

Six Languages that changed the world 22nd Jan 2020 Partridge Meeting

Professor Ian G Roberts, Language Sciences, University of Cambridge (Downing College)

Part of a larger project (The History of Ideas in 60 Languages), which aims to show how different languages and cultures have contributed in different ways to human civilisation over the centuries – Aiming to publish as a book with Profs James Clackson and Bart Vaux

Summary points

1: Sumerian Language

Mesopotamia – Babylonians from 3350 BC

First known written language - written on tablets of clay

Logographic scripts, cuneiform wedge-shaped pictures equivalent to parts of words – mainly straight lines as carved – no curves

Follow Rebus principle of sounds – as in CUL8r (see you later) as in modern texting

Uses Subject<> object<>verb (SOV)

2: Hittite language

1750BC now Turkey, mentioned in Genesis but related to English / European languages

Straight lines only again

Oldest Indo-European language – has ‘lost sound’ or ‘Laryngeals’

3: Nahuatl language

Aztecs – 7th cent Mexico and ‘new Spain’ 1570-1696

Meeting of Montezuma and Cortes 1519

Earliest documented ‘grammar’

4: Hixkaryana language

North Brazil – novel structure and order – OSV – very rare

SVO 36% of languages

SOV 40%

VSO 7% - including Welsh

VOS 2%

OSV & OVS very rare

E5: Early / Old English

400 AD onwards From Anglo Saxon – Whitby, 737 AD

Alfred the Great – 849 – 899 AD translated great works to educate the brits...

Germanic roots – 1066 AD then Norman French

14th Cent onwards ‘modern’ English – now lost the original gender for most words

6: Singlish – Singapore English

Developed from 1965 on – borrows words from other languages – Chinese etc

Future way English may develop

Also Pidgin English mentioned

Discussion

Navajo code talkers WW2 – also the Cherokee and Choctaw peoples during World War I.

[see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_talker]

Romans would probably have met Celtic and Welsh speakers in Britain 44BC [note sixth century AD, language of the Celtic Britons had split into the various Neo-Brittonic languages: Welsh, Cumbric, Cornish, Breton and probably the Pictish language – as well as some with a Germanic origin]

Most widely spoken languages – Ian’s view [NOTE views on this vary depending on how you phrase the question]

1 Mandarin 2 Spanish 3 English