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Andrew James

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Past, Present, and Future

The road traveled by the English language, from its beginnings almost two thousand years ago to the present, is easily mapped. English traces its roots back to the languages of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who lived in northern Germany over 1500 years ago. Old Norse, the language of the Vikings who invaded the area now known as Great Britain between the ninth and eleventh centuries, also influenced English greatly (Pinker 248–49). The future of English, however, is much less clear. Some critics, such as Kramsch, warn against the monopoly of one language over others and stress the importance of upholding linguistic rights (Kramsch 1998: 77). It has been said that English is becoming too powerful internationally, and English flourishes while small, indigenous languages wither and die. Conversely, Dr. Robert Burchfield has argued that standard English is destined to follow in Latin's footsteps and disappear, though not before spawning numerous new languages, such as Indian English, Jamaican English, and Singaporean English (Cran, Macneil, and McCrum 1992: 338–39). The future of English may be uncertain, but its present-day importance as an international language is indisputable. There are roughly four times more non-native- than native speakers of English (Kachru 1994: 137), a figure which suggests that it is indeed becoming increasingly difficult to say who English belongs to or what constitutes proper usage.

1.2 Demythologizing English

In considering the role of English in the development of society and culture, I shall address three issues raised by Wardhaugh (1987), Phillipson (1992), and Crystal (1997): cultural baggage and assumed values that go with English (Wardhaugh); the imposition of mental structures on L2 learners, or linguistic imperialism (Phillipson); democracy and equality in English (Crystal). The goal of this analysis is to demythologize English's role as an international language. Essentially, I am in agreement with Kaplan, who stated that English has become the international language of choice not because of its inherent superiority to other languages but due to "an accident of circumstance" (Kaplan 1987: 137). In other words, economic, political, and historical circumstances converged in such a way that English became used worldwide. But English, Chinese, and Chipeweyan are linguistic equals, and if world history had taken a few left turns instead of rights, it is conceivable that people in Sierra Leone would be trying cases and arguing with policemen in another *lingua franca*. Thus, the goal of this analysis of English as a foreign language is not to defend or justify its position as the international language of choice; rather, I wish to challenge the statements by Wardhaugh, Phillipson, and Crystal, and separate myth from reality.

THE CULTURAL BAGGAGE OF ENGLISH

2.1 English as Property

While Wardhaugh (1987) qualifies his bold declaration that English belongs to no one -- "at least [it] is often regarded as having this property" -- many people around the world view the English language from precisely

the opposite position. The cultural baggage and assumed values that go with the English language are real and powerful for language and culture are inextricably connected. Language cannot and does not exist in a vacuum. A language without a country, or people to speak it as a mother tongue, dies, just as Latin died. As one studies the role of English as an international language, the extent to which language and culture or, more specifically, the English language and Western culture(s), are intertwined becomes clear.

2.2 Culture and Language

Cultural misunderstandings are often confused with language difficulties, as borne out by Gumperz, Jupp, and Roberts' story (quoted in Kramersch 1998) of an unfortunate encounter between an Asian customer and a British bank cashier. The customer says, "I want to deposit some MONEY" and, when presented with a form, insists, "this is the WRONG one" [block letters are Kramersch's]" (Kramersch 1998: 30). The Asian speaker's tone of voice and emphases "may lead to misunderstanding and frustration on the part of the British-English speaker," claims Kramersch, who calls the customer pushy and rude (Kramersch 1998: 30). The question of whether Kramersch is treating a cultural or linguistic problem is unclear, as is the solution to the Asian customer's problem. But the fact that Gumperz, Jupp, and Roberts decided to make the customer Asian rather than, for example, British, female, overweight, and gaudily dressed shows that the script writers' real concern lies in reaffirming sociocultural stereotypes and encouraging correct British behavior. When the customer is "Asian" our imaginations go to work conjuring sociocultural stereotypes. Nouveau riche Asians are perhaps to be pitied for not knowing that it shows bad breeding to say "money" in a loud voice (at a bank, of all places).

Thus, the bank encounter shows how language and culture are inextricably connected. In many instances the EFL or ESL teacher may believe that he/she is teaching a language lesson when, in fact, by training learners in certain situational language behavior, the focus becomes the instillation of social values, or how to behave in a British bank. This is neither good nor bad. It is unavoidable.

2.3 Teaching Tone and Emphasis

Perhaps in an American, Singaporean, or Indian bank, the Asian customer would not create a problem. But the Asian customer creates very real problems for the international English teacher in the form of tone, intonation, and emphasis. The fact that an internationally approved way of saying the sentence, “I want to deposit some money” does not exist suggests that EFL teachers are faced with some hard decisions about how to teach their students communication skills. In many countries where English is taught as a foreign language, such as China, this problem manifests itself as a choice to be made between American and British English

2.4 Making Language Choices in China

Zhang reports that American English is popular among the younger Chinese generation, but most of the textbooks and audiolingual materials are produced in British English. “The mixed use of both BrE and AmE [Zhang’s abbreviations] in the textbooks has served to confuse [the Chinese teachers] as to what to do” (Zhang 2000: 57). The solution, according to Zhang, is to stress “mutual intelligibility” (Zhang 2000: 57). The EFL teachers and their training programs can then make “an informed choice as to the variety on which to base their teaching practice” (Zhang 2000: 60). There are at least two problems with Zhang’s optimistic solution. First, if

the decision is left up to the teachers, students may well be taught British English and pronunciation one year and American English the next. While Zhang probably believes that such a situation would simply cause confusion in regards to spelling and pronunciation, a more serious concern is the sociocultural one, exemplified by the British bank exchange. Second, if the decision is made by the language training program, American teachers may be forced to teach British English; British teachers, American English. Language policy decisions are easily, often accidentally, made and they are often very difficult to change, as the example of Received Pronunciation illustrates.

2.5 The RP Accident and Lessons to be Learned

The pronunciation used by the inhabitants of southwestern England became known as “Received Pronunciation” (RP) and, thanks to Daniel Jones’ *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917), became a standard method of pronunciation throughout the world. Yallop points out that in the dictionary, Jones himself cautioned that Received Pronunciation means simply “widely understood pronunciation.” Jones even went so far as to say: “I do not hold it up as a standard which everyone is recommended to adopt” (Yallop 1999: 31). Jones’ advice was ignored, though, and RP “continues to be important [. . .] because the minority who speak it includes highly influential people” (Yallop 1999: 31). Ironically, one of the most important factors determining what brand of English to speak and study is the word which created problems for the Asian customer and British bank cashier: money. The issue of economic advantage and social prestige derived from the study of English will be dealt with later in this paper under the heading of English and democracy. For now it is important to remember that there are numerous groups throughout the world that claim ownership of English.

If this were not so, then we would not be able to talk of Australian English, Indian English, and Caribbean English, let alone the American and British varieties, each of which strongly reflects sociocultural attitudes.

THE NATIVE TEST

3.1 English's Cultural Baggage: How Native Are You?

The support for RP and the belief in a standard version of English may be weakening, but the tendency to judge non-native speakers unfavorably according to Eurocentric criteria still exists. Research by Nero has shown English-speaking Caribbean immigrant students in North American colleges and universities are often placed in ESL classes because their English does not conform to the standard. Nero calls this “misplacement” and expresses empathy for such students. “Having no other language than their English to lay claim to, many of these students are genuinely surprised at the perception of their language by outsiders, especially educators, as ‘not quite English’” (Nero 2000: 484). Many of these Caribbean students join remedial English classes because they have difficulty writing analytic essays in North American grammar. The abilities to analyze and argue are highly prized in Western culture. Any member of Western society incapable of argumentation and critical analysis could find him/herself at a serious academic and professional disadvantage. Yet the connection between such skills and the ability to use the English language is questionable.

3.2 Measuring the Athabaskans

In his study of Caribbean students, Nero shows that in North America English does indeed belong to someone and the owner's skin color is white.

Students placed in ESL remedial classes are unable to respond critically to short literary works, perform poorly on standardized tests, and generally come from cultures that do not place such a high priority on English writing skills (Nero 2000: 497). The Athabaskan Native Canadians – even though they are considered native English speakers – would occupy the empty seats in the Caribbean students’ ESL remedial English class, for they have experienced similar difficulties coping with the North American educational system because of their inability to argue and analyze. When an Athabaskan is required to write an essay, he/she experiences “a crisis in ethnic identity” (Gee 1996: 60). What is viewed by modern Western society as a grave deficiency is actually, in the case of the Athabaskans, prudence:

To produce an essay would require the Athabaskan to produce a major display, which would be appropriate only if the Athabaskan was in a position of dominance in relation to the audience. But the audience and the author are fictionalized in essayist prose and the text becomes decontextualized. This means that a contextualized, social relationship of dominance is obscured. Where the relationship of the communicants is unknown, the Athabaskan prefers silence. (Gee 2000: 61)

While showing off one’s abilities is acceptable and even encouraged in modern Western society, traditional Athabaskan culture values the skills of observation and humility, particularly in social subordinates. Consequently English speakers often view Athabaskans as lazy or useless and Athabaskans consider English speakers to be reckless braggarts (Gee 2000: 60).

LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

4.1 Myth and Reality

Studying a foreign language affords learners the opportunity to reflect on their culture and language and broaden their understanding of the world. However the L2 learner may be forced or encouraged to adopt another world view. Several linguists and critics view the “Englishization” (Kachru 1994: 143) of the world positively. This may be a case of making the best of an irreversible situation. Some countries and cultures do feel threatened by English. Rajagopalan, a linguist active in Brazil reports that a year ago in Brazil there was “a certain federal deputy pushing for a bill that, if approved, [would] stipulate severe penalties for the use of languages other than Portuguese in all but a limited set of situations” (Rajagopalan 2000: 5). This way of dealing with the perceived threat of linguistic imperialism is extreme and – provided the bill is defeated – may be shrugged aside. A more insidious and, therefore, serious response to linguistic imperialism exists in Morocco.

4.2 Dealing with Delicate Issues in Morocco

In countries with unstable political and economic situations, such as Morocco, cultural comparisons with Western countries can be threatening. Such comparisons may serve to reinforce stereotypical images of the “haves” versus the “have-nots,” creating ill-feeling towards Westerners and the English language. Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi, writing roughly ten years ago, claimed that in Morocco “the negative stereotypes associated with tourists and with tourist guides make all casual encounters between Moroccans and foreign visitors a hazardous area for textbook writers”

(Adaskou 1990: 8). While these encounters have traditionally been seen by EFL teachers as a source of useful role-play practice, not so in Morocco. They only become acceptable “if treated as amusing portrayals of stereotypes” and if the Moroccan characters are presented in a positive light (Adaskou 1990: 8). It would be improper to criticize Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi for their decision, but it does raise ethical questions about the responsibility any educator has to the truth.

4.3 A Retreat into Fantasy

Adaskou et al. went beyond the simple avoidance of a thorny situation (teaching English through role play and discussing foreign tourists) to actually creating their own EFL fantasy world, which borders on nationalist propaganda. For an EFL course, Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi created a fictional cast of characters that includes “an Anglo-American ménage living in Morocco and their Moroccan friends and neighbours” (Adaskou 1990: 9). The creators admit that

the Moroccan characters in the course are not, of course, fully representative; all are educated town dwellers, mostly students or young professionals—and English-speaking. Their flaws of character are not on the whole as serious as those of some of the foreign characters and, up to now, exam failure and unemployment have befallen only non-Moroccans. (Adaskou 1990: 9)

The course creators’ justification is unsatisfactory. They depict it as “a world to which Moroccan secondary learners can reasonably aspire and with which they can identify without alienation” (Adaskou 1990: 9). But one wonders if the learners are expected to view this fantasy world as an

irony, a comedy, or the way of the future. There does not seem to be any reason to expect Morocco – or any other country, for that matter – to become the perfect society in which everyone passes their examinations and finds employment. By exposing foreigners to unjustified criticism, Adaskou et al. not only dodged the issue, they attempted to redress imperialistic wrongs through a propaganda project disguised as a language course.

4.4 Demystifying Linguistic Imperialism

A much more constructive way of viewing the proliferation of English internationally is to see EFL as an opportunity to share information. “Learning about another culture does not mean that one must accept that culture,” warns McKay, adding that “interculturalism rather than biculturalism should be the goal” of the EIL classroom (McKay 2000: 8). McKay stresses that L2 teachers must not impose mental structures on learners. “The teaching of culture needs to focus on giving students knowledge about, rather than suggesting they accept, particular cultural values and beliefs” (McKay 2000: 10–11). Others, such as Bisong (2000), dismiss the charge that the spread of English leads to linguistic imperialism out of hand. Bisong points to Africa’s political past for support of his thesis that it is not possible to tell another culture to think or behave in a Western way:

Nearly all the former fledgling western democracies in sub-Saharan Africa have either been taken over by military regimes or have become one party states. In other words, democracy as a western institution has failed. The lesson? Only a genuinely African arrangement that satisfies the yearnings of the majority of the people in any country will last. That arrangement may indeed include elements from western culture, but the basic structure will be African. (Bisong 2000: 128)

The adoption of Western intellectual and social systems does not work in many contexts, such as the one described by Bisong. Rather than rejecting Western thought and culture, or tampering with reality (as Adaskou et al. did), EFL learners need to view language learning as an opportunity to reflect on their own society and culture.

4.5 English Empowers

By learning a second language, one stands to gain. Kachru argues that English is an empowering tool rather than an imperialistic weapon: “the bilingual [writer’s] creativity is the result of a textual and contextual blend of two literary and cultural canons—that of the ‘native’ language and culture and that of the ‘other’ tongue. The result of this bi-ness is another canon of creativity” (Kachru 1995: 285). Creativity aside, one’s ability to understand international affairs is severely limited without a working knowledge of English. The majority of Internet information is in English. Business travellers at any international hotel in the world can watch CNN International news or BBC World. L2 learners should not feel compelled to accept or reject American or British ways of viewing the world. Rather, they provide food for thought and reflection on one’s mental and social structure.

EXPLODING THE MYTH OF DEMOCRACY

5.1 English Speakers Are Polite Too

One popular myth about English among Japanese learners is that the language possesses no polite forms and is therefore more democratic than other languages. While it is true that English speakers no longer use “thou” and that there has been a shift from emphasizing status to solidarity

(Holmes 1992: 303), English possesses numerous conventions allowing speakers to show respect and make distinctions in social rank. Negative or circuitous interrogative forms like, “would it be possible . . .” or “if it isn’t too much trouble . . .” do exist and are used daily. Holmes remarks that “in many eastern and Asian societies, the emphasis remains on status differences. Being polite involves using language which recognizes relative status very explicitly” (Holmes 1992: 303). Although solidarity may be held up as an ideal in Western societies, it is hardly the reality. One is likely to offend by speaking as though everyone were social equals. As Holmes herself admits, “being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of their relationship to you” (Holmes 1992: 296). Many difficulties arise in English because of the absence of rules on forms of address. “Knowing how to address your father-in-law (or mother-in-law) has often been a problem for many people,” Wardhaugh points out. (The *italics* are the author’s.) “*Mr. Smith* is sometimes felt to be too formal, *Bill* too familiar, and *Dad* pre-empted or even ‘unnatural’” (Wardhaugh 1998: 266). The lack of a “thou” form in contemporary English and the further lack of knowledge of polite forms among low-level L2 learners has contributed to the myth of English as a democratic language.

5.2 Japanese Views

The returnee population is surprisingly large and growing. “About 13,000 students have been returning to Japan each year in the past 10 years, and there are almost 50,000 students still living abroad” (Matsuda 2000: 50). Japanese students who study English abroad frequently idealize the situation in foreign countries and the English language. Because these students have been freed from the strictures of Japanese society, they view English as the language of freedom. And because they, as foreign guests, are often

not held responsible for linguistic or social blunders, English comes to be seen as free and irresponsible. In Matsuda's study (2000) of four returnee university students, misconceptions of English become alarmingly clear, though, ironically, not to Matsuda herself, who is strictly concerned with the extent to which returnees use English for communicative purposes within Japan.

5.3 You Can't Say That in Japanese

All four returnees claimed to use English on a daily basis with other Japanese who had also experienced long stays abroad. One student said she could use sarcasm in English as a "sign of friendship" but did not make sarcastic remarks in her native tongue because "it's not acceptable in Japanese society" (Matsuda 2000: 52). Another returnee noted the insincerity of English: "I might use English if I don't really feel like apologizing. A Japanese apology sounds more sincere" (Matsuda 2000: 52). One wonders where these cultural assumptions that Westerners are sarcastic and insincere come from. The further one reads in Matsuda's study, the more it becomes clear that what the returnees are really talking about is the freedom of the linguistic outsider with few social obligations. Japanese is "softer" than English, and, thus, appropriate for making requests. English, meanwhile, is the right choice when talking about "things between men and women" because "Americans are more open about those things" (Matsuda 2000: 52). All stereotypes contain grains of truth. Stereotypical views of English as liberated, insincere, sarcastic, and sexually-charged are widely accepted, as the linguist Matsuda's surprisingly simplistic conclusion proves: "research on code-switching and bilingualism have illustrated that code-switching is not only a useful communicative strategy but also a vital form of self-expression for bilinguals" (Matsuda 2000: 53). And yet the

returnees' own comments show that they use English to escape from the pressures of reality, not for communication at all. She then goes on to say that her study “challenge [s] the common belief that English in Japan is not used for intranational communication” (Matsuda 2000: 54). As seen in the Morocco example, English is sometimes (ab)used for the construction and perpetuation of a fantasy world. Perhaps both the Moroccan educators and Japanese returnee students are merely responding to perceived threats to their own identities posed by English or the West by neatly labeling and defining linguistic roles.

5.4 English and Sexism

Far from being democratic, English is highly sexist. The debate about the gender of the Christian God still continues in many circles. On the terrestrial level there are studies to show that fewer lexical items exist in English for women than for men. Moreover, the number of promiscuous terms reserved for women is estimated to be ten times greater than the number of equivalent terms for men (Spender 1984: 195). Hodge and Kress (1993) make a similar point in their discussion of gender and the English language. Ships and cars are considered female, yet women appear to use the feminine forms less often than men. Small cars may be assigned masculine gender, like the Walt Disney movie about Herbie, a self-driving Volkswagen, “masculine, but diminutive.” The Herbie case is an example of a covert gender system, “a set of sexual associations for a culture . . . which is learned and displayed indirectly” (Hodge and Kress 1993: 80). English, then, is just as sexist as any other language. Due to the strides made by feminism and political correctness, and the consequent backlashes against both movements, overt examples of sexist language have been criticized and, in many cases, changed. The universal “man,” for example,

is rarely used now to refer to humanity. But it would be a mistake to say that English is democratic in light of the abundance of sexist language that remains unaltered.

5.5 English and Elitism

Throughout the world, English is viewed as the L2 learner's ticket to elite society. While the linguistic system may not, to quote Crystal (1997), "express an intricate system of class relationships," the L2 learners themselves constitute such a system. From the early 1900's in Singapore, when two medical colleges and a liberal arts college opened, "English-medium education was increasingly recognized by some sections of the community—especially among the upwardly mobile urban Chinese and Indians—as a prerequisite for higher-paid employment and the professions" (Platt 1984: 388). In Nigeria, parents continue to send their children to English-medium schools because, while they hope their children will become bilingual, they are also "not unmindful of the advantages that might accrue from the acquisition of competence in English" (Bisong 1995: 125). In Sarawak, Malaysia, even after independence from colonial rule was gained, the use of English was "not easy to erase. There were the benefits of English-medium education in the form of overseas scholarships and career advancements, and Sarawakians with an English educational background did not want to lose their elite status" (Ting 2001: 55). And finally, in studies of the use of Creole among Afro-Caribbean blacks in Britain, the view of RP English as the language of the elite emerges again.

For a job interview or a visit to the doctor [the Afro-Caribbean blacks] are likely to select forms nearer the Standard end of the continuum (though probably with the appropriate local accent), whereas in play or

argument with younger members of the family or with a black peer group they are likely to select forms nearer the Creole end of the continuum. (Montgomery 1995: 85)

In sum, English as an international language is highly undemocratic. It actually serves to maintain the status quo. Those with the means to learn standard Western English believe that they will be able to climb the social ladder and receive financial remuneration for their efforts. Those members without the means to receive such an education may find themselves discriminated against precisely because their knowledge of the language of the elite is insufficient, or their usage is too far removed from the standard.

ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

6.1 English and Intelligence in Japan

The spread of English around the globe is not a threat. It is a reality. Unfortunately, the purpose of English study is often misunderstood. In Japan, English is studied for neither communicative purposes nor cultural reflection. Rather, the language has been reduced to a series of grammatical rules that form the basis for an intelligence test. In 1987 Kaplan claimed that the English language was “not used for any practical purpose in [Japan],” but that after World War II Japan “established for itself the goal to be among the world’s leaders in the emerging knowledge industry by 1993,” and says that the country was “moving aggressively to accomplish that objective” (Kaplan 1987: 142). This political agenda hardly seems justification for forcing an entire nation to memorize obscure grammar points for entrance examinations. In fact, Japanese teachers and students

alike do not seem to understand why so much time and money is devoted to English education. Matsuda's study of Japanese returnee students shows that this sector of the Japanese population uses English for daily communication, though these students do not really depend on their knowledge of English. It is closer to a secret, slightly wicked code, known only by a privileged few, than it is a *lingua franca* for these students.

6.2 English: the Language of Money, Not Communication

To show how many different ways English operates internationally, one might compare the situation in Japan and Singapore. A survey of "claimed use of English within the family" taken twenty-five years ago in Singapore showed that English was widely used for communicative purposes. 96.2 percent of the respondents aged 33-55 reported using English with their children, while only 23.5 percent did so with their fathers and only 5.6 percent with their mothers (Platt 1984: 390). The use of English for communicative purposes by the younger generation clearly distinguishes Singapore from countries such as Japan and Korea, where the language is dissected or used ornamentally in song titles and advertisements. During the previous discussion of democracy I attempted to show that international English is not the language of the people. On the contrary, it has become synonymous with money and status. Cran, MacNeil, and McCrum make the same observation about Japanese English:

All major corporations advertise and market their products in English. Nowhere is this more dramatically apparent than in present-day Japan. Of all things that Japan has imported from the West (to which Tokyo advertising bears witness), few have had as great an impact as English words. (Cran, MacNeil, and McCrum 1992: 37).

CONCLUSION

7.1 Fighting Against Economics

As the importance of English grows, so does its mythology. It is no longer just a language but has become an escape from reality, a political necessity, a cultural ambassador, a financial opportunity, and a set of human values. Not one of these tags is appropriate or can withstand scrutiny. However myth and deception have become the justification for a business and that business is the selling of English education. EFL and ESL teachers have a serious responsibility to sell their students on the true benefits of foreign- or second- language study. By understanding another means of self-expression we understand ourselves, and our own culture, a little better. This alone makes language study worthwhile.

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