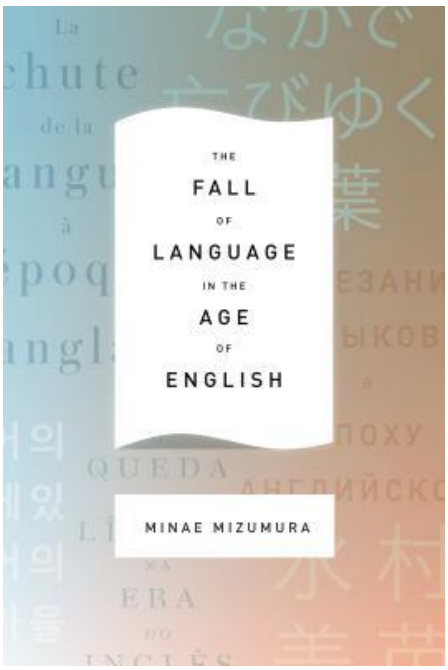

The Fall of Language in the Age of English

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Winner of the Kobayashi Hideo Award, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* lays bare the struggle to retain the brilliance of one's own language in this period of English-language dominance. Born in Tokyo but also raised and educated in the United States, Minae Mizumura acknowledges the value of a universal language in the pursuit of knowledge, yet also embraces the different ways of understanding offered by multiple tongues. She warns against losing this precious diversity.

Universal languages have always played a pivotal role in advancing human societies, Mizumura shows, but in the globalized world of the Internet, English is fast becoming the sole common language of humanity. The process is unstoppable, and striving for total language equality is delusional--and yet, particular kinds of knowledge can be gained only through writings in specific languages.

Mizumura calls these writings "texts" and their ultimate form "literature." Only through literature, and more fundamentally through the diverse languages that give birth to a variety of literatures, can we nurture and enrich humanity. Incorporating her own experiences as a writer and a lover of language, and embedding a parallel history of Japanese, Mizumura offers an intimate look at the phenomena of individual and national expression.

The Fall of Language in the Age of English Details

Date	:	Published 2015 by Columbia University Press (first published 2008)
ISBN	:	9780231163026
Author	:	Minae Mizumura (Translation) , Mari Yoshihara (Translation) , Juliet Winters Carpenter (Translation)
Format	:	Hardcover 240 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Humanities, Language, Cultural, Japan, Linguistics, Writing, Essays

From Reader Review The Fall of Language in the Age of English for online ebook

Maria Beltrami says

The one about the overflowing preponderance of English, that gradually becoming the hegemonic language in the world, is a very lively and very interesting debate, and the arguments set out by the writer Minae Mizumura are very interesting, as is the thesis of bilingualism becoming a necessity for those who want to move, at any level, in today's world. As I said all very interesting, although in many ways not entirely original, until the thread does not enter deeply into the problem of Japan.
I am fond of Japanese literature, and I read several of the authors cited as an example of modern classical literature of that nation, Mishima first, loving them so much, as I read more recent authors, including the acclaimed Murakami, obtaining instead a sort of annoyance. The one that Mizimura describes is, in effect, a true linguistic catastrophe, implemented with very little foresight by the Japanese themselves, something which I deeply regret.
Small note of costume: I hope that this book will never be translated into Italian. Most Italian rulers are not bilingual, and therefore are not able to read how strenuously pursued the Japanese government the scourge of their own language, could avoid they have some ideas on how to more effectively pursue a goal that apparently have already set about the Italian language.
Thank Columbia University Press and Netgalley for giving me a free copy in exchange for an honest review.

Quello sulla strabordante preponderanza della lingua inglese, del suo a poco a poco diventare la lingua egemonica a livello mondiale, è un dibattito molto vivace e molto interessante, e sono molto interessanti le tesi esposte dalla scrittrice Minae Mizumura, così come lo è la tesi del bilinguismo diventato una necessità per chi voglia muoversi, a qualsiasi livello, nel mondo di oggi. Come dicevo tutto davvero molto interessante, anche se per molti versi non del tutto originale, fino a quando la discussione non entra profondamente nel problema costituito dal Giappone.
Io sono un'appassionata della letteratura giapponese, e ho letto diversi degli autori citati come esempio di letteratura classica moderna di quella nazione, Mishima in primis, amandoli moltissimo, così come ho letto autori più recenti, compreso l'acclamato Murakami, ricavandone invece una sorta di fastidio. Quella che descrive Mizimura è, a tutti gli effetti, un'autentica catastrofe linguistica messa in opera con scarsissima lungimiranza dai giapponesi stessi, cosa della quale mi dispiace profondamente.
Piccola nota di costume: mi auguro che questo libro non venga mai tradotto in italiano. La maggior parte dei governanti italiani non sono bilingui, e quindi non sono in grado di leggere quanto strenuamente perseguito dal governo giapponese per distruggere la propria lingua, potrebbe venirgli qualche idea sul come perseguire più efficacemente un obiettivo che a quanto pare si sono già prefissati nei confronti della lingua italiana.
Ringrazio Columbia University Press e Netgalley per avermi concesso una copia gratuita in cambio di una recensione onesta.

Catherine (literaryprints) says

Yes, translated copies of Mizumura's books tend to be expensive. And yes - they're utterly worth it. I could feel some of my ignorance peeling itself off as I turned the pages of this.

Reading this has indirectly given me a better understanding of my own country's state of literature and language. Mizumura's careful, incredibly well-researched and insightful exploration of the historical,

political, and ideological reasons behind the (initial) rise and (current) fall of the Japanese language is something to be savoured, and contemplated upon.

She gives a wealth of historic examples to support the points she makes - and yet, I find I was never bored throughout the book. It's informative without being self-indulgent - all thanks to Mizumura's ability to write incredibly compelling narratives. Her retelling of Fukuzawa Yuichi's valiant efforts of learning Dutch, then English, is filled with thoughtful admiration. Her lushly detailed (and kind of fangirl-y) analyses of Natsume Souseki's Sanshir? is, simply put, a joy to read. The whole of this book feels a bit like sitting in a hall listening to an amazing visiting professor's impassioned lecture - all about how the reality that English is the universal language has been brought on by fortunate historical accidents. And on how the loss of non-English written languages and literature would be a huge loss to humanity.

I mean - alright, her tone can be pretty dramatic at times, and things can get a little anti-Western, a lot of the time. But hey - in an age where globalisation seems fully bent on making everything uniform (with that uniformity placing the West as the ideal), I'm very thankful a book like this has been written to knock some sense into all of us. Whether that's the native English speakers who need to "at least be aware of their privileged position - and more important(ly), be aware that the privilege is unwarranted", or the non-natives who need to get it out of our heads that our non-English languages and literatures are in any way inferior/unworthy of preservation, simply because they don't fit into the Western model.

This book is a call for all non-native-English-speakers to start thinking about writing literature according to our respective contexts and enriching the world in the process, instead of becoming a mindless consumer of popular English/Western culture.

"Reality is constructed by languages, and the existence of a variety of languages means the existence of a variety of realities, a variety of truths. Understanding the multifaceted nature of truth does not necessarily make people happy, but it makes them humble, and mature, and wise. It makes them worthy of the name Homo sapiens."

This is nothing less than a brilliant piece filled with urgency - strict in its academic research, without lacking passion and true connection to the subject Mizumura's writing about: her own language and her own identity. In turn, it has sparked questions and rumination on my part, about my own language and what it means to be part of the nation I am. A must read for anyone who has any interest in translated literature - or just anyone who wants to be less ignorant, in this age of English.

Last note: absolutely superb translation!

David Dinaburg says

Language is a constant source of delight. Imagine you overhear the statement, “Tupac’s gone, but I’m still here.” Is this a mournful paean to the fragility of life, a bold claim to personal excellence, a reaffirmation in the face of existential breakdown, or triumphant bravado in the face of a downed rival?

When I inform you that I heard it from a rather shabby looking older man on a subway in New York City, the panoply of potential intentions probably collapsed into a singular vision of “crazy, meaningless babble.” To some of you, however, hearing that it wasn’t Kanye’s latest humblebrag or a line from Diddy’s next press conference may inspire a warm regard of what can be defined as folksy wisdom—a true insight into

reality—from the words. This type of mystification is not localized to our particular culture:

> The ideology of national language would later have it that a humble peasant who tilled the soil and did not know what "democracy" meant even in Japanese was held up as the true safe, possessing a kid of wisdom that the educated could not possibly attain. This jaundiced view of higher education was possible only for those Japanese who could take for granted the existence of the Japanese language as it is today, who came late enough to be blissfully ignorant of how their language and literature developed.

When applied externally, this idealized simplicity can become blinding and dangerous, a simple and insidious way of cutting down other cultures while attempting to appear to be rational. This was a concept I hadn't encountered until The Argumentative Indian:

> In this pre-selected 'East-West' contrast, meetings are organized, as it were, between Aristotle and Euclid on the one hand, and the wise and contented Indian peasants on the other. This is not, of course, an uninteresting exercise, but it is not pre-eminently a better way of understanding the 'East-West' cultural contrast than by arranging meetings between, say, Aryabhata (the mathematician) and Kautilya (the political economist) on the one hand, and happily determined Visigoths on the other.

This of imbalance—where the pinnacle of Western thought is brought to bear against the simple enlightenment of the exotic peasantry—is egocentrism and privilege laid bare. A more subtle privilege that most people I know will likely never encounter is one of language:

> Those whose mother tongue is English often are unaware that when they are writing in their own language, they are in fact writing in a universal language. They are unaware of what they would be deprived of if they were writing in a nonuniversal language—beyond the sheer number of readers. To apply the phrase I used in the talk I gave in Paris, they are not *condemned* to reflect on language in the way the rest of us are.

It is hard to admit that English writers have a leg-up in a global society that places English at the forefront of international communications; that you, a writer of English, has potential connections numbering in the billions rather the hundreds of thousands or even millions that delineate someone that was born into a less global language. You could write in English, or you could write in your native language; hopefully, someone is around to translate for you. If you're an author and a book does well enough in its native language, the definitive version of the text might end up in English regardless of your desire.

A translated text can create a cacophony of voices that doesn't flow in the same direction; what comes from the author and what the translator? The Fall of Language in the Age of English is not an exception to this; in fact, such an intense focus on language and translation made me more aware of the filter of language and mind that stood between me and the author of the original text:

> Once we left the college town behind, tall buildings disappeared and modest, two-story houses typical of the American countryside took their place, lit by the white morning light.

Is "modest" the adjective a woman that lives in Tokyo would choose to describe a two-story home, or is that a cultural holdover from the translator? A few pages later:

> What I got was not a suite but a room, and not even a very spacious room at that, considering this was the American Midwest and not Tokyo.

I can feel the distance from the source that the physical words impose upon the reader; not because these phrases are contradictory— because they are not—but because there is room for me to ponder from whom they originated. Perhaps a transliteration would have brought *homey* or *quaint* rather than *modest*, or perhaps the casual cultural cliché of *modest american home* was intended for immerse effect; whatever the case, I was constantly reminded this was originally a Japanese text.

Which is a great thing. Close attention to the text—constant engagement with the language itself rather than just the concepts the text is attempting to explain—is what it means to actually read a book. When a book (the history of Coleco, if you're curious) I wanted to support on a crowdfunding website mentioned that it would only unlock the French language edition—the authors' native tongue—as a third-round stretch goal, I thought of Fall of Language and the primacy of English in the stream of commerce. When the Oxford English Dictionary selected an emoji for word of the year, I thought of Fall of Language and the primacy of phoneticism in Western culture:

> Social Darwinism, which saw Western civilization as the pinnacle of human evolution, was applied to writing systems as well, suggesting that human writing evolved from ideograms to phonograms. Among the varieties of phonograms, syllabaries like hiragana and katakana that combine a consonant and a vowel in one letter were considered less evolved...
>
> Chinese characters, by exemplifying ideograms, went blatantly against such phoneticism. Though regarded as more evolved than Egyptian hieroglyphs, they came to symbolize the backwardness of East Asia, crystallized in China's defeat in the Opium Wars.

English is a language of cooptation, amalgamation, and theft—it makes almost no sense at a base level, and it would be hell to learn as an adult. Adding pictures—ideograms—back into the fold is just another step in our linguistic evolution; as simple written communications increase via text messaging, it seems it will only continue to increase. Adopting unpronounceable—non-phonetic—symbols into our written language is a break with the lockstep that English has held with phoneticism for hundreds of years. Take that, outdated and painfully racist concept of Social Darwinism!

During my week with Fall of Language, it inserted itself into my interpretation of almost everything that happened around me. Whether the cause of my enchantment was the original writing in Japanese or the translator's skill—likely both—the words are dense but never clunky, and the core concept always stays within viewing distance:

> The fall of language is set into motion when such people *begin to take more seriously what they read in English*. It is set in motion when, for example, they turn to English-language media to learn about critical international events--they may or may not be conscious of the Anglophone bias there--and use the media of their own country only to find out the results of home sports games or follow home celebrity gossip.
>
> It is set into motion when they hurry to order a heavyweight English-language book attracting media attention before it comes out in translation, while neglecting fine books written in their own language. Finally, it is set into motion when, because they have gradually become accustomed to making light of what is written in their own language, bilinguals start taking their own country's literature less seriously than literature written in English--especially the classics of English literature, which are evolving into the universal canon.
>
> A vicious cycle then begins. The more palpable this trend becomes, the more non-English writers would feel that writing in their own language will not reach the readers they are aiming

> for. Without a trusted readership, those writers would have less and less incentive to write in their own language, and there would be fewer and fewer texts worth reading in that language.

The Fall of Language in the Age of English stands as an exemplar of the type of thinking that may be lost in a global community dominated by English; its existence has proven its thesis elegantly.

Deborah says

4.5 stars

All my life I have been drawn to books about books, about language. From refusing to relinquish a grammar textbook at my first public book sale (I think I was 8) to my recent enjoyment of Alena Graedon's *The Word Exchange* (which still gives me chills), I have been interested in how language develops and the role of great literature in a human life. Thus, I was very excited to read Minae Mizumura's nonfiction work, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*.

Mizumura's thesis is a simple one: through an accident of history, English has become the world's "universal language," *i.e.*, an external language, read or written by someone who speaks another language, through which knowledge is best pursued. This ubiquity, Mizumura argues, threatens the very existence of literature written in other languages, particularly non-Western languages like Japanese. Her first two chapters introduce the issue through her own personal experiences and, not surprisingly, were the most enjoyable to read, but the academic tone of the remainder of the book was still easy to understand and follow. I particularly appreciated the way in which she builds upon the "imagined communities" described by Benedict Anderson, perhaps because his work played a significant role in another book I recently enjoyed (Alessandro Perissinotto's novel *For They Have Sown the Wind*; I love such unexpected congruences). Mizumura also manages to offer cogent observations on two literary phenomena, polar opposites, which have puzzled me in the last few months: the global success of *50 Shades of Grey* and the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Patrick Modiano, a French author not well-known in the United States even among voracious readers of literary fiction.

As Mizumura acknowledges, her book was originally intended as a call to arms to the Japanese, the quality of whose national literature has fallen precipitously in her opinion. While she has clearly made substantial revisions to suit a native English-speaking audience, a great deal of the book still focuses on Japanese, a language with which I have no familiarity; I must admit that my attention during these chapters did tend to wander. Nevertheless, as a whole, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* did accomplish Mizumura's stated goal of making English speakers not only aware of our "privileged position," but also conscious that, because the works translated into English are usually those which are linguistically and thematically easiest to translate, such works may not reveal the world's diversity but may, in fact, reinforce the worldview constructed by the English language. For those of us trying to diversify our reading, this is a sobering thought.

I think it's time for me to go find my Rosetta Stone CDs.

I received a free copy of *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Claire Reads Books says

A fascinating look at the rise of English as the world's universal language and the implications that has for national languages and Japanese in particular. This book provides a concise history of Japan and the precarious development of the Japanese language that might feel like review for readers who are already familiar with those subjects—for a newbie like myself, the information was at times dense and academic but entirely accessible. Mizumura is a force, provocative and unapologetic in her assessment of the current state of Japanese literature (it's easy to see how this book caused a stir in her home country). But her criticisms are born from her deep love of the Japanese language, and her anguish over the fall of that language is at times painfully palpable. This book is both an elegy and an urgent call to arms that will leave readers (including English-speaking Westerners) with much to think about and consider.

AK says

I couldn't stand most of this book. It reminded me of various academic feuds I've observed in my life, where personal disagreements get couched in political language, in the hopes that lofty language will elevate the dispute into something universally relevant. But it's really just a fight between two people who don't like each other. In this case, the brawl is between Mizumura and the English language, and later between Mizumura and Japanese people who don't feel the way about the Japanese language as she does.

Hating the English language is a pretty reasonable position, especially for someone like Mizumura, who had to move the States as a junior high school student, and who has turned the trauma of that linguistic and cultural displacement into several highly-acclaimed novels. I read excerpts from one (in Japanese) for a class in grad school and was intrigued by her use of form and language, and so I gave this book a shot when I came across it.

The best chapter of this book is the first, which recounts her time at the International Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. It certainly reveals quite a lot about Mizumura and her own prejudices, but still gives a sense of what that kind of international workshop is like, how power is ascribed to languages and the ability to speak them. I also got a bit out of reading the second chapter, which discusses the fall of French as a 'universal language,' because the chapter was still guided a bit by Mizumura's biography, her time studying French from high school through graduate school, partly as a way to get away from dreaded English.

After that, the book takes a turn for the theoretical, and it's a mess. There's a chapter where she gets annoyed at Benedict Anderson because Imagined Communities isn't about her particular bugaboo, the rise of English as a universal language. That's because the book covers the rise of nationalism, a phenomenon that largely happened before English had the global dominance that it does today. I had a hard time with her chapters on Japanese literature, and that's speaking as someone who speaks and reads Japanese and is well-versed in Japanese history and literature. I couldn't imagine assigning these chapters in a class, for example, nor could I imagine someone who doesn't know much about the history of Japanese literature reading these chapters and finding inspiration to go and read Natsume Soseki, for example. (Soseki is great! Read Soseki!) Finally, there's where Mizumura compares, without any sense of irony, the move to simplify some aspects of written Japanese to the genocide of intellectuals by the Khmer Rouge.

This book was originally written to incite debate among Japanese readers, many of whom don't read the classics that Mizumura loves, and who are, to her, uninterested in preserving and protecting the Japanese

language. I have a feeling the structure and content of this book make a bit more sense in Japanese, though I haven't looked at the Japanese version yet. I know the translators worked with Mizumura to adapt the book for an English-language readership, and though it seems to be well-reviewed here on Goodreads, it didn't work at all for me.

Mats says

Bearing in mind that this book is a translation into a universal language and thus not complete but rather reshaped and retold to fit a universal mentality... (just to keep in line with Mizumura's general ideas)

Pros: Mizumura elegantly puts into words how I reckon many non-English natives must feel and experience English and how its function as a universal language affects their native tongues and texts. Here in Scandinavia, where English is extremely present, anglicisms are gradually seeping into grammar and vocabulary and it seems to worsen with each new generation of speakers and writers (Mizumura calls us bilinguals, I just believe we have adapted). I am personally not as frustrated or scared as Mizumura - I am sure national languages will survive. They will evolve and adapt like languages do but as long as there are nation states there will be a divide. Mizumura's strongest point to me was that every one with the means and opportunity should learn a second language other than English. As she writes, languages are mentalities, words are markers of culture. Even though English is a universal language it can't do justice to the whole world and its literature.

Cons: In the first part of the book - which another review judges to be the best and I agree - there are some remarks that I really believe should've been left out. The students she sees in the US are all white and blond and they all look like Hitler Jugend to her; the German participator in the programme she attends is bald and thus looks like a Nazi (she even jokingly tells him this - I doubt he found it funny); she's initially scared of one the participators from Africa purely because he's big and black. This is not an academic book, it's very subjective, but remarks like those just doesn't do the author or the book any favours in my opinion. In one of the last chapters she starts seeing Communist ghosts everywhere, blaming them and their egalitarian misconceptions McCarthyism-style for the detriment of the Japanese language and Japan society in general. She doesn't mention a lot of names though and those she does highlight were alive a century ago. It's just too comical.

Furthermore she claims that Japanese (written) language has never been guarded, only the opposite. This is not entirely true though. When ideas about *genbun itchi* (unification of spoken and written language) were put forth in the wake of the Meiji restoration the literate and literary elites came out in full force, determined to keep the archaic status quo, and even though younger authors at the time began using *genbun itchi* it wasn't until 1946 and the rewriting of the Constitution that it was employed on the imperial and governmental level. As another review mentions, she's rather conflicted by the end of the book; she wants language to be free of governmental influence yet regulated at the same time; she wants Japan to take foreign language less seriously yet English speaking countries to take it more seriously.

Also the book is supposed to be about the fall of languages. However, only the last third of the book is. The rest of the book is about how national languages came about. It should've been proportioned differently.

I guess I was a bit heavy on the cons there compared to the pros but I was disappointed with the book, thinking it would be more academic - far too subjective for that. However, some of her personal thoughts about how we feel and relate to our native languages - where objectivity just doesn't match up - were very

insightful and valuable.

Maire says

DNF. First chapter was painfully self-absorbed, so I skipped ahead. Still very self-absorbed. I really should have picked up on this from the introduction, but alas, my optimistic heart was blind to it.

Avery says

On seeing the title of this book, one might wonder how translation into English affects Mizumura's rhetoric. In fact, on opening it one discovers that the force of her argument is actually not in how the nature of the Japanese language influences storytelling, but how the existence of a “national literature” can transform how it feels to be a speaker of any non-English language, and why 21st century English makes all other languages into minorities. As such, the target audience of this book is not merely Japanese speakers but readers, writers, and critics of all literatures. I am confident that if readers approach it with an open mind and an understanding that she is grounded in the Japanese canon, they will be able to get a powerful message out of it. Native English speakers will finish this book able to better contemplate and doubt the assumptions that they make when they speak about globalism and common communication. Speakers of other languages may feel a renewed confidence in reading and writing their own national literatures, and a better understanding of why these literatures must be preserved and passed on to future generations.

This book is written in a rather personal and confidential tone, which makes it rip-roaring read — I spent all night reading my copy, unable to put it down. It is rather unusual for a work of literary criticism to be this readable, and as the introduction to the book notes, it has been the subject of much unfriendly critique from people who prefer to nitpick writing style rather than try to see into the mind of the author. Having read the whole book, I endorse it without reservation, because while individual passages may show the author’s peculiarities, the central argument is much deeper and quite important to anyone reading or writing in the 21st century.

The central texts engaged with are Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities” and the novels of Natsume Soseki. But Mizumura puts her broad intellectual reach to work, integrating all sorts of books from many different languages. Here, Juliet Winters Carpenter once again displays her otherworldly talents as a translator in making this colorful collection of literatures into a seamless and extremely readable whole.

[I was provided with an advance copy of this book by NetGalley. I received no compensation.]

Will says

A book that extols the virtues of "national languages" could easily have been a stridently nationalist book. But Mizumura blew away my expectations with the lucidity of her prose, her beautifully constructed argument, and her inspiring call to arms.

I have always thought that I was lucky to be born into the "universal language" of my time, English. Vast troves of information are easily available, and I can converse with more and more people around the world as

the dominance of English spreads. But Mizumura is completely correct when she argues that speakers of the universal language rarely think about the consequences of its creep into the vocabularies of local and national language. For millions of writes, educators, and professionals, the only way up is through English.

Mizumura presents a compelling argument that nations, specifically Japan, must make a concerted effort to bolster their "national languages" to preserve their unique lens at looking at the world. Even nations that suffered under colonialism or national fragmentation and whose languages are still "local", i.e. without a definitive oeuvre of modern literature, cannot succumb to the temptation of writing, thinking, and philosophizing in English. They must hang on to every scrap of identity and resist. She argues that if only specialists read and write seriously in Japanese, then Japan will lose part of its critical identity and no one will take the country seriously. And the death of literature will ensure.

Mizumura bemoans "leftist intellectuals" and their obsession with creating egalitarianism in Japan, citing their "dumbing down" of the language by restricting the number of Chinese characters as a reason why Japanese people are reading the classics less and less. This section was the least compelling portion of her argument for me because it seems to be based more on her personal opinion and less on any scholarly inquiry. While this approach works well for the majority of the book, Mizumura's place as an "armchair theorist" weakens her analysis. Also, Mizumura begins the book with a lengthy chapter about personal experiences at the University of Iowa, which detracts from the tone and the message of the book.

Fighting against my own monolingualism is an eternal battle. I have started a new journey through French in the last two years, and while it has been a struggle, it's also exhilarating and rewarding. Parsing my way through a French novel takes time, but when I go an entire page without the dictionary I feel triumphant. Communing with a national language and forsaking my universal language for a few minutes each day has opened my understanding of the world to new vistas. I'll give an example. Just the other day, I came across what has quickly become one of my favorite words. Discovering the word "boursicoter" (to dabble on the stock market) proved to me the versatility and beauty of language, as well as the inherent value of foreign language education, once again.

Mizumura's work has given me a new lens through which to view my study of French and a window into how non-native English speakers interact with my language. Definitely worth reading.

Jessica says

It's always a delight to encounter a beautifully written book, containing new and unexpected ideas about an old topic.

"Through this bilingual form, I wanted to directly appeal to Japanese readers, to impress upon them that their language is different from English, different from any Western language, different indeed from any other language in the world. Not that I tried to make a case for the uniqueness of the Japanese language; I tried rather... to make a case for the irreducible individuality of all languages, the reason for which writing even in the most local of all local languages becomes a worthwhile activity in itself.

Just imagine. Imagine a world one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years from now, a world in which not only the best-educated people but also the brightest minds and the deepest souls express themselves only in English. Imagine a world in which all other languages have been reduced to stillness. Imagine the world subjected to the tyranny of a singular "Logos." What a narrow, pitiful and horrid world that would be. To

live in such a world would be infinitely sadder than to be confined to the asymmetry we have now."

Dan says

Minae Mizamura's *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* is an highly approachable, surprisingly personal discussion of universal, national, local, and vernacular languages.

Mizamura convincingly argues for multilingualism and wisely counsels humility to native English speakers. *"The rest of the world would appreciate it if. . . [native English speakers] would at least be aware of their privileged position—and more important, be aware that the privilege is unwarranted. In this age of global communication, some language or other was bound to become a universal language used in every corner of the world. English became that language not because it is intrinsically more universal than other languages, but because through a series of historical coincidences it came to circulate ever more widely until it reached the tipping point. That's all there is to it. English is an accidental universal language."*

Mizamura's arguments hold particular interest within the context of recent debates about global literature, such as Tim Parks' excellent *Where I'm Writing From: The Changing World of Books* and Adam Kirsch's *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century*.

Catherine says

This is an excellent read for native English speakers who haven't thought about the perks of knowing a universal language. Having speaking and writing access to a universal language without even thinking about it means quite a bit, and the book deftly illuminates the implications.

It also dwells in length on the beauties of modern Japanese literature—something I've been discovery on reading translations of S?seki and Tanizaki. Mizumura argues strongly that non-Western cultures must value and save their languages, philosophies, and literature and not let it get swept away by valuing only western culture.

Will says

It's all too humbling to glimpse the fact that the islands of accepted reality we stand upon are small, narrow things. We sometimes come to see that our thoughts and actions are all caught up in something much larger than anything we could individually support or resist in any meaningful way, but can appreciate the fact that our boundaries of awareness have been incrementally widened. This is the gift of Minae Mizumura's book *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*.

As the title portends, the book explores the spread of English and how Mizumura believes it to be impoverishing languages throughout the world. Mizumura takes this on through personal, political, literary, and historical perspectives that focus most heavily on Japan and the social costs of its pursuit of English. The book starts with Mizumura's personal accounts of seeing different languages meet and ultimately try to bridge the gap of communication. It's a personal section about her growing awareness of differences

between the East and the West, and the ways in which exchanges between the two is often one sided.

From here *The Fall of Language* transitions into linguistic history, with a brief overview on the formation and propagation of English, and a similar but more detailed look at Japanese and how it came to be in its current state. It's all well written and informative, but drags a little compared to the beginning of the text. The second half picks up the slack with a discussion on Japanese literature, how the internet and globalization have influenced the world of language, and ends with a call to defend national languages while making peace with the ever-rising tide of English.

Reading reviews prior to reading the book made me wary that this would be a thinly veiled alarmist argument for nationalistic beliefs but having finished I think it's anything but that. Mizumura is level and considerate in her rhetorical steps, and raises interesting points of discussion that she is confident enough to give voice to and let wander from her main quandary, like what role literature plays when the modern world does not leave much room for it. Mizumura's writing is of a deft mind that veers neither into tirade nor chilly academic objectivity, with an implicit lament for the ruins of languages the world has lost or is in the process of leaving behind.

It's an invaluable text for an English speaker because we take it for granted that our language has spread to the extent it has, often validating and promoting a western, and some might even argue specifically an American, sense of reality. As is the case of various forms of privilege, when that reality is like the air you breathe, it is everywhere, it is invisible, and it is seemingly ludicrous to question. We monolingual English speakers see the open doors of our world but cannot comprehend what worlds our limited linguistic framework has locked us out from. *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* is a nudge towards seeking out those other worlds, or, at the very least, understanding that reality is more multifaceted than one language will ever allow us to grasp.

Caroline says

I found the first two chapters hard to get through and not particularly useful.

The third chapter, however, starts to delve into the application of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* to the emergence of Japanese as a national language (as an example of the general application of his theories). (Her citation of the differences in the widths of the channels that separate England from continental Europe and Japan from the Asian continent, and the resulting influence on the divergent histories of these two island nations, was an eerie echo of lines that I listened to yesterday in -- how strange reading is.)

Then there are two really useful chapters that provide short histories of the development of written Japanese and its literature: one pre-modern (up to the Meiji restoration) and one after the restoration. Japanese really is a unique amalgam of adopted and cadged components; she does what seems a good job of describing this. I got several reading ideas, and brief lives of Natsume Soseki (an author I was already familiar with) and Fukuzawa Yukichi (new to me), an essential thinker on education and other topics during the emergence of Meiji Japan. One shocking fact was the proposal during this time to abandon Japanese and use English as a national language; another was to butcher the language in various ways to make it more 'accessible' after centuries of connection between the written language and Chinese classics.

The last part of the book is really addressed to writers and readers in Japan, and relates to the importance of

maintaining Japanese as a vital literary language rather than giving in to universal English.

It makes interesting reading alongside two other works I've just read: the novelization of the life of Sakamoto Ryoma, active in the revolution that resulted in the Meiji restoration and some types of westernization, and *Worlding Sei Shônagon*, a compilation of dozens of translations of the first paragraph of *The Pillow Book* into about twenty different languages over 200 years.
