

Alastair Pennycook: English and the Discourses of Colonialism (1998)

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Our marvellous tongue

The wondrous spread of English

The nineteenth century was a time of immense British confidence in their own greatness, and writing on English abounded with glorifications of English and its global spread. [...] Although the fervent triumphalism that appears so evident in [...] earlier descriptions of the spread of Empire and English is a less acceptable aspect of more recent discourses on the spread of English, I would like to suggest that the same celebratory tone seems to underlie recent, supposedly neutral descriptions of English. Thus, it is interesting to compare Rolleston's (1911) description of the spread of English with Crystal's (1987) from the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*:

The British flag waves over more than one-fifth of the habitable globe, one-fourth of the human race acknowledges the sway of the British Monarch, more than one hundred princes render him allegiance. The English language is spoken by more people than that of any other race, it bids fair to become at some time the speech of the globe, and about one-half of the world's ocean shipping trade is yet in British hands.

(Rolleston 1911: 75)

English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic

conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Of all the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. English radio programmes are received by over 150 million in 120 countries.

(Crystal 1987: 358)

The similarities become more obvious when we turn to other books and articles on English. Bryson's (1990) book *Mother Tongue: The English Language* starts: 'More than 300 million people in the world speak English and the rest, it sometimes seems, try to' (p. 1). [...] Claiborne (1983) opens his book *The life and times of the English Language: The history of our marvellous tongue* with:

By any standard, English is a remarkable language. It is, to begin with, the native tongue of some 300,000,000 people—the largest speech community in the world except for Mandarin Chinese. Even more remarkable is its geographical spread, in which it is second to none; its speakers range from Point Barrow, Alaska, to the Falkland Islands; from Hong Kong to Tasmania ... English is also by far the most important 'second language' in the world. It is spoken by tens of millions of educated Europeans and Japanese, is the most widely studied foreign tongue in both the USSR and China, and serves as an 'official' language in more than a dozen other countries whose populations total more than a thousand million ... English is the lingua franca of scientists, of air pilots and traffic controllers around the world, of students hitchhiking around Europe, and of dropouts meditating in India and Nepal.

(Claiborne 1983: 1-2)

and so on and so on.

[...]

According to Simon Jenkins (1995), attempts to introduce artificial languages have failed because 'English has triumphed. Those who do not speak it are at a universal disadvantage against those who do. Those who deny this supremacy merely seek to keep the disadvantaged deprived.' As we shall see later, this notion of 'linguistic deprivation' for those who do not speak English and even for those who do not speak it as a native language starts to have very particular significance within this discourse.

At times, too, the descriptions of this global spread start to use terms even more reminiscent of the prose of George (1867) or de Quincey (1862) and their talk of ‘destiny’ and the inevitable spread of English being like a mighty river flowing towards the sea. An editorial in *The Sunday Times* (UK) (10 July 1994), responding to the attempts in France to limit the use of English in various public domains, thunders against the French for opposing the ‘European lingua franca which will inevitably be English’. To oppose English is pointless, the editorial warns, since ‘English fulfils its own destiny as Churchill’s “ever-conquering language”’. With every shift in international politics, every turn of the world’s economies, every media development and every technological revolution, English marches on’. The editorial then returns to slightly more sober language:

No other country in Europe works itself into such a frenzy about the way English eases the paths of multi-national discussion and assumes an ever-growing role as the language of power and convenience. The Germans, Spanish and Italians have accepted the inevitable. So, further afield, have the Russians, Chinese and Japanese. If you want to get ahead, you have to speak English. Two billion people around the world are believed to have made it their second language. Add that to 350m native English speakers in the United States, Britain and the Commonwealth, and you have an unstoppable force.

After these remarkable claims for the global spread of English and its inevitable path towards ascendancy, the editorial goes on to reassert that France must acknowledge ‘the dominance of Anglo-American English as the universal language in a shrinking world’, and that ‘no amount of protectionist legislation and subsidies can shut out the free market in the expression of ideas’. ‘Britain,’ it asserts, ‘must press ahead with the propagation of English and the British values which stand behind it’ with the British Council (‘Once a target for those unable to see no further than the end of their nose, it now runs a successful global network with teaching as its core activity in 108 countries’), the BBC (which ‘is told to exploit its reputation and products abroad as never before’) helping with ‘the onward march of the English language’. As we shall see, this juxtaposition of the spread of Eng-

lish with the protectionism of the *Academie Francaise* is a frequently repeated trope of these discourses.

An article in *U.S. News & World Report* (18 February 1985, p. 49) called ‘English: Out to conquer the world’ starts with the usual cataloguing of the spread English:

When an Argentine pilot lands his airliner in Turkey, he and the ground controller talk in English. When German physicists want to alert the international scientific community to a new discovery, they publish their findings in English-language journals. When Japanese executives cut deals with Scandinavian entrepreneurs in Bangkok, they communicate in English ...

and so on and so on. The article also derides those who would oppose the ‘inevitable’ spread of English, for ‘English marches on. “If you need it, you learn it”, says one expert’. Despite various attempts to counter the spread of English, ‘the world’s latest lingua franca will keep spreading. “It’s like the primordial ooze,” contends James Alatis, ... “its growth is ineluctable, inexorable and inevitable”’ (p. 52).

[...]

Clearly, there is quite a remarkable continuity in the writing on the global spread of English. Bailey (1991) comments that ‘the linguistic ideas that evolved at the acme of empires led by Britain and the United States have not changed as economic colonialism has replaced the direct, political management of third-world nations. English is still believed to be the inevitable world language’ (p. 121).

[...]

In praise of English

If there are many similarities in the ways the spread of English has been both exhorted and applauded over the last hundred years, there are also interesting similarities in the way the language itself has been praised as a great language. Nineteenth-century writing on English abounded with glorifications of the language, suggesting that on the one hand the undeniable excellence of British institutions, ideas and culture must be reflected in the language and, on the other, that the

undeniable superior qualities of English must reflect a people and a culture of superior quality. Thus, the Reverend James George, for example, arguing that Britain had been ‘commissioned to teach a noble language embodying the richest scientific and literary treasures,’ asserted that ‘As the mind grows, language grows, and adapts itself to the thinking of the people. Hence, a highly civilized race, will ever have, a highly accomplished language. The English tongue, is in all senses a very noble one. I apply the term noble with a rigorous exactness’ (George 1867, p. 4)

[...]

A key argument in the demonstration of the superior qualities of English was in the breadth of its vocabulary, an argument which, as we shall see, is still used widely today.

The article ‘English out to conquer the world’ asks how English differs from other languages: ‘First, it is bigger. Its vocabulary numbers at least 750,000 words. Second-ranked French is only two thirds that size ... English has been growing fast for 1,000 years, promiscuously borrowing words from other lands’ (1985, p. 53). According to Bryson (1990), the numbers of words listed in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (450,000) and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (615,000) are only part of the total number of English words since ‘technical and scientific terms would add millions more’. Looking at which terms are actually commonly made use of, Bryson suggests that about ‘200,000 English words are in common use, more than in German (184,000) and far more than in French (a mere 100,000)’ (p. 3). Claiborne (1983) asserts that ‘for centuries, the English-speaking peoples have plundered the world for words, even as their military and industrial empire builders have plundered it for more tangible goods’. This plundering has given English

the largest, most variegated and most expressive vocabulary in the world. The total number of English words lies somewhere between 400,000—the number of current entries in the largest English dictionaries—and 600,000—the largest figure that any expert is willing to be quoted on. By comparison, the biggest French dictionaries have only about 150,000 entries, the biggest Russian ones mere 130,000. (p. 3)

Simon Jenkins (1995) explains that:

English has not won the battle to be the world’s language through a trial of imperial strength. As the American linguist Braj Kachru points out, English has achieved its hegemony through its inherent qualities, by ‘its propensity for acquiring new identities ... its range of varieties and above all its suitability as a flexible medium for literary and other types of creativity’.

The subtitle to Jenkins’ article (‘The triumph of English’) is ‘Our infinitely adaptable mother tongue is now the world’s lingua franca—and not before time.’

Apart from clearly supporting a simple argument about the superiority of English, this view of the richness of English puts into play several other images of English that are extremely important: the notion of English as some pure Anglo-Saxon language, the idea that English and English speakers have always been open, flexible and integrationist, and the belief that because of their vast vocabulary, speakers of English are the ablest thinkers. The first of these emerges in ‘English out to conquer the world’ when the article suggests that ‘All-told, 80 per cent of the world stock is foreign-born’ (p. 53). The implications of this statement seem to be that ‘English’ refers to a language of Anglo-Saxon purity, a language that despite all its borrowings and enrichments is, at heart, an Anglo-Saxon affair. This effort to construct some clear Anglo-Saxon lineage for English has a long history. [...] Writing in 1901, Earle argued that:

We do not want to discard the rich furniture of words which we have inherited from our French and classic eras; but we wish to wear them as trophies, as historic blazon of a great career, for the demarcation and amplification of an imperial language whose thews and sinews and vital energies are essentially English.

(cited in Crowley 1989: 74)

According to Burnett (1962), ‘the long process of creating the historic seedbed of the English language actually began with the arrival of the first Indo-European elements from the continent’ (p. 75). Claiborne (1983) goes further and claims that ‘the story of the life and times of English’ can be traced from ‘eight thousand years ago to the present’

(p. 5). Although both these claims—that 80 per cent of English could be foreign and that the language can be traced back over 8,000 years—seem perhaps most remarkable for the bizarreness of their views, they also need to be taken very seriously in terms of the cultural constructions they produce, namely a view of English as some ethnically pure Anglo-Saxon or Aryan language. Bailey (1991) comments that “Restoring” a racially pure language to suit a racially “primitive” nation is an idea that reached its most extreme and dreadful consequence in Hitler’s Reich, and its appearance in images of English has not been sufficiently acknowledged’ (p. 270).

The second image that emerges here is that to this core of Anglo-Saxon has been added—like tributaries to the great river of English, as many writers like to describe this—words from languages around the world, suggesting that English and British people have always been flexible and keen to borrow from elsewhere to enrich the language. This image of English is then used to deride other languages for their lack of breadth and, especially when people have sought to safeguard languages from the incursions of English, to claim that English is democratic while other languages are not. Most commonly this argument is used against the French for their attempts to legislate against the use of English words.

[...]

Thus, the image of English as a great borrowing language is used against any attempts to oppose the spread of English, the argument being that the diverse vocabulary of English is a reflection of the democratic and open nature of the British people, and that reactions against English are nothing but evidence that other people are less open and democratic. ‘English need not be protected by French Academies, Canadian constitutions or Flemish language rioters,’ Simon Jenkins (1995) tells us. ‘The world must just take a deep breath and admit that it has a universal language at last.’ But Tenkins is of course merely repeating an old image of English, one that the linguist Jespersen was quite happy with: ‘The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself.’ (Jespersen, 1938/1982). And this

linguistic democracy is, as ever, far superior to the narrow-minded protectionism of the French:

the English have never suffered an Academy to be instituted among them like the French or Italian Academies ... In England every writer is, and has always been, free to take his words where he chooses, whether from the ordinary stock of everyday words, from native dialects, from old authors, or from other languages, dead or living.

(Jespersen 1938/1982: 15)

The notion of English as a great borrowing language also seems to suggest a view of colonial relations in which the British intermingled with colonized people, enriching English as they communed with the locals. Such a view, however, is hardly supported by colonial history. Kiernan (1969) mentions Macartney’s observation of the British ‘besetting sin of contempt for the rest of mankind’ and that ‘while other foreigners at Canton mingled socially with the Chinese, the British kept aloof’ (p. 148). Kiernan goes on to suggest that ‘the *apartheid* firmly established in India was transferred in a great measure to China. Everyone has heard of the “Dogs and Chinese not admitted” notice in the park’ (p. 156). In Hong Kong, he points out, ‘the position of the Chinese as subjects under British rule increased British haughtiness’. He quotes from Bowring in 1858 as observing that ‘the separation of the native population from the European is nearly absolute: social intercourse between the races wholly unknown’ (Kiernan 1969: 156). As Metcalf (1995) shows with respect to India, this *apartheid* policy extended to the division of cities, with railway lines often built to separate the ‘native areas’ from the white preserves, and houses built with extensive verandahs, gardens and gateways in order to keep the colonized at bay. These observations are backed by Wesley-Smith’s (1994) analysis of ‘anti-Chinese legislation’ in Hong Kong. Looking at the ‘considerable body of race-based discriminatory legislation’ in Hong Kong, Wesley-Smith points to one of the central aims of much of this legislation: the separation of Chinese and Europeans. In 1917, Governor May [...] wrote to the secretary of state about the importance of maintaining the Peak area as an all-European reserve: ‘It would be little short of a calamity if an alien and, by European standards, semi-civilized race were allowed to drive the white man from the one area in

Hong Kong, in which he can live with his wife and children in a white man's healthy surroundings' (cited in Wesley-Smith 1994: 100).

If, then, the British tended to mingle with colonized or other people far less than did other Europeans, it is unlikely that the English language was in fact such an open, borrowing language as is claimed. Indeed, Bailey (1991) argues that the British 'sense of racial superiority made English voyagers less receptive to borrowings that had not already been, in part, authenticated by other European travelers' (p. 61). Thus, he goes on:

Far from its conventional image as a language congenial to borrowing from remote languages, English displays a tendency to accept exotic loanwords mainly when they have first been adopted by other European languages or when presented with marginal social practices or trivial objects.

Anglophones who have ventured abroad have done so confident of the superiority of their culture and persuaded of their capacity for adaptation, usually without accepting the obligations of adapting. Extensive linguistic borrowing and language mixing arise only when there is some degree of equality between or among languages (and their speakers) in a multilingual setting. For the English abroad, this sense of equality was rare.

(Bailey 1991: 91)

There are, therefore, serious questions to be asked about the image of democratic English put into play by the construction of English as a borrowing language. Indeed, the constant replaying of this image of English as an open and borrowing language, reflecting an open and borrowing people, is a cultural construct of colonialism that is in direct conflict with the colonial evidence.

The third, and probably most insidious, view produced by the insistence on English having a far larger vocabulary than other languages relates to thought. Having stated that English has far more words than German or French, Bryson (1990) goes on to argue that:

The richness of the English vocabulary, and the wealth of available synonyms, means that English speakers can often draw shades of distinction unavailable to non-English speakers. The French, for example, cannot distinguish between house and home, between mind and brain, between man and gentleman, between 'I wrote' and 'I have written'. The Spanish cannot differentiate a chairman from a president, and the Italians have no equiva-

lent of wishful thinking. In Russia there are no native words for efficiency, challenge, engagement ring, have fun, or take care.

(Bryson 1990: 3-4)

Now it is important to note here that this is not merely an argument that different languages cut the world up differently but rather that English, with its larger vocabulary, cuts the world up better. Claiborne (1983), having also claimed a larger vocabulary for English than for other languages, goes on to suggest that 'Like the wandering minstrel in *The Mikado*, with songs for any and every occasion, English has the right word for it—whatever "it" may be' (p. 4). Thus:

It is the enormous and variegated lexicon of English, far more than the mere numbers and geographical spread of its speakers, that truly makes our native tongue marvellous—makes it, in fact, a medium for the precise, vivid and subtle expression of thought and emotion that has no equal, past or present.

(Claiborne 1983: 4)

in case the implications of this are not clear, Claiborne goes on to claim that English is indeed 'not merely a great language but the greatest' (p. 4) and that 'Nearly all of us do our thinking in words, which symbolize objects and events (real or imagined) ...' (p. 6). Clearly, then, in this view, if you are a speaker of English, you are better equipped than speakers of other languages to think about the world. In this view, English is a window on the world. According to Burnett (1962), 'not only in Asia and Africa, but in Europe, crisscrossed by linguistic frontiers and dissected by deep-rooted cultural loyalties, people of all classes now look to English as a window, a magic case-ment opening on every horizon of loquacious men' (pp. 20-21).

[...]