

## **LANGUAGE LEARNING, GLOBALISM, AND THE ROLE OF ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>**

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“I talked too much English,” declared Olaudah Equiano, the eighteenth-century freed slave who wrote the first black African autobiography to be published in the west.<sup>2</sup> By learning the language of the white man, he ultimately succeeded in making his way in the white man’s world, despite the obstacles put in his way. “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse,” cried a famous fictional precursor, Caliban, on Prospero’s magic island.<sup>3</sup> Learning the language of the colonial master has been a way out for many of the colonized over the years: English or French or Spanish or Portuguese means access to education, to a world of words convertible into a job and into physical and social mobility.

Internationally, the flow of language learning from the bottom of the economic pyramid (local languages, unknown beyond their immediate boundaries) to the top of the pyramid (languages of wider communication, useful over broad geographical distances) continues apace. Most people across the world speak more than one language, using different languages for different kinds of transactions, and the number of bilinguals is almost certainly growing. English-speaking Americans, who speak the same language at the breakfast table and in the boardroom, at the local supermarket and at the Department of Motor Vehicles, have less understanding than most others about the extreme importance of knowing more than one language. Talking too much English may be the single biggest problem facing the American foreign language educator today: it seems that too many people in the world speak our language, and so it is difficult to convince Americans that foreign languages matter. Aren’t more and more people speaking English? Perhaps so; but more and more people are speaking other languages as well, and Americans are being left behind. What is the role of foreign languages in what appears to be increasingly an English-speaking world? It is a question often asked, if only to themselves, by our colleagues. How do we respond?

On the status and long-term future of English not everyone agrees. “My guess is that English will retain its currency in the world for the next 50 years or so,” writes Gillian Brown, of the Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics at Cambridge University, “but it is difficult to see it retaining it beyond then.”<sup>4</sup> Her reason? The simple fact that non-English-speakers are gaining increased influence on the world scene, in such parts of the world as China. David Graddol, while emphasizing the current strength of English,

emphasizes how difficult it is to forecast its comparative strength years into the future: “The ‘rush’ to English around the world may ... prove to be a temporary phenomenon which cannot be sustained indefinitely. Languages other than English are likely to achieve regional importance whilst changed economic relations between native-speaking English countries and other parts of the world will alter the rationale for learning and speaking English.”<sup>5</sup> Although some others seem less doubtful, in effect declaring that English has won the battle for the world’s attention, by no means can we be sure that a knowledge of English is enough to deal with the new world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, it may put us at a serious disadvantage.

Five hundred years ago, learning English was a way out of the Highlands or the Irish provinces or the mountains of North Wales for young men eager to get on in life, and they and their literate comrades took jobs in the Tudor or Stuart civil service, or migrated to London or Edinburgh or Dublin in search of new opportunities.<sup>6</sup> In our own day, people did the same thing with Russian, in order to make the transition from Tajikistan or Azerbaijan to a party position or a scientist’s job in Moscow or Leningrad. The same process went on in Africa or in the Indian sub-continent, where vast numbers of people trekked to the cities in search of work, picking up Yoruba or Tamil in the process. In so doing, they joined, willingly or unwillingly, a larger and broader culture, and their loyalties shifted from their geographically constrained origins to a broader society and idiom. While for many, movement from the provinces to the cities led only to a different kind of penury, for others mobility brought opportunity. Yet it also cut them off from their roots, or, rather, caused them to put down roots in the looser soil of a larger field. This movement from the provinces to the cities has been going on for as long as provinces and cities have existed, but it has accelerated in recent years: the United Nations experts estimate that by 2005 over fifty percent of the world’s population will live in urban areas (Graddol 27). Many were the young men around the Mediterranean or in Western Europe who learned Latin two thousand years ago to escape their tribes or clans and seek prosperity as adopted Romans – indeed to become members of the “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s term for nationhood, that was Rome.<sup>7</sup> Others made the trip as slaves.

Today, a key to entry into the community of the educated elite – or at least a necessary if not a sufficient qualification for a membership card – is the English language. David Crystal points out that “a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country,” and Crystal suggests that English has acquired this status. Such global status, he suggests, arises from a combination of factors, including military and political might, economic power, and what he describes as cultural power – primarily the use of English as the means of storing and imparting knowledge and information.<sup>8</sup> The role of English in such storage and imparting of knowledge has expanded by leaps and bounds in the past twenty years or so. Today, the vast majority of scientific texts are published in English; English is the dominant language on the Internet (though by no means the only one); international business is conducted in English, as, increasingly, is diplomacy. It continues to serve as the language of

government in many countries, and, even in those countries where efforts are made to assert the local language as the language of government, it refuses to disappear. A story in the New York Times is typical: in the recent trial of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian Attorney General, Mohtar Abdullah, scored points by pointing out that Ibrahim, an enthusiast for Malaysian nationalism, replied to questions in court not in Bahasa Malaysia but in English.<sup>9</sup>

In short, English is the Microsoft of languages – the linguistic medium that has acquired such a dominant role in the marketplace that it seems to have become self-perpetuating. The parallel with computers is by no means far-fetched: just as the colonial powers laid down railroads and installed telephone systems that depended for their maintenance and spare parts on industries based in the mother countries, so the British Empire and, in its way, the United States, developed a linguistic software infrastructure that is today heavily dependent on the cultural products – everything from entertainment to education – of the English-speaking world. Apparently the only means available to other countries wishing to share this global market is to adopt its linguistic software. Accordingly we find many countries whose languages are essentially local and marginal using English as a medium of instruction in colleges and universities, or in publishing or the entertainment industry. In the 1980s, the University of Amsterdam launched a program in European studies in which English was the medium of instruction. It created a sensation at the time. But today, according to a recent article in the Times Higher Education Supplement, the use of English for instructional purposes in Dutch universities is widespread. In Germany meanwhile, the Universities of Freiburg, Heidelberg and Mannheim are planning a worldwide virtual university with English as its medium of instruction.<sup>10</sup> Even so, almost half of the world's foreign students are studying in six English-speaking countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely to catch more of this business that universities in much of the world are re-engineering themselves into instruction in English.

Robert Phillipson, in a highly influential and powerful book,<sup>12</sup> has labeled this and related phenomena linguistic imperialism, the natural accompaniment of what John Tomlinson, echoing Raymond Williams and others, has called cultural imperialism<sup>13</sup> “What is claimed,” writes Tomlinson (7) “is that a form of domination exists in the modern world, not just in the political and economic spheres but also over those practices by which collectivities make sense of their lives.” In the post-Soviet era, the term “imperialism,” hijacked by the successors of the Czars as a term of abuse for every empire but their own, has perhaps floated back into a measure of objectivity. The dominant culture of today, the American culture, is more like Rome, ever open to barbarians willing to shed their barbarism in favor of the Roman way, than it is like, say, Japan, accessible to the outsider only with extreme difficulty.

Indeed, what is emerging more and more is not a conventional imperialism at all, but a form of globalism. Those of us in the global education business may be distressed to see a concept so near and dear to us

appropriated for such different purposes, but the appropriation of the signifier tells us something important about the signified. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, in a wide-ranging critique of globalization,<sup>14</sup> the field of opportunity traditionally sought by the ambitious provincial now embraces the entire world. To a marked degree the efforts of global educators have reinforced and coincided with the efforts of those who would make the world safe for American industrial capitalism.

I must confess that as an educator I look back to the late 1970s and early 1980s with a good deal of nostalgia. Those were times when Americans of all political persuasions assailed American ignorance of the world with abundant statistics and pithy anecdotes to prove that our twelfth-graders knew less about the world than a randomly chosen group of Irish hairdressers or Uzbek cotton farmers. We urged on our fellow professors the need to bring their international experience into the classroom – or, at the very least, to have some international experience that they could later convey into their teaching. We called on more students to go abroad. We encouraged American universities to accept more visitors from overseas. Above all, we hammered away at the importance of learning foreign languages. Finally, in the waning days of the Carter administration, we were successful in getting a President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Education launched, and the country seemed set on overcoming its ignorance.<sup>15</sup> Though the Commission’s proposals were light on language learning (Commission member Rep. Millicent Fenwick filed a dissenting report criticizing the Commission on this point), the message had been delivered, and there was a marked increase in interest in promoting foreign languages at the local and state levels in most parts of the country. Indeed, zeal for programmatic expansion in some cases outstripped the availability of competent teachers.

There were of course some interesting bumps along the road. Let me cite just two. First, discussion in Unesco of a New World Information and Communication Order, in which efforts would be made to create two-directional communication between the developing world and the industrial world, proved such a threat to the western powers intent on open markets for their cultural products and on what they described as the free flow of information (actually the flow was all in one direction), that the United States and Britain withdrew from that organization in protest. While language received only the briefest of mentions in the MacBride Report that was the immediate cause of the conflict, making the world safe for English was an underlying motivation for American and British resistance to approving the MacBride recommendations.<sup>16</sup>

Second, when global education was attacked by the influential anti-feminist and American loyalist Phyllis Schlafly, the organization Global Perspectives in Education renamed itself the American Forum, intent on showing that its interest in world affairs was not an attempt to deprive young Americans of their patriotism.

But the extremism of people like Phyllis Schlafly made them relatively easy to answer. What proved less easy to deal with, or even to recognize for what it was, was the rhetoric of competition that resulted from the President's Commission and efforts like it: as a new administration under Ronald Reagan took office in Washington, the message went out that we had to inform the young people of Utah or Idaho or Oregon or Ohio about the world in order to reassert American competitiveness. In an era in which the Cold War was less and less relevant, we were embarked on an effort to capture and dominate international markets<sup>17</sup> – so knowing where Thailand was, or being able to sell our goods in German, was important. Those of us in the field, our eye on government grants and on the compliance of our colleagues, gladly embraced the new rhetoric, and this new globalization continued apace. We cheered, and rightly so, when more democratic governments replaced the military leadership in Latin American countries, and above all when the Wall came down and the last of the great national empires disappeared in a puff of communist smoke. But gathered under the umbrella of globalism was a highly varied collection of supporters.

Hardly surprisingly, the euphoria of the late 1980s has given way to a period of unease. Indeed a recent issue of *Foreign Policy* asks, "Has Globalization Fizzled Out?" "The unalloyed enthusiasm that accompanied the spread of [economic] globalization," the journal's editor declares, "...has fallen victim to unexpected financial crashes, important policy reversals such as those in Malaysia and Russia, and many unresolved problems with potentially disastrous consequences."<sup>18</sup> A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, we might reply. The internationalism driving global markets is a mile wide and an inch deep, and its motives, far from creating a better or more just world, are all too often focused on a greed and exploitation whose by-products may be beneficial but whose principal force is irredeemably corrosive (just as old-fashioned colonialism contained such contradictory ingredients). Chad Alger and others told us to think globally and act locally: too many of our compatriots today think locally and are ever more free to act globally. This was one of the messages that the rather motley crew that gathered in protest in Seattle on the occasion of the World Trade Organization meeting sought to convey

The truth is that the globalization of the past decade, building on trends long apparent in the west, has created an elite of increasingly mobile and deracinated participants who have lost contact with traditional notions of space and time. As one wit put it, Fukuyama may have been wrong about the end of history, but right about the end of geography. In the world of the Internet and of increasingly mobile and fluid capital, to say nothing of personal mobility through modern transportation, space matters little. As for time, our technology is hell-bent on reducing it and flattening it out. Bauman (18) explains: "Rather than homogenizing the human condition, the technological annulment of temporal/spatial distances tends to polarize it. It emancipates certain humans from territorial constraints and renders certain community-generating meanings exterritorial – while denuding the territory, to which other people go on being confined, of its meaning and its identity-endowing capacity." Hence, while the ten or twenty percent of the world's population described by Robert Reich as the world's elite is logging on to the Internet, the rest

is engaged in Islamic fundamentalism or training for the Michigan Militia or hacking the arms off its innocent compatriots in Sierra Leone.

What this means in linguistic terms, as Joshua Fishman explains in one of the articles, previously cited, in the issue of *Foreign Policy* on globalism, is that a second stratum of regional languages is emerging, and also that the disenfranchised, or those who feel themselves excluded, are turning more and more to ways of acquiring self-definition through the use of local languages.<sup>19</sup> Most of these people have no knowledge of English, which is not the world's most used language, but *is* the language of the elite. This tendency of the world language system<sup>20</sup> to exfoliate into regional and local linguistic arrangements is often ignored or misunderstood by Americans, who are disinclined to recognize what much of the world takes for granted – that you use different languages for different purposes. One of the legacies of the European conception of the nation-state, in which the notion of a unified and unifying national language plays such an important role, is a kind of language loyalty that devalues bilingualism and assumes that the ideal condition is one in which an individual speaks a single language and everyone else does the same. Our construction of reality links language and identity, language and group loyalty, in particular ways. It is not the construction of reality practiced in all other parts of the world, where bilingualism is increasingly the norm.

As educators, we have a responsibility to point out the complexity of the world – not just our part of it, but the world as a whole. I would argue that, at the very least, we have an obligation to explain to our students and our colleagues that the widening economic gap between rich and poor in the world is accompanied by a widening cultural (and linguistic) gap, or at least an increasing cultural malaise. We know enough about the world to move around it with relative ease, but our limited knowledge confuses response to economic stimuli with what Americans call life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.<sup>21</sup> Those great ideals ring increasingly hollow in our conflict-ridden world. A major cause of our confusion before the globe that we have created is our inability or our unwillingness to go beyond the boundaries of our elite universe to engage the people at its fringes and beyond, in terms, and in languages, that they understand. The very seductiveness of the welcoming world of technology and mobility and the English language, its very openness to all who qualify, may blind us to what lies beyond. We need languages to reach beyond the envelope of wealth and privilege in which we find ourselves.

We also need new thinking on the whole subject of global education, along with a new rhetoric to explain and justify the use of foreign languages and the importance of teaching them in our colleges and universities. We can perhaps recognize, as the President of the University of Twente, in the Netherlands, recently put it,<sup>22</sup> that “we have the feeling that English is the *lingua franca*” of international education, but as English-speakers we should recognize that one of the consequences of this situation is that those who speak our language have the means to understand us, but we who are locked in our own linguistic house, no matter how commodious its rooms nor how broad the surrounding parkland, do not have the means to

understand them. Furthermore, having a single language for global communication may have its advantages, but it comes at considerable cost to the diversity of cultures. Indeed it makes it doubly imperative that we learn how to communicate effectively with the rest of the world in a spirit of reciprocity and openness.

Fifteen or twenty years ago, it was still possible to argue that a faculty member without a working knowledge of a foreign language could not have a complete command of the literature published in his or her field. There were physics articles in Russian, or sociology articles in German, that the good researcher needed to have a knowledge of. Today, it is difficult to persuade even foreign researchers to publish in anything other than English. A multilingual journal of which I am an editor, *Language Problems and Language Planning*, regularly receives articles in English written by French or German linguists eager to have their work read by people they assume will not know their languages. They are resistant when we suggest that they write in their native languages, and not without reason. However, if those of us who are native English speakers confuse our professional self-sufficiency in English with a belief that all we need to understand the world is the English language, we will be quite wrong. Our colleagues need languages to gain a perspective on themselves, and to move beyond the comfortable and mobile milieu in which they live. Arguably, it is precisely here that the survival of the idea of the university – as a place of intellectual exchange rather than the simple exchange of knowledge – will be determined.

We must recognize that a milieu dominated by English will inevitably be a milieu dominated by American modes of thought, American assumptions – and that silence on the part of those we are dealing with may be the silence of the inarticulate (a dangerous condition, giving birth to frustration), not the silence of the convinced. Precisely because other ways of looking at the world are mediated to us through non-native speakers of English, rather than being experienced at first hand, we may think we understand when we do not. When others, like the slave Olaudah Equiano, “talk too much English,” we may, fatally, lose the ability to talk anything else.

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## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper given at the Annual Conference of the Association of International Education Administrators, Mérida, Mexico, February 11-14, 1999. Humphrey Tonkin is University Professor of the Humanities at the University of Hartford and chairs the board of the American Forum for Global Education. He wrote this paper while a Visiting Fellow at the Whitney Humanities Center, Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> Equiano recounts that his master, apparently concerned that he will run away in London, puts him in the custody of a certain Capt. James Doran, whose vessel is moored at Gravesend in preparation for a trip to the colonies. Equiano points out to Doran that the law forbids his removal from London under such circumstances. “Upon this Captain Doran said I talked too much English; and if I did not behave myself well, and be quiet, he had a method on board to make me.” Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative, and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York and London: Penguin, 1995), p.94.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Tempest* 1.2.365. On the implications of linguistic commerce between colonizers and colonized see Stephen Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century," in Fredi Chiappelli, ed. *First Images of America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1976), 2: 561-580, and Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Interview in *Cam*, the Cambridge University alumni magazine, 28 (1999), 30.

<sup>5</sup> *The Future of English?* (London: British Council, 1997), 55.

<sup>6</sup> See Victor Edward Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic Languages* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983), Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development 1536-1966* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> "In Court, Ousted Malaysian Talks of Political Intrigue," *New York Times*, February 9, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> *Times Higher Education Supplement*, October 9, 1998, p.10 (on the Netherlands), September 25, 1998, p.15 (on Germany).

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Fishman, "The New Linguistic Order," *Foreign Policy*, 113 (1998-99), 26-40; see p.28.

<sup>12</sup> *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> *Cultural Imperialism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Press, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> *Globalization, The Human Consequences*, New York: Columbia U Press, 1998. For an earlier investigation of some of these issues, see Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Re-Shaping the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1996). A summary of the literature and the issues is provided in *Issues in Global Education*, 157 (1999-2000), published by the American Forum for Global Education. See particularly my article "Globalization – An Opportunity for Peace?" (pp. 1, 12-16).

<sup>15</sup> See *Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability: A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies*, November 1979. The report had six chapters, the first of which was devoted to foreign language competence. Among its numerous recommendations were a call for the reinstatement of foreign language requirements in schools, colleges, and universities; a system of incentive funds to be channeled to schools and postsecondary institutions for foreign language teaching; the establishment of sixty Language and International Studies High Schools in various parts of the country; and a National Criteria and Assessment Program for foreign language learning and teaching.

<sup>16</sup> The principle of free flow of information goes back to the original Constitution of Unesco. This principle ran up against what the developing nations saw as a right to be heard, in the face of what they believed was a deluge of messages from the industrialized world to the developing world, with nothing much flowing in the other direction. In an effort to redress this imbalance, various western countries, notably Sweden, proposed the recognition of a "right to communicate." See Sean MacBride and others, *Many Voices, One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Unipub, 1980). The continuation of this problem was documented for French readers recently by one of its longtime exponents, Herbert I. Schiller, "Vers un nouveau siècle d'impérialisme américain," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1998.



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<sup>17</sup> The nature of the challenge is lucidly presented in Michael L. Detouzos, Richard K. Lester, Robert M. Solow, and others, *Made in America: Regaining the Productive Edge* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). See especially the chapter on “Neglect of Human Resources,” pp. 81-93.

<sup>18</sup> Moisés Naím, “Editor’s Note,” *Foreign Policy*, 113, Winter 1998-99, p.8. The issue is entitled *Bracing for the Hangover: Has Globalization Fizzled Out?*

<sup>19</sup> Graddol makes the same point in *The Future of English?*, which takes an altogether less triumphalist position than Crystal.

<sup>20</sup> Abram de Swaan’s term: see “A Political Sociology of the World Language System,” *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 22 (1998): 63-75, 109-128.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Grünzweig and Nana Rinehart refer to an erroneous “equation of culture and consumption” in a recent article: “International Understanding and Global Interdependence: A Philosophical Inquiry,” *International Educator*, Fall 1998: 41-48.

<sup>22</sup> See the report in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* on Dutch universities, cited above.