

REPOSITIONING ENGLISH: AN ATTEMPT TOWARDS CONSTRUCTING A PRO-GLOBAL AND TRANS-COLONIAL CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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INTRODUCTION

Today's world is claimed to be economically and culturally more globalized than ever before, thanks to the faster and more reliable means of transportation and communication, which have facilitated the exchange not only of information, goods and services, but also of cultures. This concurrent evolution has led to increased mutual cultural influences across national and regional boundaries, which have prompted some experts to claim that the world has been homogenizing by convergence, at the expense of cultural diversity. The players or partners involved in the relevant world-wide networks of interconnectedness and interdependence do not hold equal economic powers; it is rather the more powerful who control the resources and decide as to which commodities (including languages) are transported in what directions. Thus, to the eyes of many, globalization is no more than McDonaldisation and Americanization (largely through the diffusion of Hollywood movies), and the spread of English is no less than a part of this trend. Some linguists have thus claimed that a 'global English' is bound to emerge which would facilitate communication world-wide alongside, or perhaps superseding, indigenized forms of English. According to the same futurologists, the more widely this global English spreads, the more likely it is to drive other languages to extinction, just has been witnessed in North America and Australia.

However, neither economic globalization nor language spread is new in the history of mankind. What are especially striking today are both the scale and the speed at which these processes are evolving. 'Globalization may be thought of initially as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life.' (1) this description indicates the extent to which the world is structured at an international level, given the fact that the contemporary world order is globally constituted as much in the social and cultural realms as it is in politics and economics. Acknowledging this inevitably involves a consideration of the linguistic situation globally. A wider, deeper, accelerated interconnectedness has far-reaching implications regarding languages, especially one so often described as a *lingua franca*. English is probably like no other language in its current role internationally, even like no other at any point of time in history. Although there are, and have previously been, other international languages, the case of English is different in fundamental ways: firstly, for the extent of its diffusion geographically; secondly, for the enormous cultural diversity of the speakers who use it; and finally, for the infinitely varied domains in which it is found and the

purposes it serves. Hence, for all these factors, English has now come to develop an entire system of epistemology, given the fact that there have been numerous papers and book-length treatments on the implications of the spread of English, including issues such as the question of ownership (2), the normative model in second language pedagogy (3), and reconsiderations of the nature of communicative competence (4). Indeed, an entire body of literature has emerged, ranging from ‘linguistic imperialism’ (5), through to critical applied linguistics and pedagogy (6), leading English to become an instrument of ‘universalism’ and an established field in its own right (7).

THE CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION HYPOTHESIS

Modern communications technology continues to spread at every level – locally, regionally and globally – with greater diffusion of information transmitted with greater intensity and velocity. As a result, the geographically local might appear less familiar, more alienating than images projected via satellite from across the globe. The local thus often becomes defamiliarized and the global familiarized, blurring the boundaries between what is local and global, leading to what Robertson (1995) terms ‘glocalization’ (8). Heightened interconnectedness in many senses leads to greater pluralism and diversity, and interactions thereof drive forth to an increasing transcendence of regions and borders and a substantial alteration of the context within which cultural projects develop. This represents significant challenges to any homogenization hypothesis, including claims about ‘linguistic imperialism’. Rather than view the intensity of interconnectedness as a root cause of cultural dominance, new infrastructures and innovative channels of communication in fact make censorship and oppression of local identities more difficult to maintain. International movements have greatly benefited from the possibility of virtual communities, cultural networks that link the ideas and practices of different groups across vast distances. On a political level, transnational organizations permit the flow of information to such an extent that it is easier to forge the necessary ties to enable ideas to be better mobilized through a common frame of reference, thus providing a greater voice to the marginalized.

THE GLOBALIZATION MODEL AND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

The implications of globalization in language pedagogy are substantial and far-reaching, and several books have now explicitly begun to address this. Through globalizing forces, information exchanges can become more democratized and made less hierarchical, or more ‘levelled’ (9). Instead of viewing globalization as the imposition of the global onto the local, increased interconnectedness and the technologies that facilitate this can enable pedagogical norms and practices to be more locally defined and regionally interchanged, becoming less dependent on a single unitary (L1 English) centre. Many teachers and learners undoubtedly regard language norms as essentially fixed, predetermined and tied to a restricted number of geographic centres. However, the globalization of English leads to the very heart of our understanding of language, in turn leading to fundamental concerns regarding language norms. In the light of the increased linguistic diversity, we need to reassess current practices in relation to the selection of language teaching materials, methods and approaches to testing. What is required is a more flexible view of language, a more pluralistic approach to competence (10). The growing prominence of regional and local varieties of English has several implications for English teaching in the 21st century. English teachers will need to re-conceptualize how they conceive of the link between language and culture. As a Taiwanese educator proclaimed at a

conference of English teachers in Taipei in 1997: ‘Why is it that our students learn in their English classes to talk about the British parliament but not about our local government institutions? Why do they learn to talk about British media and artifacts, but not about Chinese forms of media and cultural expression?’ (11) Culture remains an integral part of language learning, but the approach towards culture must become multi-faceted, taking into account the diverse cultures of the many people who speak English around the world. There is no single formula for how to handle issues of culture in teaching. Teachers shall need to vary their approach depending on the particular learners being taught and their purposes in learning English. The emergence of different varieties of English shall thus, as a matter of fact, affect the way teachers think about syntactical, lexical and phonetic standards and the great importance placed on the use of ‘correct’ language. In the 21st century, speakers of English may increasingly need to diverge from what they have been taught is correct in order to make themselves understood to interlocutors from around the world. In such circumstances, narrow emphases on the observance of decontextualized rules will serve learners poorly. In the present time, there will also be a growing basis for learners around the world to view English as their own language of additional communication based on the values, cultural norms and needs of the learners rather than on the syllabi and texts developed in England and the United States. English language educators must have to come to grips with the social, economic, cultural and linguistic consequences of the global spread of English. There has been much debate about the desirability and impact of this phenomenon. Some critics view global English as a medium of ‘linguistic imperialism’ or, in other words, hegemony or even genocide. Others take a more balanced view pointing out the advantages of a *lingua franca* while also expressing concern about linguistic diversity. But to declare that English is unequivocally harmful or beneficial is to deny the human agency that shapes how English is used in different circumstances. Besides, the issues that the spread of English may privilege certain groups of people (including native speakers and non-native elites who have the opportunity to master it) and may harm others who have less opportunity to learn it, and that such a dissemination may also be one of the many factors contributing to the tragic loss of indigenous languages around the world, there is, very importantly so to speak, another aspect of such a spread of the language and that is the fact that it can also be deployed as a weapon of the dispossessed, as occurred in the South African struggle for liberation (12). This notion of the colonized using English to their own ends was expressed well by a Singaporean student in a discussion on Philipson’s notion of ‘linguistic imperialism’ (13):

Although it was definitely unpleasant to be colonized by another country, I have to say that the British in one way or another paved the way for the development of Singapore and have educated us in English and have enabled us to benefit from all its advantages and its standing as a global language. However, we have not by any means lost our cultural heritage. Multilingualism is prevalent and we are rich in the use of different languages and dialects, which we speak and use whenever the situation calls for it

One thing I would like to clarify is that we do not view and value the language in a mercenary sense – we have gone way beyond that. We study and use the language because it has developed into a language of our own that is used comfortably among ourselves. (14)

Hence, the continued use and spread of English, and whom it benefits and whom it harms, will be a site of ongoing struggle. In this context, I shall rather wish to urge English language users in general, and English language educators in particular, to take guard against a possible misappropriation, which eventually results in a certain form of misplacement as well, that the language is often subject to, being described as a means of communication that is ‘foreign’ to us and thus is not ours, and to question the rather uncommonly held belief that the world is subject to an undesirable linguistic hegemony that has, in its turn, served to perpetuate yet another era of colonialism. Educators of English language can certainly go on to lend their support to those for world-wide ‘language ecology’ (15) by providing linguistic and pedagogical respect for a range of English dialects; by offering professional and human support for the maintenance and use of other languages besides English; and by introducing critical language awareness into the curriculum so that students can better understand the interrelationship of language, discourse, and power (16).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, OR LITERATURE(S) IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE, AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CONSTRUCTION OF A CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Emphasis should nonetheless be there on teaching literatures in English language, let alone English literature *per se* or, more specifically, what we may call the literature of Britain. If we view literature from a holistic standpoint, instead of considering it from a microscopic perspective, we shall be able to appreciate it as a reflection of a wide diversity of cultures, whereby it performs the function of attesting not only meanings to such representations, but also of constructing separate identities that go on to define the respective domains of culture. Literature is but one aspect of the cultural practices of a community and therefore should be considered with reference to its context for a proper understanding. Cultural practices are rooted in the economic base of any society, and that is why there are enormous differences in the cultural practices of the people of the world. In India, for example, we have seasonal festivals welcoming the six seasons, whereas in the other parts of the world, there is no such custom. People eat different kinds of food, wear different kinds of clothes and have various ceremonies or rituals that are the product of their own social processes. Hence, in any interpretation of a literary text, the entire culture behind that text needs to be taken into account. This is the reason why an African novel cannot be grafted on to a Japanese context unless it is radically altered to suit that context or an English drama staged or taught in a classroom in India without altering its bearings to make it accessible to an audience or to a group of learners who are perhaps not adequately equipped to perceive the cultural nuances pertaining to a different and altogether unfamiliar nationality, given their limited exposure to other world cultures. Literature thus constitutes a unique world by delving deep into which a learner becomes enriched with such experiences and insights that help to develop what we may call a cultural consciousness. Hence, when we talk about pedagogical strategies that would befittingly suit a 21st-century curriculum in English language, we have to inevitably relate to the processes of teaching and learning through English literature or literatures in English in all its/their diversity/diversities. To quote Prof. S. Dhar here would perhaps be most appropriate:

... to teach literature written in English is to allow the conflict to rage under one’s skin, to split one’s consciousness. From the specific angles of political and nationalistic perspectives, the question neatly resolves into a dilemma: should one as an Indian contribute to a process that valorizes the

language of our erstwhile colonial masters? One way out of this dilemma is by recognizing that it is only in English that can one overcome the perceptual limitations of regional language writing. (17)

CONCLUSION

In continuance with what we have discussed here, it may thus be said that there is a need to reassess the notions of preservation of cultural or linguistic heritage or certain other idealized versions of it, in the light of current tendencies and influences. As language practitioners we must acknowledge the pluralism involved in language use, otherwise we face the risk of continually freezing English spatially and temporally. A stern adherence to an essentially monolithic concept of language is counter to the diversification of English globally. Apart from this, a perceptible shift towards a global informational economy has also helped the spread of English as a *lingua franca* around the world. However, it makes more sense when the process is related to colonization, to which globalization is originally connected. Much of the impetus that today's globalization has given to the spread of English is also largely attributable to the earlier role that colonization played in expanding the language geographically and demographically. As the world becomes more interconnected, our networks extend further, transcending national and regional boundaries and resulting in still more hybridization, thereby giving birth to a 'trans-colonial' consciousness. This process is now accelerated in modern societies, and expression of culture can be experiences, almost simultaneously, across the globe. It has now come to integrate more countries and regions into the global market and the need for workers in diverse occupations world-wide to learn English has increased manifold. The most far-reaching changes are felt in the area of technology, with the internet becoming ubiquitous in the developed world and commonplace in urban areas elsewhere. The expansion of the internet and its convergence with other technologies are requiring more people to read, write and listen to English on a daily basis, to shop and sell, to teach and learn, to collaborate and struggle. They would thus use technology to express their identity and make their voices heard. English is what its users and speakers make of it, and such people are increasingly found to hail from developing and newly industrialized countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. As a group of Brazilian scholars wrote: 'The learning of English, considering its hegemonic role in international exchanges ..., can contribute to the formulation of counter-discourses in relation to inequalities between countries and social groups.' (18) And we, as English teachers, can promote students' ability to formulate such counter-discourses by assisting learners in developing critical literacies in multiple media and genres. In summary, if the central contradiction of the 21st century is between global networks and local identities, English is a tool of both. It connects people around the world and provides a means to struggle and to give meaning to those connections. To quote Prof. Dhar shall again be very pertinent here:

... as P. Lal once argued (in the second issue of his journal, *Literary Miscellany*), one can be "Indian" only in English, for the other languages of our country are bound down to their distinctive regional milieux. The justification of teaching English ultimately lies in the fact that in reading and teaching it we take on not one world or one culture but many. Literatures in English map out the complex contours of different terrains, diverse positions. No English literature allows the reader or the teacher the scope to slide into the comfort of conformity, of fixities and definites. Hence its challenge, its pleasure, delight and (perhaps) profit. (19)

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