

Teaching English as Culture: Paradigm Shifts in Postcolonial Discourse

Eugene C. Eoyang

The teaching of an 'imperialist' language like English in a postcolonial era presents not only unprecedented difficulties to the teacher, it also raises disconcerting questions about the paradigms underlying the concepts of language, language teaching, and culture. This new perspective renders inadequate, on the one hand, the pedaling linguistic categories of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language), and, on the other, the postcolonial critique in general of hegemonic languages.

To address the second issue first, there is some confusion in the object of attack in the postcolonial demonization of hegemonic language, a confusion between 'English' referring to the language, and 'English' referring to the people and culture of Great Britain. Clearly the ideological assault against English is now a misnomer, because most of the hostility toward globalization is no longer directed against the English (who have ceased to command an empire on which the sun never sets), but rather against the United States, and against that branch of 'Ameringlish' which dominates the world through the pervasive influence of the US media. English, nowadays, is no longer as English as the English.

The first issue, of conceiving the project of English being taught as a foreign language (EFL) or as a second language (ESL), significantly misprizes the situation, since English, with its global reach, is often not an entirely closed book to its learners, and students are not being taught English as either a foreign or as a second language. Another category needs to be recognized, to which I give the acronym TUE, which stands for 'Teaching Unbroken English'. For the purposes of my own analysis, I focus on my experience teaching English in Hong Kong, before and after 1997, during the end of the colonial and the beginning of the postcolonial era.

As I have indicated in an earlier essay (Eoyang, 1999), it is both true and untrue that English is a global language. If by 'global language' we infer that everyone in the world is fluent in English, that is, of course, far from the truth. If we hedge and

Copyright © ICPHS 2003

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com
0392-1921 [200305]50:2;3-16;032894

say that some form of English is used more than any other language as the lingua franca in the world, no one, I think, would object. I agree with the Japanese businessman who rejected the claim that English was the global language: 'English is not the global language,' he said. 'Broken English is the global language.'

Background

The challenge of teaching students 'unbroken' English – when they have spent years acquiring broken English – is radically different from teaching English as a foreign, or even as a second language. Much more attention needs to be paid to repair the student's faulty command of English, which requires, in many cases, the dispiriting and difficult necessity of breaking bad habits – often of many years standing. One sometimes wishes for students who are totally ignorant of the language – a complete *tabula rasa* is more inscribable than a page that has been scribbled on already. Even this already complicated situation is exacerbated by the impossibility of determining which RP (Received Practice) one should hold up as the standard: British English, US English, Irish English, Scottish English, Australian English? In some respects the proficient learner of English must be equipped to deal with at least these variants, let alone the varieties of English which one encounters and which may be variously incomprehensible to different ears – Jamaican English, Indian English, South African English, etc. The modern teacher of English faces a dilemma which did not trouble his or her predecessor. In the past, teaching English meant teaching the King's (or the Queen's) English; it meant teaching the literature written in English by English authors; and it meant indoctrinating the student to being, in fact, English. Now, one has to take notice of the English of the American dialects, whether in the rustic colloquialisms of Mark Twain's *Missouri*, the southern cadences of William Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha County*, the Caribbean accents of a Derek Walcott, the urban Chicago patois of Saul Bellow's *Augie March*, the Harlem locutions of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the lilting cadences of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Nor can we confine ourselves exclusively to the literature of Great Britain and the United States, since English now includes the plays of the Nigerian Wole Soyinka, the novels of his compatriot Chinua Achebe, the drama of the white South African Athol Fugard as well as of the Black African Ngugi Wa Thiongo, whose early work was written in English under the name of James Ngugi. Then there are the exiles who write in English, including V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Nor should we overlook the expatriate writers who adopted English after producing distinguished work in their original languages: they would include Vladimir Nabokov (Russian), Czelaw Milosz (Polish), Isaac Bashevis Singer (Hebrew) and Joseph Brodsky (Russian) – the last three Nobel laureates.

If English as a subject is no longer what it is, the objectives in teaching English can no longer be the same. There is no one model to emulate, but many, and we are not training students to be pseudo-Englishmen and Englishwomen, but rather to avail themselves of the advantages of literacy in English. Notice I did not say that our objective was to teach students to achieve fluency in English, but literacy. By literacy, I mean not only the ability to read, but also cultural literacy, the ability to understand

the structure of English and the context of meaning from which it stems and on which it depends. Here, the temptation, the easy assumption is to consider teaching English as a tool. But there is a problem with that instrumentalist metaphor, because it suggests a bloodless functionality, in which there is no investment of cultural capital, only the recognition of dispassionate utility. But, as I have said on another occasion, 'a language must be earned more than it is learned'.¹

If a student expects that English as a language can be learned with the same dispatch as, say, a computer language like COBOL, PASCAL, or LISP, then s/he is misjudging the enterprise at hand, for the learning of a language also requires the 'earning of its culture'. Human languages are different from scientific languages: where scientific languages, properly acquired, are objective in significance and are largely culture-free, human languages, properly acquired, are subjective in their effect and are largely culture-bound. Unless the student negotiates the terms of linguistic currency in a specific culture, s/he will never appreciate the values in that culture and will never fully understand the cultural experience that the language embodies. It is neither a failure in pedagogy nor a failure of the learner that so many students of a foreign language confess that they've had three years of instruction and have retained no facility in that language. The enterprise of language teaching has been founded on a basic misunderstanding – of teaching language as a tool rather than as an experience. If language exists only in context, as Michael Halliday has insisted, language teaching must also exist in context, as Claire Kramsch points out (see Halliday and Hasan, 1985; Kramsch, 1993). The era of learning a language by merely 'mastering' its grammar, as many polymaths used to do, reflects a western – one might say Chomskian – ethnocentricity, which assumes that the essence of language is in the grammar, that all languages depend on grammar to the same degree, and that all grammar is universal. It is possible to know a language in detail, particularly its 'grammar', and still to understand nothing about the spirit or the mindset of the culture.²

Learning a language is not like learning mathematics or physics, where, once acquired and understood, the formulas are available for use at any future date. Their utility remains constant. The content of what is learned doesn't change, nor does its utility. Language, however, is an entirely different matter: the content of language, not to mention the style, does change, and 'mastery' does not depend on understanding a static vision of a culture, it lies in the constant and repeated exercise of discourse in the language. It cannot be recalled in the same way as riding a bicycle can be recalled after many years of inactivity. Even native speakers lose a grasp of their mother tongue if they haven't used it in an extended period of time. Unlike abstract and context-free subjects, language command depends on habitual use, not on cognitive understanding. What needs to be taught in teaching languages is not formulas or equations or theorems but habits of mind and ways of thinking. The difference between command over a subject and mastery of a language is that the first is self-conscious and analytical, and the second is reflexive and subconscious. The goal in language learning is not analytical understanding of language structure, which is what linguists study and which most native speakers are happily ignorant of, but a reflexive familiarity with forms of discourse. Language teaching is more training than teaching, more motivation than explanation, more conditioning than

understanding. The 'whys' of analytical skepticism – the hallmark of intelligence in other areas of inquiry and research – are impediments to the subliminal accommodations to a foreign tongue. To speak a language is not to argue with its oddities or perversities.³

But mere mimicry of behaviour cannot be the training that is required of second- and foreign-language learners, for the simple and practical reason that adults are not the geniuses at imitation that infants are. The 'language earner' has to make commitments of time and effort to the culture whose language is being acquired. I am always puzzled why people are frustrated that they cannot learn a foreign language – say, Chinese – over a weekend, or over several weekends. When I ask how long it took them to learn English, the answer is, usually, all my life. Precisely, I respond. Why should someone else's language be easier to learn than one's own? The undoubted time constraints of the learner do not determine the requirements of authentic lived experience that effective language acquisition demands.

Language assumptions

What then can be taught to adult learners if the experience of growing up in another language is not feasible? Residence in the foreign language culture would be, for most people, the answer. But it is only half an answer, because it never specifies the length of residency. Implicitly, most people define the length of residency as a short visit, or a summer, or perhaps even a year; they do not normally think of an extended stay. This notion of language acquisition might be labeled the 'osmosis' myth of learning a language, which believes that merely to dip oneself in it is enough, and that, by some form of osmosis, competence in the alien language will rub off and be internalized. This scenario is, in fact, so far from reality as to be misleading. Even a residence of one year would be, for most people, inadequate to form the basis for sound language acquisition: the first half year will be a period of inevitable culture shock; perhaps only in the second half of the first year will a foreign visitor begin to make progress – that is, provided a conscientious effort is made to intermingle with the natives and to use the indigenous language at all times. If mere residence and osmosis were all that's required to learn a foreign language, then it would be impossible to explain the thousands of expatriates who inhabit a country for decades and develop no fluency in the native language. There are ways of being in a foreign country without being in a foreign country, as one can see from the British enclaves throughout the world during the glory days of the British Empire, and today from the vast US Army bases throughout the world which constitute 'Little Americas' totally isolated from the 'alienness' of the native culture. Residence on site is no guarantee of enhanced language proficiency if there is no comprehensive interaction with the speakers of the local language. In this connection, the phenomenon known as 'globalization' – deplored by postcolonial radicals and advocates of local cultures and ethnicities – is a boon to the teacher of English, because the pervasiveness of the media (movies and television) and the ubiquity of commercial products promoted in English provide the learner of English with reinforcing realia that can be useful in the classroom. Culture, then, defined as

linguistically related artifacts, constructions and situations, becomes the context which must inform the lessons of the language learner attempting to master the grammatical structure of the language. Locutions have no validity outside of a real-life relevance and force, which is why 'textbook' instruction will always fail, especially those 'textbook' lessons which inauthentically try to imitate life situations. The student needs to be equipped with a particular appreciation of the congeries and the configurations peculiar to the language being studied, whether it's the simple word order in English and Chinese; the *keigo*, polite terms of hierarchical deference in Japanese; the deferred verb sequence in German and Japanese; the flexible word order in Latin which is made possible because the syntax relationships are, for the most part, unambiguous. These characteristic individual traits of each language should be highlighted, if not emphasized and appreciated, as a 'key' to the spirit and the mindset of the language. A student who understands these cultural paradigms will go a long way towards understanding the spirit of the language and the way it approaches reality. In this respect, Benjamin Lee Whorf and his theory of the non-interchangeability of languages was not wrong: he was merely massively misinterpreted. Another point about culture is that, unlike the technicalities of grammar, which have no interest for natives, and little fascination for learners, culture and the peculiarities of a particular culture are endlessly fascinating, particularly for people who come from a different perspective. Culture can be taught as content, and can be – as the discipline of Cultural Studies, among others, has demonstrated – analysed and deconstructed engagingly. The study of culture becomes a part of language study, not only as a separable context in which the 'text' of language is to be understood, but as an integral part of language itself. Indeed, it is exactly when language is conceived of as independent of culture, and set apart from the idiosyncrasies of culture, that misunderstandings will occur. The innumerable gaffes in translation that are repeatedly cited by cross-cultural observers are sufficient testimony to language learning devoid of context. These are always amusing to the native speakers, because familiar phrases take unexpected turns when rendered in a foreign tongue and then translated back. Semantic confusion is inevitable when the very essence of language and its relationship to culture is so glaringly misunderstood. Another content area that might be helpful in reinforcing language acquisition efforts might be called 'language axiomatics', i.e. what is peculiarly important in one language as opposed to what is salient in another. One example would be the emphasis on gender in many European languages, and the lack of gender phonemes in English, say, or Chinese. Another would be the requirement of distinguishing between four options in the use of articles – none, definite, indefinite, and plural – in English.⁴

My favorite illustration of the importance of specifying or not specifying nouns in English is the following: 'truth'; 'a truth', 'the truth', 'truths'; this can be permuted even further with the use of capitals, which offer: 'Truth', 'a Truth', 'the Truth', 'Truths'. Each of these has its own nuance in English, which the foreign student of English will find difficult to disambiguate. The question is whether it's the fault of the language, in creating distinctions without a difference, or of the student, in being incapable of understanding actual distinctions. Although custom and usage tend to suggest the latter, my inclination is to believe the former: these distinctions appear particularly factitious when attempts are made to translate them into languages (say,

Chinese) where the patterns of specification are not so rigid or so explicit. There are different defaults in English and Chinese: in English, the tendency is to specify, which means that specifications are either logical or conventional; whereas in Chinese, one specifies only as needed, and the omission of specification is not, as it is in English, generically missed. (That's why the misuse and the neglect of articles is a recurrent mistake among Chinese learners of English.) Every language has its idiosyncrasies, just as every speaker of any language has his or her idiolect. Indeed, the ironic challenge of language learning is not to copy a native speaker, but rather to gain sufficient control of the language so that one can find one's own individuality in its employment. In any event, psycholinguistically, the non-native speaker must not aspire to perfect imitation, because mimicry only implies inauthenticity, both to the self-conscious producer of the language and to the native interlocutor. Native speakers do not apologize for departing from the norm: indeed, they relish inventing their own variations on the common theme. Yet, languages are not neutral conveyors of meaning: they embody their own history, their own point of view, their specific perspective. It has been observed that speaking a different language elicits from the speaker a different personality, or at least a different aspect of the same personality. I am not here trying to typecast languages – British English reserved; American English direct; Italian demonstrative; French intellectual; German explosive; Chinese inscrutable, etc. Any language can accommodate any number of temperaments and personal styles. But to assume that all languages are equally bland and colorless – like a perfectly transparent pane of glass – is to miss what is interesting and undeniably unique about each language.

To conceptualize different languages in a way that captures both their transparency and their unique character, I like to think of them as different prisms through which one can view the world. Each speaker can see the light refracted in this prism, but what is refracted may vary from prism to prism. Each prism offers a different perspective: different realities will be viewed in different ways through different prisms. At the cognitive level, this point has already been established in English by the work of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner which focuses on how basic metaphors and paradigms of thought in English subsume a particular mindset (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The different cultural valuations of what should be neutral – the four cardinal orientations of up, down, left, and right – offer ample illustration: up and down are neutral indicators of direction, but culturally there can be no disagreement that 'up' in English is more often positive and 'down' is more often negative.⁵

There are, of course, exceptions, as when one is told that the temperature of someone feverish is going down. More common, however, are the 'upturns' in the economy; the 'ups' in one's moods; the progress onwards and 'upwards'; the fact that heaven is 'up' (above), and hell is 'down' (below). Some of these biases are shared by different cultures, but others are not. The negative associations with the word 'left' and the positive associations – particularly manifest in French ('droit') as well as English – are too well known to be rehearsed here. Cultural differences in the valuation (to say nothing of the perception) of color deserve wider recognition. The associations of the color white, for example, are not universally the same. The symbol of innocence and purity in the West, white is more closely associated with

death and annihilation in the Far East. Nor are words like 'emptiness' without their different cultural valuations. Generally pejorative in English (except with a poet like Wallace Stevens), it is a symbol of fecund potentiality in key Taoist and Buddhist texts (see Eoyang, 1985).

In an age of westernized (more specifically Americanized) globalization, the word 'new' is valued more positively than 'old'. (This is no coincidence: in a world where capitalism exploits, if it does not entirely require, rampant consumerism, the incentive to buy will always be stimulated with the word 'new' than with the word 'old'; and 'save' in capitalistic cultures means not to keep one's money, but to spend it – on supposed bargains.) 'Modernization' embodies an unmitigated emphasis on the 'new'. 'Tradition', as a word and as a concept, persists more in Asia than in the modernized West, where, again more often than not, it is something to be overthrown: 'traditional thinking' is hardly a compliment in English.

The prism model suggests that the object is not to find semantic equivalents in negotiating a foreign language; it is rather to adopt a different cultural mindset, to make another language virtually second nature. The mechanical acquisition of rules (rules which native speakers are scarcely aware of) is likely to make the student more rather than less self-conscious, more rather than less at ease in a foreign language. (The intuitive and tacit inculcation of these rules is, of course, another matter.) Above all, teaching students to see through the English prism (or the French, or the Chinese), is a way to avoid the bane of language acquisition – which is translation, either into or out of one's native language. And the bane in the reading of foreign texts is the annoying and interminable need to look up words in a bilingual dictionary, sometimes repeatedly searching for the same word.⁶

The view of the world through a language prism reminds the language learner that the enterprise does not involve translating foreign concepts into native vocabulary, but of understanding foreign concepts natively. Therefore, the task of the teacher is not merely teaching students how to speak differently but also of explaining how they might, to a real extent, think differently. The successful language teacher effects a kind of metempsychosis, where the student is transformed into another version of him/herself. Let me offer a few examples relating to English. The first we might label as 'war is the solution to everything'. In the 1960s, under President Johnson, there was a 'War on Poverty'; since the 1970s, there has been a 'War on Drugs'. In the aftermath of the demolition of the two towers of the World Trade Center, there is a 'War on Terrorism'. Underlying this mindset is a Manichaeian view of reality, reinforced by President George W. Bush's characterization of the opponents in this war as 'Good' and 'Evil'. I will leave unremarked the impropriety, if not the impiety, of America casting itself in the role of Good, and concentrate merely on the vision of the world as comprising categorical opposites, two mutually exclusive entities, and of the annihilation of the demonized adversary as the ultimate solution to any problem. There is a logical and an ontological problem with this categorical separation of opposites as a depiction of reality. In fact, history has proved that a Manichaeian view of the world is not accurate, nor even very useful. During the Second World War, the USSR was a powerful ally against Hitler and the Nazis, but shortly afterwards it became the devil incarnate, labeled by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s as 'the evil Empire'. In the 1970s, America and Americans were

taken hostage by Iran, which was demonized as the epitome of evil: among Iran's many enemies was Iraq, which then became, in the Manichaean scheme of things which allows for only two possibilities, an ally, on the so-called side of the Good, and an enemy, on the so-called side of the Bad. Yet, in the early 1990s, during the Gulf War, it was Iraq who became the enemy. From this angle, America had difficulty befriending Iran, Iraq's long-time enemy, as an ally, but it also could not entirely oppose Iran, since the US and Iran shared a common enemy. In the all-or-nothing logic of Manichaean categorization, one can be either a friend or an enemy, but not both. But the enemy of my enemy is not always my friend, and these complexities of reality appear not to fit with the mutually exclusive categories that dominate American thinking.

These ruminations are, unfortunately, not merely of historical interest. In the aftermath of the shocking attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, George W. Bush spoke ill-advisedly of mounting a 'crusade' against terrorism, ignorant of the fact that the Crusades did not represent the finest moment of western history, and blind to the fact that his use of the word 'Crusade' is no less offensive to non-Christians (including the Jews) than when Islamic fundamentalists use the word 'jihad' or 'holy war'. It is hardly surprising that Osama bin Laden should respond precisely with the Islamic counterpart: he called for a 'jihad' against Bush's 'crusade'. Only ethnocentricity blinds itself to the fact that, to those we consider evil, we too are – rightly or wrongly – demonized as evil. Only self-important piety assumes that one's own claims to justice are valid, while claims by others are invalid. Another aspect of American culture is reflected in a detail of language: the fact that the word for 'conation' – reflecting volition and desire – is identical to the auxiliary verb indicating the future tense. 'I will this pain to disappear' and 'I will be going to school' reflect two different predicates, which the sense of each sentence disambiguates. In the first case, 'will' is an active verb that takes a direct object; in the second case, 'will' is an auxiliary stative verb. There is little possibility of confusion here. However, if we say 'I will succeed', the overt sense is a comment about the future, but an emphasis on 'will' carries not a little sense of determination and resolve. Perhaps the association between the word for conation and the marker of the future tense is a linguistic oddity (certainly, one does not find the same coincidence in other languages), and the conjunction of the two meanings in the same word a mere happenstance, but surely there is at least a subliminal effect of this conjunction on the characteristically 'can-do' outlook that Americans direct toward the future – an outlook not quite so widespread in Asian cultures, where the recognition of destiny and inescapable fate is much stronger. What I am saying is not restricted to the word 'will': the older, and more British, form of the auxiliary verb marking the future tense, 'shall', has no phonetic or orthographic resemblance to 'will', but it can also be infused with a sense of resolution – especially when intoned in Churchillian cadences. When General Douglas MacArthur said, memorably, 'I shall return!' as he left the Philippines in the Second World War, he was not only making a dispassionate prediction, he was also indicating the depth of his resolve. His 'shall' indicated both conation and the future tense.

Pedagogical challenges

In a postcolonial and postmodern era, the use of English affords perhaps as many advantages as it poses difficulties. Concerning its advent as a global lingua franca, there is as much to deplore as to celebrate. There is a tendency, particularly among native English speakers and not a few benighted stalwarts of business, to think that the pervasive use of English obviates the need to learn other languages or to understand other cultures. The more enlightened, however, realize that multilinguality is a must for world-class executives. Indeed, a significant proportion of the CEOs of top Fortune 500 companies command more than one language, with substantial experience in more than one culture. The policy of accounting firm Deloitte, Touche, and Tohmatsu is to actively promote international experiences among their employees, particularly those with executive potential.⁷

Of course, the East–West combination of the company’s title already bespeaks an international perspective at the very core of its leadership, not merely a western corporation that is adding ‘token’ Asian representation at the highest levels. There is the danger that the widespread use of English may be confused with the tendency toward globalization. The ‘triumphalist’ rhetoric of some commentators (usually Anglocentric) does not help to reassure ‘second’ and ‘third world’ cultures that the use of English is not merely a 21st-century version of the hegemonic practices of British imperialism of the 19th century, with the only difference that English is now predominantly American English, and that the hegemons of the 21st century are the Americans rather than the English. It would indeed be unfortunate if English as a lingua franca, far from being merely a facilitator of communication between peoples, were to become a factor in the erasure of all cultures other than the Anglo-American.

But if the ‘triumphalist’ view of English as a global language is misleading and unhelpful, so is the imputation that English is a reflection of the evils of globalization. Such a view would overlook the salient fact that the very authors of post-colonial theory – whether Antonio Gramsci or Michel Foucault or Edward Said – were first written, published and read in so-called ‘hegemonic’ European languages (Italian, French, English). Indeed, without these languages, it is questionable that the world would be as alert as it is to the evils of cultural imperialism. Nor would the ethnicities of various non-hegemonic cultures – whether those of the Indian subcontinent (*vide* Raja Rao, Rabindranath Tagore), the Caribbean (Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul), Africa (Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, James Ngugi, if not Ngugi Wa Thiongo) – be as well known in the world as they are.

On a day-to-day instructional level, one must ask which regional accent to accept as ‘Received Practice’? Does one insist that the flat ‘a’ of the Australian version of ‘I came today’ – which sounds to the American like ‘I came to die’ – is wrong or sub-standard? How wide must the latitude of ‘received practice’ be? Is only Oxbridge pronunciation acceptable, but not Cockney? And should a New York accent be privileged over a Bostonian? Despite the textbook mythology of ‘standard pronunciation’, the reality remains that there are as many ‘dialects’ of English as there are regions in which English is spoken. There is a lilt in Singaporean English which makes it awkward to understand for listeners not accustomed to it. And there have been personal conflicts between New Zealanders and Americans that stem from the

inability of Americans to understand New Zealand pronunciation – although the prevalence of American pronunciation throughout the world makes it more comprehensible to speakers of dialectal English. These empirical complexities and confusions and inequalities are not without pedagogical consequences. There is no theoretical adjudication that will survive classroom experience, and one must resort to circumstantial convenience. To insist on Oxbridge English in Australia, or to require American pronunciation in India, would be a pedagogical impropriety sure to stir resentment in the local student. Yet, on the global scene, it may be necessary to train the ear to accept a wide latitude of phonetic variation if English is to be truly a lingua franca. The last thing one needs is a lingua franca which is variously incomprehensible to different speakers. We need to dispel our Anglocentric prejudices in pronunciation. For example, I once asked Hong Kong examination students the name of the rival poet in the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, expecting the answer to be Marlowe. The students had read no Elizabethan literature aside from a few sonnets of Shakespeare, and of course knew nothing of the history of that era. When I collected the examinations and encountered ‘Ma-lo’ instead of ‘Marlowe’, I was on the verge of censuring this illiterate spelling as incorrect. Yet, I recalled that, as I had not assigned any plays of Christopher Marlowe and the students had no way of identifying in writing who the rival playwright was, ‘Ma-lo’ was as phonetically correct as it was fair to expect. (And, to correct spelling before spelling was standardized would not only be anachronistic but wrong.) So, although ‘Ma-lo’ would not have been acceptable in a course on Elizabethan drama taught in the United Kingdom or the United States, ‘Ma-lo’, as the Chinese equivalent, had to be accepted in Hong Kong.

Cultural prejudices in the use of English abound. In his Preface to *Myth, Literature, and the African World* Wole Soyinka tells the story that, as a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge in 1973, he offered a series of lectures on ‘Literature and Society’, under the aegis not of the Department of English but the Department of Social Anthropology. Evidently the Department of English, according to Soyinka, did not ‘believe in any such mythical beast as “African Literature”’ (1976: vii). ‘I was,’ Soyinka comments with due postmodern irony, ‘paradoxically, quite sympathetic to the dilemma of the English Literature traditionalists. They at least have not gone so far as to deny the existence of an African world – only its literature and, perhaps, its civilisation’ (vii–viii). Soyinka, of course, publishes his plays in English and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.

The defenders of Standard English who celebrate the apotheosis of English as a Darwinian progressivist evolution to excellence, applaud the change that led to the apotheosis and deplore the change with which that ‘apotheosis’ is threatened. As Marnie Holborow has written: ‘Standard English is seen as arising from centuries of civilization and culture. . . . Standard English is presented as being the repository of all that is British, British par excellence’ (1993: 153). Holborow quotes, to telling effect, both James Murray, the Victorian lexicographer and Enoch Powell, the modern arch-conservative. Murray saw Standard English as ‘the race of English words which is to form the dominant speech of the world’ (154); and Powell insisted: that ‘Others may speak and read English – more or less – but it is our language and not theirs. It was made in England by the English and it remains our distinctive

property, however widely it is learnt or used' (154). The racist and nationalist overtones of these statements can hardly be underestimated. But underlying them, as Holborow and others have pointed out, is a myth about language as a static, unchanging entity (the word 'standard' tends to reinforce a fixed, absolutist notion of language). Part of this virulent bias privileges written English over spoken English, and dismisses dialects as of no account. The postcolonial teacher of English, to avoid ethnocentrically favoring one standard of pronunciation over another, has to acknowledge that 'Received Practice' is a great deal more variegated than it was in the past. Not only regional accents, but regional expressions seep into the language – whether it's 'Bollywood' from south India, 'billabong' or 'fair dinkum' or 'bushranger' from Australia. All of these expressions are listed in the *Encarta Concise World Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. And, as so-called 'foreign' cultures become 'ethnic' in the United States and the United Kingdom, the world's culture becomes part of the English language. The vocabulary of diplomacy reflects the French influence in international statemanship, with words like *détente*, *attaché*, *aide-de-camp*, *coup d'état*, *communiqué*, *espionage*, *sabotage*, etc. The multitude of ethnic cuisines available in the United States and the United Kingdom, in more or less authentic forms, include the familiar *pizza* and *lasagna*, but also *dim sum* from China, *kimchi* from Korea, *sushi* and *sashimi* from Japan, *fajitas* and *tacos* from Mexico, *nan*, *poppadom* (var. *popadum*, *popadam*) and *samosas* from India, and, of course, *baguette* and *croissant* from France. (All these staples of ethnic cuisine are listed in the 2001 *Encarta Concise English Dictionary*, but *fajitas* and *samosas* do not yet appear in the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.) The teaching of English in a postcolonial and postmodern age is fraught with pitfalls, with respect to the populations being taught, and to the presumed notion of 'Received Practice', which is more chimerical than ever before. We are faced not with one English language, but with 'World Englishes'. Ironies abound: English is at once demonized as the language of the imperialist, yet it is also the preferred language for anti-imperialist, postcolonial theory; English lays claim to be the world's language, yet more of the world is reflected in English than in any other language; citizens of the United States and United Kingdom are uncomfortable with 'triumphalist' claims for English, but the enthusiasm for English in other parts of the world seems boundless.⁸

*

There are several myths about language which have, in my opinion, bedevilled language learning and language teaching theory. The first is that language is a tool, a functional instrument. English is often viewed as a means for upward mobility, either in securing better employment opportunities or a higher social class. Certainly this is one of the effects, possible some of the benefits of acquiring English. But if English is seen only as a tool, then learning English should be much easier than it is: tools should not be difficult to master – their function is, after all, to facilitate use. The misconception lies in the character of a tool, which is mute and material, whereas language is expressive and intangible; a tool has no personality, whereas speakers of a language, any language, are inescapably idiosyncratic; a tool is not organic and does not change: it can only be replaced, whereas a language is in constant flux and

adapts to new realities, new situations, and is constantly evolving. Languages die only when their speakers become extinct. The trouble with the view of language as a tool, and with English as an instrument of social success, is not that people who have mastered English do not indeed secure better prospects for themselves in this globalized world, but rather that the learner of English misprizes the object at hand, which is not an inert utility, but a living sociolinguistic complex with an organic being, capable of absorbing parts of other languages, and of adapting to them. Conceiving of language as a tool neglects the factor of human experience inherent in any language: until that human experience is understood in concrete situations, the learner can only pretend that he speaks the language, and what imitative strategies of language teaching achieve is not so much mimicry as mockery. The objective of language learning is not to clone natives (which would be impossible in any case), but of making a new language one's own.

The second myth that muddles theories of language learning is to conceive of language as a code. But the definition of codes is that they yield disambiguated messages and are invariant in their meaning, whereas language, even when it involves only one word with one meaning let alone words with multiple meanings, carries different weights in different contexts. Even the notion of correctness is often controverted with natural languages. For example, an illogicality uttered by a non-native speaker is a solecism, whereas an illogicality uttered by a native, and repeated by other natives, becomes an idiom. A deviation in pronunciation by a non-native is unintelligible, but deviations produced by natives are called 'accents'. Surely real codes do not behave so perversely; real codes do not depend on deictic relationships, they do not embody personal styles, and are not subject to situational meanings. Language, on the other hand, is vital and not so much indeterminate as multi-dimensional: it operates on more than one level, semantically, psycholinguistically, sociolinguistically, sometimes even psychosomatically.

The third myth about language, and about English, is that one can speak meaningfully about standards, confusing inflexible rules and regulations with 'best practice'. British English, according to the Murrays and Powells of the world, is superior to any other, including Irish English, which has produced some of the finest writers (Swift, Shaw, Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett), who are hypocritically tolerated by their inclusion in the canon of 'British' or English Literature. We cannot continue to muddle up 'English' when it refers to a world language with 'English' when it refers to the language of the United Kingdom. It is time we restrict 'English' to designating a transnational phenomenon, as in Tom MacArthur's and Braj Kachru's reference to 'World Englishes', and we use 'British English' to designate specifically the literature of Albion, restricted to the language of the British Isles. Even that would not be sufficient to extirpate 'foreign' elements from the strictly British canon. Language purists seem unaware that the nationhood they invoke is not what it used to be: the 'our' is different from what it was generations ago. As Lam says, 'A prominent feature of today's global cultural landscape is the intermingling of customs and life-ways and the presence of multiculturalism within national borders' (1999: 389). The postcolonial teacher of English must abandon the rigidities of textbook rules and regulations and the dogmas of grammar. Their prospects are both more daunting and more inviting: they must learn to share with the student English as a culture, in

all its complexity, its untidiness, its multifariousness – and its fascination. Whether the Enoch Powells of the world like it or not, English has been appropriated by the world, just as it appropriated the locutions of the world in its formation and development.

In this, Powell's meanness of spirit overlooks the true glory of the English language, a glory which the most reactionary Englishman can be proud of, to wit, that, in having taken so much from the world, English has also – actively and dialogically – given so much back. Ironically, only the 'triumphalist' chauvinists in England can possibly diminish that credit, or degrade that honor.

Eugene C. Eoyang
Lingnan University

Notes

Presented at the conference 'Cultural Memory in the East and the West', annual meeting of the Korean Comparative Literature Association, Seoul, Korea, 12 October 2001, and at the conference 'Language Usage: Creation, Investigation and Teaching of Languages, Literatures and Cultures', University of Porto, Portugal, 26–27 October.

1. 'Earning as Well as Learning English', Keynote Address, 6th International Conference on English Teaching and Bookfair, 'Meeting the Challenges of Education Reform: Problems and Prospects in English Language Teaching', National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, 13 November 1998.
2. My own sense, which is entirely anecdotal, is that US foreign policy has depended too much on people who are only partially fluent in the languages of the world. They may have oral proficiency, but their understanding of the cultures they study – sadly – misses the forest for the trees. Milton J. Bennett calls these individuals 'fluent fools', described as 'someone who speaks a foreign language well but doesn't understand the social or philosophical content of that language' (1997: 16).
3. Some of the 'perversities' that tend to go unremarked by native speakers are included in my article 'Perversities of the English Language' (Eoyang, 1997).
4. Even between cognate European languages, there are anomalies: 'les mots' means in French, literally, 'the words', but the plural form can also be generic. The English translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiography as *The Words* fails to reflect this distinction and mistranslates the much more suggestive if not more existential *Words*.
5. The words 'positive' and 'negative' should be neutral, as when they are used in electricity, with the positive terminal designated as the 'anode' and the negative terminal as the 'cathode'. But the jargon of AIDS offers an ironic exception. It is good news when the results of a test for AIDS are negative, and bad news when they are positive.
6. This annoying incompetence is not, in my opinion, a mere matter of a faulty memory or poor concentration. It is the result of translating for meaning, for the word to be referenced is a cipher, and the definition is what rewards the search; the student, upon finding the meaning, forgets the original word, which is now as indecipherable as it was before. The reader now inserts back into the text to be deciphered the native-language word rather than the deciphered 'foreign' word. That is why, when the same word is encountered in another excerpt, the student recognizes that it has already been encountered, which is information of no use, since s/he cannot now recall the meaning. Single-language dictionaries are pedagogically more sound, because they not only wean the student from his or her native language, they also enrich and reinforce vocabulary in the language s/he is acquiring.
7. As I discovered from Priya Martin, Human Resources Director for Asia, Deloitte, Touche, and Tohmatsu, when my wife and I conducted a cross-cultural seminar in Bangkok on 14–15 August 2001.
8. Some years ago, Korea even considered making English a national language: 'English is no longer a

secondary language and has already become a primary language', Lee Nam-ki, chairman of the Korean Fair Trade Commission has declared (*Korea Times*, 18 September 2001). China has recently mandated that English be adopted as the medium of instruction in all technical courses at universities and colleges (*South China Morning Post*, LVII: 266, 25 September 2001, p. 9).

References

- Bennett, Milton J. (1997) 'How Not to Be a Fluent Fool: Understanding the Cultural Dimension of Language', in Alvino E. Fantini (ed.) *New Ways in Teaching Culture*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Eoyang, E. C. (1985) '“Vacuity”, “Vapor”, and “Vanity”': Some Perspectives on the Void', *Tamkang Review* XVI(1): 51–65.
- Eoyang, E. C. (1997) 'Perversities of the English Language', *The Hong Kong Linguist* No. 17: 1–9.
- Eoyang, E. C. (1999) 'English as the World's Language', *The Hong Kong Linguist* Vol. 19–20: 16–22.
- Halliday, Michael and Hasan, Ruqaiya (1985) *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holborow, Marnie (1999) *The Politics of English*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kramsch, Claire (1993) *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lam, Wan Shun Eva (1999) 'The Question of Culture in Global English-Language Teaching: A Post-colonial Perspective', in Lydia Liu (ed.) *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Soyinka, Wole (1976) *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.