

(Mobile pdf) The Fall of Language in the Age of English

The Fall of Language in the Age of English

Minae Mizumura

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#1378806 in Books 2017-02-21 Original language: English 8.90 x .60 x 6.00l, #File Name: 0231163037240 pages | File size: 52.Mb

Minae Mizumura : The Fall of Language in the Age of English before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*:

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Thought-Provoking, Particularly for English Speakers Trying to Read More Diversely By Deborah 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.

18 of 19 people found the following review helpful. Rescuing national literatures from hegemony
By Avery
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.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. And what happens when English rules the world?
By Wally Wood
Minae Mizumura's new book knew for Western readers is *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*. It was originally published in Japan as *When the Japanese Language Falls: In the Age of English* (*Nihongo ga horobiru toki: Eigo no seiki no naka de*) in 2008 where it became an enormous best-seller. The English version, translated by Mari Yoshihara and Juliet Winters Carpenter, is somewhat different from the original which addressed Japanese readers. *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* makes a more general, more universal argument. Mizumura was born in Tokyo in 1951, moved with her family to Long Island, New York, when she was twelve years old. She lived in the States for twenty years but never felt entirely at ease here. She studied French literature and literary criticism at Yale as both an undergraduate and graduate student. She has taught at Princeton, University of Michigan, and Stanford and in *The Fall of Language* she gives her account of her experience in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 2003. She currently lives in Tokyo. Her book makes a clear distinction between a local language, a national language, and a universal language. A local language is the one you grow up speaking; it may or may not have a writing system. As I understand her argument, a local language in Italy is something like Neapolitan, Calabrese, Sicilian, Venetian more than a dialect or an accent language that outsiders cannot understand; the national language would be Italian. In Japan, local languages include Tohoku-ben, Kansai-ben, Hakata-ben, and more local; the national language is Japanese. A national language Mizumura says "is an elevated form of a local language" and a country like Belgium might have two national languages. A universal language is one used internationally for science, business, diplomacy, and more. In the middle ages, Latin was a universal language. Today, thanks to British colonial efforts, trade and US strength after WWII, English has become the universal language. More Chinese may speak Mandarin, but "what makes a language 'universal' has nothing to do with how many native speakers there are, and everything to do with how many people use it as their second language . . . What matters is that English is already used and will continue to be used by the greatest number of nonnative speakers in the world." (Italics in the original.) One of the things this means is that translation becomes far more important than most people realize. If an author writes in her local or national language, her readers are only those who can read it. If an author writes in English, her prospective readers are all over the world, not only in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia,

and New Zealand. Many more Japanese are able to read a novel in English than Americans are able to read a novel in Japanese. This suggests that if an ambitious author wants a wide audience, she ought to write in English even though her native language may be Hausa, Tagalog, Tswana, or Tigrinya. Translation, however, is at best a limited answer to the challenge of literature written in languages other than English. As Mizumura points out "the works that are usually translated into English are those that are both thematically and linguistically the easiest to translate, that often only reinforce the worldview constructed by the English language, and preferably that entertain readers with just the right kind of exoticism." Readers therefore "are not condemned to know that there is thus a perpetual hermeneutic circle that in interpreting the world, only 'truths' that can be perceived in English exist as 'truths.'" And machine translating, while clearly improving almost weekly, has real problems with languages remote from English like Japanese and Chinese. In a news article or instruction manual where the meaning rests mostly on the surface, a machine version may be adequate. But in a work of literature where much of the meaning and pleasure is in the nuance, the implications, the way words can resonate against one another, machine translation, as I can testify from my own experience, has a long, long way to go. And sudden thought by the time it gets there, (which is not a sure thing), it may be useless because English has so overwhelmed all other languages that no one is bothering to write literature in her native language anyway. Given her interest, Mizumura has much to say about Japanese literature, its remarkable florescence during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (i.e., during the Meiji and Taisho eras) and, in her opinion, its current low state. Indeed, when her book was published in Japan, she was attacked for her judgment: "She talks down about contemporary Japanese literature, when even Americans say it's great!" As if American opinion is the measure of quality. I found the book fascinating. Anyone interested in language, literature, Japan, or all three can read *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* profitably. Because most of us tend to think in our native language most of the time, we are usually no more aware of it than a fish is of the water in which it swims. Mizumura helps us consider the medium in which we think and write, what we're doing, and the effect the spread of English is having on the rest of humanity. *The Girl in the Photo*

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 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 provocatively participates in current debates on world literature, translation, reading, and writing in the age of global English and the Internet, bringing forward a new and illuminating perspective on the translingual formation of national languages and the now endangered arc of modern literature. It is written from the viewpoint of a noted Japanese novelist as well as from a wider theoretical and historical perspective. (Tomi Suzuki, Columbia University) A dazzling rumination on the decline of local languages, most particularly Japanese, in a world overshadowed by English. Moving effortlessly between theory and personal reflection, Minae Mizumura's lament is linguistic and social in equal measure, is broadly informed, closely reasoned, and in a manner that recalls her beloved Jane Austen at once earnest and full of mischief. (John Nathan, translator of *Light and Dark: A Novel* by Natsume Soseki) A stirring call to consciousness about the role of language.... For English speakers, the book presents an important opportunity to walk in someone else's shoes. (Publishers Weekly) *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* is or at least can be valuable to any literature-interested reader. Certainly, it is an interesting personal introduction to aspects of Japanese writing, and its transitions across recent centuries, as Japan's own position internationally has shifted. (M. A. Orthofer *The Complete*) A call to arms for everyone: for all non-native English speakers to embrace and champion literature in their own languages, and for English speakers to be that little less arrogant in their use of their mother tongue, which just happens to have become the world's universal language. (Sophie Knight *The Japan Times*) Mizumura traces how the myth of the 'national language,' a pure upwelling of political character, coincided with the flowering of the nation-state and, even more fascinatingly, of the novel itself.... 'Language' may be in the book's title, but Mizumura has really crafted a conservationist's plea for literature. (Katy Waldman *Slate*) Rigorous and wide-ranging.... This book is a cracker. (Peter Gordon *Asian of Books*) An eye-opening call to consciousness about the role of language. (Publishers Weekly *Tip Sheet*) There is incredibly smart stuff in here... Mizumura's ability to weave together so many strands of history (lingual, academic, economic, geopolitical)

paints a clear picture of the evolution of Japanese literature, with commentary on the rest of the globe being a pleasant byproduct. (Graham Oliver *The Rumpus*) [A] highly charged book. (Eric Banks *The Chronicle Of Higher Education*) Persuasive, elegantly written.... [The Fall of Language in the Age of English] is highly deserving of attention, from English and Japanese speakers alike, as well as from anyone concerned about literature's past and future. (Rebecca Hussey *The Quarterly Conversation*) The Fall of Language in the Age of English deserves wider coverage (and debate). (Flavorwire) Mizumura has crafted a book that stimulates thought, excites passions, and encourages debate. For these alone, it is well worth a read. (Erik R. Lofgren *World Literature Today*) Translators Juliet Winter Carpenter and Mari Yoshihara have done a superb job of rendering [the text] into clear, readable English. (Japanese Studies) This powerful, insightful work analyzes the predicament of world languages and literatures in an age when English has become the universal language of science and the default language of the internet.... Rich, profound meditation on language and literature. (Claremont of Books) In *The Fall Of Language in the Age of English*, Minae Mizumura shows, better than anyone ever has, how English is wrecking other languages reducing even great literary languages, including Japanese and French, to local dialects and makes a vigorous case for the superiority of the written over the spoken word. (Benjamin Moser *New York Times Book*) [Mizumura's] book is a 'text to read' in the 'universal library,' to use her terms. (Selma K. Sonntag *Journal of Asian Studies*) Skillfully translated. (Harou Shirane *Public Books*) The care with which Mizumura has crafted this book... [makes] the reading of it a pleasure, allowing for wit and personality to shine. (Full Stop) About the Author Minae Mizumura was born in Tokyo, moved to New York at the age of twelve, and studied French literature at Yale University. Acclaimed for her audacious experimentation and skillful storytelling, Mizumura has won major literary awards for all four of her novels one of which, *A True Novel*, was recently published in English. She lives in Tokyo. Mari Yoshihara is professor of American studies at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She is the author of *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* and *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music*. Juliet Winters Carpenter studied Japanese literature at the University of Michigan and the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Tokyo. In 1980, Carpenter's translation of Abe Kobo's novel *Secret Rendezvous* (Mikkai) won the Japan United States Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature.