked computers and mobile devices are changing the world — and us — in manifold ways, driving the emergence of a global society and culture. What that culture will look like and how it will function is, at this point, hard to predict, but one possible feature is a single world language spoken and understood by all. The current leading candidate for that role is, of course, English, the *lingua franca* of the early 21st century.

Whether or not English is destined to become a true world language, its preeminence over the last several decades has had major influence on writing and literature. Since the middle of the last century, many writers from non-Anglophone countries have grown up learning English as a second (or third or fourth) language, regularly read English-language media and writers, and use the language to communicate with friends and colleagues around the globe via email and social media. Their writing is inevitably influenced by English, yet beyond the obvious cultural touchstones and allusions (to U.S. commercial brands, movies and TV shows, for instance) that pepper modern writing across cultures, it is difficult to pin down exactly how English is affecting literature on global scale, or what its growing influence portends.

Is the rise of English fundamentally reshaping what the rest of the world writes and reads? Or, conversely, will the world change English, transforming it into something quite different from what it is today? Might we even be witnessing the birth of a new, yet-be-named universal language that will one day be classified as a descendant of English, just as Spanish and French are descendants of that previous *lingua franca*, Latin? Or are all of these phenomena perhaps occurring at the same time as part of a more complex but as yet inscrutable shift?

These are large questions, impossible to answer with any confidence. Nevertheless, as readers and cultural consumers, we can see the first glints of the linguistic world-to-come in the careers and works of writers who have drawn significant international audiences and critical acclaim over last few decades. One of the most prominent is Haruki Murakami, the Japanese writer who, since the late 1970s, has published a steady stream of books widely viewed as having a distinctly “global” character.

Fifteen years ago, while in Japan on a fellowship from the Japan Society of New York, I interviewed Murakami at his apartment in Tokyo. My fellowship project was a study of Japan's vibrant culture of reading, a notable feature of which is a voracious national appetite for foreign media and literature. Murakami struck me as an ideal source of insights on this phenomenon. It was well known that he grew up reading American fiction — hard-boiled detective novels were a particular favorite — and that, though English wasn't his first language, he was very comfortable with it.

At one point in our wide-ranging conversation, he told me the story of how he became a writer. When he first began tentatively writing fiction in his 20s, in his native Japanese, he experimented with a number of different styles, but none were even remotely successful. He grew terribly frustrated until one day, on a suggestion from his wife (who had been reading and critiquing his efforts), he tried an experiment: He sat down and wrote the first few pages of a new story in English, then translated it back into Japanese. Reading the result, he immediately realized that this was the voice he'd been searching for. His wife agreed and that same voice has defined his work ever since.

Some view Murakami, who has a large audience outside Japan and whose books are full of references to Western culture, as the quintessential global writer. And the way he found his voice would seem to confirm that view, underscoring the profound influence English is exerting on world literature. Indeed, in a 2011 profile of Murakami, *New York Times Magazine* writer Sam Anderson quoted an observation by Murakami's longtime translator Jay Rubin's that "a distinctive feature of Murakami's Japanese is that it often reads, in the original, as if it has been translated from English".

And yet, for anyone familiar with Japanese culture and literature, it's impossible not to notice that all of Murakami's writing — novels, short stories and nonfiction — is deeply infused with a Japanese sensibility (and spirituality) that ultimately defines him far more than his Western cultural references and professed admiration for American literature. Though there are obvious stylistic commonalities with Raymond Carver, F. Scott Fitzgerald and other English-language writers he cites as role models (and in some cases has personally translated into Japanese), it is actually easier to place his work in the literary tradition of his own country alongside such writers as Naoya Shiga, Kobo Abe and Yasunari Kawabata. I would argue that the voice he found via English was the Japanese one that had been waiting for him all along.

When I asked him about his reputation as the quintessential global writer, he demurred, saying he believes Americans and other non-Japanese are drawn to his work by its ineluctable Japanese-ness: "The reason foreign readers are interested in my books is because my heroes are acting differently compared to Americans or Europeans — because I'm Japanese and I'm a Japanese writer writing in Japanese. I can't escape that fact".

That a novelist widely seen as the very model of a Westernized, English-inflected global writer attributes his own success to his roots outside that culture undermines the theory that because English is the predominant language of the new technology-driven culture, it will define world storytelling. Indeed, it seems to me that the more hyper-connected and globalized everyday reality becomes, the more likely we will crave writing that is fundamentally the opposite. A world language that transcends all borders and cultures? Perhaps. But whether it will make our stories "global" is another matter. Great literature is never general; it's very specific. It comes from idiosyncratic places and people whose experiences are as irreducibly rich and strange as our own, whatever language they happen to arrive in.