

Language ownership revisited

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In the IATEFL Newsletter (Feb-Mar 98: International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language), David Eastment's discomfiting experience in the EFL classroom in Britain provided a very interesting yet disturbing read. Having explained to a student that a particular language item was 'plain wrong', he found himself in a rather awkward and embarrassing situation the following day when the student returned with a list of examples – from a corpus – to demonstrate that the item was actually a common feature of American English.

This is very much reminiscent of an incident that occurred to me quite recently in Japan. I was subjected to an emotional and irrational tirade of verbal abuse from two of my American colleagues, who disagreed strongly with my inclusion of a particular expression in the English component of our university's entrance examinations. According to them, the item was unquestionably wrong. Despite all my efforts to convince them that it was correct usage in British English, they repeatedly rebuffed my argument in an unsavoury, arrogant fashion with comments such as 'we don't say that' and 'that's wrong'. I was recently informed of a similar case involving a British EFL teacher from Scotland – working at a private language school in Japan – who was heavily criticised and subsequently victimised by her American/Japanese employers for her 'inability to pronounce her vowels correctly'.

These may appear to be unfortunate, isolated events. However, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that incidents like these occur

with alarming regularity. As a linguist and EFL teacher, I am appalled and irritated every time I hear complaints about the incorrect spelling conventions and grammatical errors perpetrated on either side of the Atlantic.

This brings me to my point: Why should native speakers of English – or of any other language for that matter – feel they have an automatic claim to the language? We are born into a language community, but does that necessarily imply that we own the language we speak? I think not. I find it hard to believe that language should be thought of as an item of possession like a house or a car. Is it so radical to think of ourselves as language 'users' as opposed to language 'owners'? It also saddens me greatly to think that there are those in the EFL/ESL profession who consciously or unconsciously propagate and perpetuate the notion of English-language ownership. Certainly, there is an ever growing body of literature detailing the detrimental effects of linguistic imperialism.

Perhaps teacher-training and teacher-education programmes are failing to sensitise practitioners to the idea of global English, varieties of English or World Englishes (Kachru 1985, etc.). Alternatively, could it possibly be that there are too many commercial interests in promoting one brand of English over another? However, Kachru – through his proposed three concentric circles of Englishes – and other sociolinguists (Pennycook 1994, Phillipson 1992) state quite categorically that English does not represent the identity of any one nation.

Evidence suggests that it has a cross-cultural identity, reflecting the different thought patterns, ideologies, cultural values and traditions of its users around the globe. Sociolinguists also make the point that over 80% of all interactions in English worldwide actually occur between non-native

speakers of English, for diverse cultural and interactional needs. In the not-too-distant future, the number of non-native speakers of English looks set to exceed the number of native speakers; an extraordinary phenomenon, unparalleled in history.

And yet, the puerile, vacuous, tit-for-tat comments surrounding who owns the English language continue to tarnish the integrity of the ELT profession and stoke up resentment and disaccord between English speakers not only on both sides of the Atlantic. I am embarrassed and sickened whenever I hear the pompous and egocentric remarks that British English is 'more prestigious' and that by right English belongs to England on historical grounds. Similarly, I despair at the absurd and outrageous claim that American English is 'more important' because it is the language of the superpower.

Such myopia is detrimental to our common, underlying objective: the teaching of English as a medium for international communication. When will it ever end? It is about time we started thinking of ourselves as users and not as guardians of the English language.

[See: David Eastment, 1998, 'Editorial', IATEFL Newsletter 141, Feb-Mar:1; Kachru, Braj, 1985, 'Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle', in *English in the World, Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*, ed. Randolph Quirk and Henry Widdowson, Cambridge University Press; Alistair Pennycook, 1994, *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, Longman; Robert Phillipson, 1992, *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford University Press.]

Editor's response Your point is well taken: 'In the closing years of the twentieth century, the English language has become a global resource. As such, it does not owe

its existence or the protection of its essence to any individual or community. English is the possession of every individual and every community that in any way uses it, regardless of what any other individual or community may think or feel about the matter' (p. xvii, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992). See also David Crystal in this issue, p.17.

Hong Kong language policy

From: Jacqueline Lam Kam-mei, Language Centre, HK University of Science and Technology, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Martha Pennington's 'A brief history of the English language in Hong Kong' (ET54, Apr 98) very usefully covers English language education in Hong Kong before the 1997 handover. As a Hong Kong Chinese who teaches English in a tertiary institution, I would like to make three complementary comments on the development of language education after the handover, the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in non-language subjects, and the employment of native speakers to teach ESL in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China.

Tung Chee Hwa, Chief Executive of the SAR, recently spoke about the importance of language education in maintaining Hong Kong's competitive edge (in 'Building Hong Kong for a New Era', an address to the Provisional Legislative Assembly, 8 Oct 97). The government has already laid down a framework to achieve the goal for secondary school proficiency in writing English and Chinese and speaking confidently in Cantonese, English and Putonghua. He specially emphasized mother-tongue teaching in non-language subjects, but, in order to make an immediate impact on improving students'

English, a Native-speaking English Teachers Scheme providing more than 700 additional native-speaking English teachers for secondary schools has been introduced in 1998.

In many parts of the world, the mother tongue is the taken-for-granted medium of instruction for non-language subjects in schools. In Hong Kong, however, the situation is more complicated since it is not clear what mother tongue should now be used. Should it be Cantonese, a language spoken by 98% of the local Hong Kong Chinese – or Putonghua, the national language of China? My opinion is that although Putonghua eventually should be the first language in the SAR, it should not be imposed as the medium of instruction at present. Instead, careful planning should lead from mixed-code Cantonese and English to a more Putonghua-like Cantonese, with Putonghua's grammatical structure and Cantonese pronunciation and intonations. After Putonghua has been mastered by primary-school children over the next five years, it should become the main medium of instruction in all schools. Putonghua is the spoken language of China that most resembles the written language. To have it as the medium of instruction would help the Hong Kong Chinese write what they speak, reducing possible misinterpretations in a multilingual situation.

The Native-speaking English Teachers Scheme arouses hostility among local teachers. One argument against it is that the government should take care of the welfare of its citizens first, by creating more job opportunities for English teachers. Mr Tung has suggested that language benchmarks should be set for all teachers in 1998-99, that all new teachers must meet these benchmarks before joining the profession in 2000, and in-service training for teachers should ensure that within five years of the benchmarks being set all will be able to reach them. In my own view, the government should also

send young teachers abroad to acquire native-like proficiency. As local learners of English, they will understand what the Hong Kong Chinese need, and a small number of experienced native-English-speaking teachers should act as consultants or trainers, to give local teachers solid support. The policy of bringing in expatriates as classroom teachers is influenced by both the colonial past and current pressure from parents. If you ask parents with children at primary or secondary schools, many will insist that their children should study through English that is taught by native-speakers. This should not happen. Parents in the Hong Kong SAR should be introduced instead to the notion of *International English* – that they and their offspring can actually contribute to such a versatile *lingua franca* in a foreseeable future.

Martha C. Pennington responds:

I welcome this letter, as it largely confirms and extends the main point of my article: the inconsistency and unreality of Hong Kong language policy. A prominent example is the Native-speaking English Teachers Scheme, which, as Lam states, is grossly unfair to Hong Kong teachers and gives the impression that 'Government policy appears to be still under the shadow of colonial rule'. This scheme is both highly inconsistent with the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty and unrealistic as a long-term 'solution' to Hong Kong's language 'problems'. These are in fact less problems than the normal result of bilingualism or multilingualism, i.e. the presence of more than one language in a community – a situation which has been repeated many times in many places around the world.

Tung Chee Wa's *liang min sam yu* goal of trilingual communication in Cantonese, Putonghua and English, while a laudable one, is at least as unrealistic as the former goal of universal bilingualism with English, given the overwhelming numerical strength and ethnolin-

guistic vitality of Cantonese speakers in the community, which has been noted by many since the 1980's (e.g. Bauer, 1984). The Chief Executive's language benchmarks for teachers would also seem unrealistically short-term. As has been true in the past, government initiatives which are not based on a realistic view of what is possible, given the actual situation that exists and the motives and desires of the people affected by those initiatives, can end up causing more problems than they solve.

The view that '[a]fter Putonghua has been mastered by primary-school children in the next five to ten years, it should become the main medium of instruction in all schools', also seems unrealistic as well as undesirable, for several reasons. First, it is difficult to see how such a scenario would promote the Chief Executive's goal of trilingualism. Second, such a rapid changeover of medium of instruction can be argued to be against the spirit of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region retaining a high degree of autonomy for fifty years. Third, a rapid shift away from Cantonese as the main medium of instruction greatly disadvantages local teachers who do not have a strong command of Putonghua. In fact, it disadvantages them to an even greater extent than attempts to strengthen the presence of English in Hong Kong schools, since most ethnic Chinese secondary teachers have English as a stronger second language than Putonghua.

In my experience, ethnic Chinese English teachers in Hong

Kong secondary schools who hold a Master's degree in English are highly bilingual in Cantonese and English, and those who hold a BA degree in English are also quite bilingual – certainly bilingual enough to teach wholly or mainly in English. The reason qualified English teachers teach in a 'mixed mode' is not a simple matter of lacking sufficient proficiency in English but rather represents a response to their students' needs, to the extreme pressures of the examination-oriented curriculum, and to the social and psychological context of language use, as has been understood by those investigating bilingual classrooms in Hong Kong (for recent discussion, see Lai, 1996; Lin, 1996; Pennington, 1995; Pennington & Balla, 1996). Moreover, a government-led push for a higher standard of language teaching is entirely inconsistent with the common practice in Hong Kong schools of shifting teachers from other subjects to teach English and of requiring teachers trained in English language to teach in areas for which they hold no qualifications.

I agree entirely with Lam that the attitude of 'many parents with children at primary or secondary school... [who] want their children to be taught in an English-medium school and, even better, by English native speakers' is 'outdated', and I am sympathetic to her view that '[p]arents in the Hong Kong SAR should be taught the notion of a varied but universally comprehensible International English [which]...they and their children... can actually contribute to'. However, I believe this

'solution' for educating Hong Kong parents is just as idealistic (and thus, unfortunately, unrealistic) as parents' desire for their children to learn English on a native-speaker model. While one can applaud a utopian ideal in which '[i]t does not really matter what kind of language people speak as long as it can enhance understanding between human beings everywhere and eliminate unnecessary conflicts', language policy will never be based on such ideals as perfect harmony among people. As long as Hong Kong people do not face up to the political and social reality (as opposed to the 'ideality') of the language situation in their community, they will continue in vain to try and prevent history from repeating itself.

[See: R. S. Bauer, 1984, 'The Hong Kong Cantonese speech community', in *Language Learning & Communication*, 3: 243–414; M.-L. Lai, 1996, 'A reality shock: Teaching English through English or Chinese?', in *Education Journal*, 24(2): 173–190; A. M. Y. Lin, 1996, 'Bilingualism or linguistic segregation? – Symbolic domination, resistance and code switching in Hong Kong schools', in *Linguistics and Education*, 8: 49–84; M. C. Pennington, 1995, 'Pattern and variation in use of two languages in the Hong Kong secondary English class', in *RELC Journal*, 26(2):80–105; M. C. Pennington & J. Balla, 1996, 'Bilingualism in microcosm: The emergence of discipline-related discourse communities in Hong Kong tertiary education', in *Education Journal*, 24(2): 147–171.] □

Behold! The beauty of sarcasm

By e-mail, from Guy Oliver via Ian Wright, IBM Europe:

A linguistics professor was lecturing to his class one day. 'In English,' he said, 'a double negative forms a positive. In some languages, though, such as Russian, a double negative is still a negative. However, there is no language wherein a double positive can form a negative.'

A voice from the back of the room piped up: 'Yeah, right.'