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Decentring English through bilingual creative practice

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Abstract

This study problematizes the global spread of English and its status as the default language of the Academy, proposing bi/ multilingual creative practice to undermine the centrality of English to the creation of counter colonial discourses. Utilising the linguistic imperialism paradigm of Phillipson (1992; 2009), Pennycook's study of the English Language Teaching industry (1998), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence on indigeneity (1986; 2013), I interpret the exclusive use of English in postcolonial writing and English Literatur*es* as reinforcing the divide between speakers of English and those of 'other-ed' languages, and even between 'native' and 'non-native' speakers of English. Simultaneously, I explore and accommodate the utility of English as a tool for challenging hegemonic narratives through Ashcroft (2009) and Roy (2018), but argue that English should not be allowed to become hegemonic itself by being the sole language of critical/ creative debate. For this, I propose a syncretic union of English and 'other-ed' languages in critical hindsight of my creative practice.

Key words:

English, linguistic imperialism, World Englishes, decolonisation, bilingualism, creative practice

Introduction

Today, English is the language of the Academy, of science and technology, of aviation, navigation, diplomacy, and the internet, inspiring Phillipson to couple the supremacy of the language with Britain's naval dominance of yesteryears: 'whereas once Britannia ruled the

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waves, now it is English which rules them' (1992, 3). In its apotheosis as a global language, English has ceased to be the language of *the* English — or the Americans for that matter. It has been appropriated and utilised to question Western epistemic categories (Ashcroft et al. 1989), and revisit its own colonial pedigree (Pennycook 1998; Mair 2003; Boampong and Penova 2010). Importantly, English has been an empowering tool, not only against the old coloniser, but also in the struggle with the post-colonial state that controls the allocation of resources and the provision of education (Roy 2018). Resultantly, the view that English has been appropriated by the marginalia, that it belongs to 'us', comes from an array of postcolonial writers to whom the unrelenting given-ness of the situation demonstrates that no nativist recovery of supposed pre-colonial bliss is tenable. We ought to accept and embrace English, argues Achebe, 'I have been given the language and I intend to use it' (1975, 62).

Yet, there is something that continues to nudge the stated and settled status of English, some abiding unease, for we must account for the fact that the question of its use keeps cropping up, usually eliciting a justificatory response from post-colonial writers. Perhaps there is an abiding 'English-ness' or an increasing 'American-ness' associated with the language, not literal but not entirely figurative either. V. T. Vittachi identified as the Brown Sahib, a member of the Anglicised native elite who came to look down upon those of his own people who were not educated in English (1962). Those among the Lowland Scots who readily partnered with the English in Britain's imperial economy were accused of adopting a colonial attitude towards the Highlands and 'things Scottish' in the 18th century (Sorensen and Sorensen 2000, 3). Cultural pretensions aside, there is a 'real' material dimension to the global spread of the language which cannot be just as easily brushed aside. English Language Teaching and proliferating English Literatur*es* are linked to a corporate

juggernaut, a multibillion dollar English language industry incarnated globally in a plethora of acronyms — ELT, ESL, TEFL, EAP, CELTA, DELTA, IELTS. Teaching resources and pedagogy are largely oriented towards what we call 'English-speaking' countries in one lexicon, 'white settler colonies' in another, so as to complicate a straightforward verdict on the question of the ownership of English.

The questions

Has English been domesticated, appropriated, created anew so that the question of its cultural moorings is redundant in an age where English is spoken by a greater number of 'non-native' than 'native-speakers', and, as the title of a discussion heralds, 'the native speaker is dead'(Paikeday and Chomsky 1985)? Or do the continued use of English and burgeoning English Literatur*es* herald the posthumous realisation of Thomas Babington Macaulay's dream: 'The sceptre may pass away from us … But there are triumphs which are followed by no reverse. This is an empire exempt from all natural causes of decay … that empire is the *imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature, and our laws*' (italics added Macaulay 1879, 142). This essay is premised on the assumption that different languages express the world differently and embody peculiar literacies, values and behaviours. Reminiscent of the contested ideas of Benjamin Whorf (1956), the intimate relationship between culture and language continues to offer rich avenues for critical inquiry as I frame my primary question: 'how can the centrality of English to the creation of counter colonial discourses be unsettled?' This writing then, attempts a critical reappraisal of World English, or englishes to argue that the global spread of the language and its localisation act contrary to some of the professed boons of its proliferation, reinforcing the divide between speakers of English and speakers of 'other-ed' languages, and even between 'native' and 'non-native' speakers of English.

Positionality

This study subscribes to Willig's concept of 'positional' reflexivity defined as looking at 'the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research' (Willig 2013, 10). It is a measure of my past, of my ambitions and of my cultural and geographic situated-ness that I take up the issue of writing in English. Born to Pakistani parents (who speak Urdu/ Punjabi) and schooled in London, I am bilingual but English is the language of my interior monologue. English is also the language of higher education and social mobility in Pakistan, which has been the venue of my creative practice from 2011 — 2016.

The impetus for this essay stems from a theatre play on Tipu Sultan of Mysore (1750 — 1799), the most implacable opponent of the East India Company's (EIC) expansion in India. With his father Hyder Ali Khan (1720 — 1782), Tipu was involved in a series of conflicts, the Anglo-Mysore Wars (1767 — 1799 intermittently), with the EIC. After his death in combat, Tipu was textualised extensively in British historical accounts, such as those of Buchanan (1807), Wilks (1810) and Taylor (1870), as an 'oriental despot'. Fiction writers like Walter Scott (1827), Meadows Taylor (1840) and G. A. Henty (1895) perpetuated the image of the sanguinary tyrant of Mysore. Conversely, Tipu Sultan is a national hero in Pakistan and parts of India (depending on demography), and has been taken up in postcolonial reappraisals of silenced histories in Hasan (1951), Brittlebank (1997; 2016), and Habib (2002). Tipu has been the subject of imaginative writing from Britain (Shipway 1976; Cornwell 1998) and the subcontinent Hijaazi (1964), Gidwani (1976) and Karnad (1997). Pakistan has produced an Urdu feature film *Tipu Sultan* (1977) for which the novelist Naseem Hijaazi wrote the screenplay.

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Tipu is a contested figure in contemporary India, hailed simultaneously as a moderniser (Habib 2002) and proto anticolonial figure (Fernandes 1991), and a Muslim tyrant who destroyed temples, trampled over Hindu traditions and converted thousands to Islam (Goel 1993; Balakrishna 2013). Villagers in some south Indian villages abstain from *Divali* festivities in commemoration of their ancestors killed during Tipu's excursions (*India Today* 2018). Hasan (1951) ascribes the negative Tipu legend to colonial propaganda in a bid to justify British expansion and present the Mysore sovereign as a scourge removed by the civilising force. Pakistan, which came into being after the partition of British India in 1947, continues to define itself in oppositional terms to India. What Hindu revivalists describe as rapacious Muslim conquests of India in the 10th century, Pakistan presents to its people as the arrival of a liberating influence and a developed culture represented by Islam and the Persian language. Tipu falls in the category of historical figures who have been appropriated in the postcolonial state's narrative of its past. The government-run Lahore Museum, for instance, presents the Freedom Movement of Pakistan as having its roots in Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan's struggle against the British in its pictorial gallery. However, Tipu was/ is also genuinely admired by Indians, Pakistanis and even some of his British foes. There is thus a genuine cultural celebration of the legacy in tandem with its different appropriations. For example, the legend of the 'Muslim martyr' had assumed its present shape for many admirers of Tipu on the heels of his fall in 1799 (Price 1839, 432). Concerning Tipu's governance, British official Francis Kelly found that Tipu's dominions of Coimbatore and Kolar were well-maintained and Tipu held in esteem by the villagers (Brittlebank 1997, 89). For the liberal historian James Mill, Tipu was an able ruler whose kingdom rivalled British Bengal in prosperity (1840 [1817] vol. III, 258).

As I researched Tipu Sultan's story, I determined to participate in the textualisation of his

legacy through a creative intervention, a bilingual play (conceived in English, adapted/ translated into Urdu) titled *Shair-e-Mysore* 'Tiger of Mysore', staged in Lahore, Pakistan in April 2015 before a bi/ trilingual audience that learns English for social mobility, employment and participation in the global economy. The play offers an imaginary reconstruction of Tipu's wars with the EIC as he struggles to keep his wits about him in a confrontation those around him see as futile. The pivot of the play is the chorus's plea: 'Remember our story friends, remember us!' playing with the audience's foreknowledge of the colonial conquest of South Asia. The play received positive reviews with wide coverage in the national press (*Dawn* 2015, *The Nation* 2015) and earned one feature article in an Urdu daily for its 'cinematic portrayal of Tipu's story' (Kausari 2015). English and Urdu overlap fruitfully in the play, a combination I offer as a response to the primary question of this study. How can we unsettle the hegemony of English in the creation of counter colonial discourses? My suggestion is that we ought to continue using English but in covalence with 'other-ed' languages, a syncretising of English and local languages to enrich understanding. For the purpose of this writing, this is decentring English.

Methodology

This essay follows a thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure. To problematize the postcolonial reliance on English, I will explore and analyse contesting views of language use. The first section provides an overview of the global spread of English (Schneider 2011), the material benefits accrued by English-speaking elites as a consequence of this spread (Phillipson 1992; 2009), and the consequent cultural retardation of 'other-ed' languages (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986; 2013). The following section presents the case for the appropriation of English by the global periphery (Sontag 2007; Ashcroft 2009; Roy 2018), and effectively doubles as the antithesis to Ngũgĩ. My critique of Phillipson and Ashcroft in the same section paves the way for a synthesis of polar formulations in the theoretically informed hindsight of my bilingual

creative practice. In the final analysis, English is affirmed as a tool for challenging hegemonic narratives, but is not allowed to become hegemonic itself by being the sole language of critical/ creative debate. This can be achieved, as I demonstrate, by bringing marginalised languages into bi- or multilingual combinations with English.

Thesis

Though dated, Kachru's (1985) categorisation of countries in terms of language use remains fruitful: the core English-speaking centres, the US, UK, Canada, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand, form the Inner Circle; former British colonies in in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean fall in the Second, while countries increasingly taking up English, such as China, occupy the Expanding Circle. But such classifications assume an epistemological rather than an ontological differentiation between the varieties of English, so that there is a discreet triumphalism accompanying announcements that today South Asia houses more English speakers than the US. Central to the justificatory paradigm for the continued use of English is the notion of its indigenization in and ownership by the English-speaking Global South. Ashcroft et al. distinguish between 'Standard' British English and its avatar in the 'english' of many postcolonial societies (2002, 8). The varieties of English (and accompanying 'lects') that have developed across the globe are 'indigenous', implying ownership and localism as opposed to 'Anglo' English (Wierzbicka 2010, 2014) — the language(s) of the erstwhile settler colonies, seen as an imposition from the Centre on the Periphery, or from the Global North on the Global South. 'English has become localised and indigenized in a great many countries', writes Schneider (2011, 2). 'In many countries English has become embraced, appropriated, transformed, made "our own" ' (2011, 4). If English has been de-centred thus, the implication is it has been unhinged from its colonial moorings and can, and often is, employed to reflect the daily struggles, passions and lived

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reality of those from the Global South. It is such a language that Indian writer Raja Rao refers to: ‘We cannot write like the English. We should not … Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American’ (1967, Foreword). Yet, this achievement comes at a cost. Emphasising the de-centring of English in the following extract, Schneider taken on a jubilant tone:

> In many countries of Africa and Asia, where English was introduced just one or two centuries ago, there are now indigenous children who grow up speaking English as their first and/ or most important, most frequently used language. Some of them are not even able to speak the indigenous language of their parents. Come to think of it – isn’t this an amazing phenomenon? (2011, 3)

The children who grow up speaking English as their first language gain English at the cost of some of the ways of thinking, facets of knowledge and values embedded in the ‘other-ed’ languages that their parents have abandoned out of real economic and cultural concerns. ‘At the pragmatic level,’ notes Rahman, ‘the dominated languages are perceived as ghettoizing, i.e., those which keep their users confined to low powered status and occupations . . . This is understandable, considering that people assume that the established order will not change and they do not wish to reduce their children’s chances of acquiring power’ (1996, 10). Might we argue that English continues to colonise even in its localisation?

Phillipson (1992, 2009) sees language as a veritable arm of imperialism, a category in its own, while also pervading other forms that imperial exploitation takes. Phillipson utilises Johan Galtung’s theoretical work to undergird his theory of linguistic imperialism (Galtung 1972). To simplify terms, imperialism in Galtung, is defined as an asymmetric relationship between two societies propelled by four mechanisms: exploitation, penetration, fragmentation and marginalisation of the unequal partner in the relationship. Galtung

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elaborates the theory as operating within a division of the world into a dominant Centre (the US, EU) and dominated Peripheries (Africa, Asia, Latin America). There are, Galton clarifies, centres of power in both the Centre and the Peripheries, reflecting social class and racial/ ethnic hierarchies. Often, elites in Peripheral regions of the world enter into strategic relationships with powerful quarters in the Centre (political governments, multinational corporations, donor agencies). Concerning such networks, Sefa Dei notes that colonialism 'establishe[d] sustainable hierarchies and systems of power' many of which remained in place following the coloniser's departure (2006, 3). Despite the success of anticolonial movements across the Anglo-French empires, these enduring hierarchies remain beholden to the same economic and cultural formulations that engendered them (Chinweizu 1975, 43). Phillipson adds that the centres in both the Periphery and *the* Centre are also linked by a common language – English. Since the nationalist struggles in multiple theatres of colonial expansion were led by a British-educated and English proficient local elite — Macaulay's native 'intermediaries', or Vittachi's 'brown sahibs' — English continues to link elites in the Global North with those in the Periphery. Postcolonial centres of power invite economic expertise, technology, and military hardware from the Global North, facilitated by the use of the common language (Phillipson 1992, 52). The inherited coloniality of the elites, 'reinforces exclusive notions of belonging, difference and superiority' (Principe in Dei 2006, 3) where English becomes a bearer of these hierarchies.

There are significant implications for Anglophone writers. The postcolonial literati from the subcontinent, Singapore and China opt for English because it is the language they most command and takes their writing to a wider audience. The sense of inevitability construed with the spread of English serves, according to Phillipson, to hide the inequalities that are maintained by the global 'demand' for English. English in Periphery countries is often seen

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as the gateway to social mobility (Kirkpatrick 2015, 8), and government policies on teaching English, or using English as a medium of instruction, 'play an important role in shaping the social character — the social habitus — and, in the process, reinforce existing unequal language (and economic, political and cultural) relations' (Rassool 2007, 142). As an instance of these inequalities, Phillipson (1992; 2009) and Pennycook (1998) have shown how English Language Teaching (ELT/ ESL/ EFL) has evolved into a multi billion-dollar industry, run primarily at the expense of 'non-native' speakers of English. Teaching material, methodologies, instructors and accompanying ideologies concerning English and other languages that English supplants, argues Pennycook, come from English-speaking (Centre) to non English-speaking (Periphery) nations. The ties between Global South and Global North elites are mutually beneficial. Postcolonial elites control access to these resources, often to the detriment of the disadvantaged. A Pakistani government study, for instance, admits that 'the use of English as the medium of instruction at higher levels perpetuates the gulf between the rulers and the ruled, it also perpetuates the advantages of those children who come from well-to-do families' (Rahman 1996, 237).

Accompanying the economic dimension of linguistic imperialism, is what Fanon described as the splitting of the colonised self (1991). For Fanon, the language of the coloniser is pivotal to the coloured person's understanding of the world. The coloured person wants to be comprehensible to the white man (Fanon employs the masculine throughout); to show the white man that he exists, so he speaks for him: 'For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other' (1991, 17). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o notes that such a fractured identity is consequent of the colonial degradation of the native. The natives are distanced from their surroundings and come to associate instead with the alien culture. Importantly for Ngũgĩ, this alienation takes place when a foreign language is imposed on cultural 'others' through

the administrative arm of the colonial machinery. As the new language replaces the old, what is replaced is a way of thinking. What is created is a duality: 'It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person' (1986, 28). In this context, Ngũgĩ sees the continued use of English in literary and critical writing as a betrayal of decolonial efforts. He argues that such fiction, even in postcolonial englishes, serves to enrich the original language of oppression – English. Approached from this context, even when writers like Achebe express themselves in a distinctly African English, the composition does nothing to strengthen the native language(s):

> Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? … We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages? How can we 'prey' on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggles of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own? Why not have Balzac, Tolstoy, Sholokov … in African languages? And why not create literary monuments in our own languages? (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986, 8)

Ngũgĩ makes an emphatic case for literary composition in native languages, but does not adhere to a parochial vision for his output. His own creative practice has involved writing in the Bantu language of Kenya's Kikuyu people, and translating into English to cater to a wider readership.

Antithesis

Both Ngũgĩ and Phillipson envisage the spread of English in terms of an impositional continuity. They see neo-colonial elites in the Global South in collusion with multinational corporations, western governments and donor agencies, generating the sequel to colonial exploitation. Bill Ashcroft (2009), on the other hand, challenges such a conception by highlighting that English is not superimposed, but has been grafted onto colonised cultures,

and that its use instantiates the discursive agency of the colonised. Taking Shakespeare's Caliban as the archetypal 'other' trapped on his own island in the coloniser's language, Ashcroft shifts the focus from his dispossession to his agency (2009). Caliban can seize the magic wand from Prospero, break the spell and forge a renewed discursive space where European knowledge can no longer interpellate the colonial subject. This and more, Ashcroft insists, has already been achieved in postcolonial literary writing in English.

Ashcroft traces the genesis of the oft-touted link between language and culture to race-based philology in the 19th century. Colonisers assumed and asserted that their language embodied their race with 'superior race, superior language' being an essential corollary. Second, colonists used their language to name appropriated territories. As naming is inextricably linked with ownership, the European came to own the land and interpellate the native in the appropriated landscape. Third, since language has the power to bring those parts of the self into being that remain unactuated, these *un-potentialised* depths of the 'other' were named and activated in the coloniser's language once it had already been imposed on the likes of Caliban. It would be fair to say that some psychic recesses of the Calibans of the world have been birthed in English. But, Ashcroft insists, there is room to wriggle in the trap. The conquest is only complete if and when the colonised accept and remain frozen in the activated categories. Caliban can use the same language to actualise parts of her being independent of Prospero and confront the coloniser with a newer, fuller and better-armed self (Ashcroft 2009, 27-29). Here is essentially where Ashcroft strikes at the heart of Ngũgĩ's argument in stating that the colonised self, or parts of it, can be activated in the language of the coloniser: 'the idea that colonised peoples are unable to use the colonisers language as anything more than a way of serving the colonising power, is a myth about the function of language which falls into Prospero's trap' (31).

The idea of English as a ‘trap’, even, is misleading, for Prospero too is constrained to use language and is in the same bind as Caliban. In this sense, the native speaker of English does not really ‘own’ the language. Since naming and appropriation is practised in language, the colonial language becomes ripe for the plucking: ‘It is not exactly “ours” but it is not exclusively theirs “either”. It is “ours” because we make it ours, and when we do so we choose to identify ourselves in a particularly contested, a particularly ambivalent space. It is then no longer fully “theirs” because in making it “ours” we change its form’ (96). Ownership, in fact, has been contested since the moment Caliban came to speak Prospero’s language. More so in the globalised world. Ashcroft asks if a bilingual child even has a mother tongue, concluding that language is already ‘an ambivalent “third space” between people — a transcultural space that defies the essential location of subjects’ (96).

While the indigenization of English in former British colonies means that the domination of English has reached higher levels in the postcolonial era, Ashcroft’s assertion that the language has also served to empower marginalised sections is borne out in several instances. Many Dalit activists in India, for Arundhati Roy, ‘see the denial of a quality English education to the underprivileged (in the name of nationalism or anticolonialism) as a continuation of the Brahmin tradition of denying education and literacy … to people they consider “shudras” and “outcastes” ’ (Roy 2018). In other words, proficiency in English enables the underclass to participate in the struggle for the postcolonial nation’s limited resources, prompting a Dalit critic to dedicate a village temple to a *Dalit* Aphrodite whose bequest to the people is the English language. This demonstrates the recalibration of ancient class/ caste struggles in the post-colonial state where English works as an empowering tool in stiff competition. More evidence that Phillipson has clearly deflated the agency of

language learners in the Global South, is provided by the case of the multibillion dollar ‘call centre’ industry housed in India. Galton’s Peripherals are not hapless victims of a running colonial scam in which they are forced to learn English or perish. Quite often, in fact, unsuspecting ‘Westerners’ are at the wrong end of the stick when it comes to the call centre industry. Scores of South Asian English speakers operate from cubicles to offer technical support, holiday reservations and outright scams to native-English speakers across the Anglosphere. Often targeting North America, pseudonymized recruits are trained vigorously to sound as American as possible:

> Nancy, or Mary Lou, Betty, Sally Jane, Megan, Bill, Jim, Wally, Frank – these cheerful voices had first to be trained for months, by instructors and by tapes, to acquire a pleasant middle-American (not an educated American) accent, and to learn basic American slang, informal idioms (including regional ones), and elementary mass-culture references (TV personalities and the plots and protagonists of the main sitcoms, the latest blockbuster in the multiplex, fresh baseball and basketball scores, and such), so that if the exchange with the client in the United States becomes prolonged, they will not falter with the small talk and will have the means to continue to pass for Americans (Riley 2007, 233).

The training ensures that recruits *become* Americans for the duration of the work day. To pull this off, the recruits have to effectively *live* it. Reminiscent of Fanon, *speaking* translates into *being*; to know a language is to bear its cultural burden, to own it. Everyday in their shift, coloured people in South Asia *become* Americans. But unlike coloured people who are victims of epistemic violence in Fanon, these resourceful chameleons have learned to tap into the global market.

English, in many ways, has been seized, sequestered and exploited by those on whom it was imposed. And yet, the appropriation of the language is complicated by the material benefits accrued by native English speaking Centres and English-proficient elites in the global

Periphery. The fact that cultural others can pretend to be Americans and make money off their prowess in English, I believe, also reinscribes the prestige of the global language and the native speaker. When call centre operatives were asked if they 'would prefer to be a real Nancy and a real Bill?', says Susan Sontag, 'Almost all say – there have been interviews – that they would. Would they want to come to America, where it would be normal to speak English all the time with an American accent? Of course they would' (Sontag 2007). Milking the call centre industry in South Asia, resourceful chameleons are still in the Global South and, in many cases, would prefer to permanently assume their alter egos. What I intend to show is that while examples like the 'Dalit Renaissance' and the call centre industry curtail the thrust of the argument in Phillipson, Rahman and Pennycook, they do not necessarily negate it. It is largely the post-colonial state that controls the provision of education, and it is English which acts as a gatekeeper to social mobility in Global South peripheries.

The language learning and teaching networks between Inner and Outer Circle countries are positioned asymmetrically in favour of the former. English Language Teaching (ELT) and in its various incarnations (EFL, ESL, CELTA, DELTA), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and proficiency testing services IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, and Cambridge English Exams (CEE) generate substantial revenue for the Inner Circle. The IELTS website triumphantly announces: 'More than three million International English Language Testing System (IELTS) tests were taken in the past year [2017], reflecting the growing importance of the world's leading test of English for international higher education and migration' (British Council n.d.). That each of the three million tests was roughly £ 200 must make us pause, if ever so briefly, and ask when was it the native speaker died? And did the death occur before or after the de-centring of English?

Synthesis

In an essay which has since earned the chagrin of linguists, Benjamin Whorf's claimed that Hopi Indians did not have words corresponding to *past*, *present,* and *future*, and thus possessed a different conception of time (Whorf 1956, 58). Though the claim was disproved shortly afterwards, Whorf's insistence that different languages embody location-specific insights which contribute to humanity's storehouse of knowledge is increasingly relevant in the age of the global spread of English. It is the West, Whorf argued, that must realise the import of 'other-ed' languages and catch up, an effort which 'requires linguistic research into the logics of native languages, and realization they have equal scientific validity with our own thinking habits (1956, 21).   Whorf may have been wrong about the Hopi, but subsequent studies have shown that cultures retain divergent conceptions of time/ history. Our everyday concepts like hours, minutes, seconds and the 7-day week, may be nothing more than naturalised cultural propensities. The Amondawa tribe of Brazil, for instance, does not believe in the traditional segmentation of the day into twenty-four hours (Sinha 2011), while the Pueblo conception of history, as it emerges in their writing, is not linear (Tierney in Tierney and Lincoln 1997, 30). The status of English as the language of global capital and technology, of supranational organisations like the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, and of the world's sole superpower, means that the learning of other languages has not been incentivised. Other than in areas of academic specialisation, native English speakers do not feel the need to 'bridge the intellectual gulf' that Whorf sees in Western learning. In the context of the increasing spread of English, bi- or multilingual creative practice offers a rich avenue of resistance to the continuing relegation of 'other-ed' languages.

Shair-e-Mysore can be placed in the larger framework of linguistic imperialism discussed above. The intention in my bilingual play is to enrich English Literature with a non-Western protagonist, and explore how a bilingual audience can tease out insights that would not be accessible to monolingual speakers. The play was conceived and originally written in English because it is the language inside my head, but the use of English was oriented to exploit the resources of the language I command best, akin, in many ways, to J.M. Coetzee: 'English does not feel to me like a resting place, a home. It just happens to be a language over whose resources I have achieved some mastery' (2008, 197). Following the first English draft, I sought the services of a friend, a professor of Urdu Literature and together we translated/ adapted the play into a bilingual script.

The effort revealed to me the Whorfian claim that some languages are more amenable to the expression of ideas peculiar to the cultures in which they are spoken. Not that these ideas cannot be conveyed in English, but that the languages which originally articulate them convey a wealth of subtle shades and nuances which are worth knowing for their own sake. Furthermore, with native characters speaking in Urdu and their British antagonists in English, *Shair-e- Mysore*, offers a deeper engagement with the visible reality of language predation. The audience's familiarity with both languages allows for a richer interpretation of the colonial intervention in linguistic terms by providing an image of 'what else was at stake' as two world views clash head on. As an instance of what I have said above, concerning shades of meaning and the triumph of English, I will quote from Scene 8 of the original (English) version. Tipu, having suffered defeat at the hands of the East India Company in 1792, is poised to endure another drubbing in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War of 1799. Efforts to prevent further destruction in the Third War had cost him half his kingdom and the humiliation of having to offer up two of his sons as hostages to Lord Cornwallis. The new

aggressive governor general, Richard Wellesley, demands another half of Tipu's truncated kingdom and four of his sons as hostages – conditions the Mysore sovereign refuses to accept. It is in this context that he attempts to seek refuge in the company of his mistress. Tipu finds Jehan Ara in quite a state as she rambles about her own existential struggles. During this conversation, Jehan Ara remarks rather audaciously that Tipu is poised to lose his father's kingdom in what seems to be an unavoidable reversal of fortune. The conversation leaves Tipu agitated in the face of his difficulties. In the bilingual play however, the exchange is complicated. Both characters are speaking in Urdu when Jehan Ara's sudden use of the English term 'inevitable' (in relation to the consequence of Tipu's confrontation with the English), sends the sultan into a fit of anger and despondency. Jehan Ara has hit a raw nerve; referencing Tipu's past defeat, she has predicted his future humiliation in the language of the adversary with the exchange taking place in the intimate space of Tipu's palace. Tipu foams at this violation of his interiority, bellowing to his royal guard to come forth and seize the English who have penetrated his house. There is then the attendant sexual connotation of his favourite mistress having had intercourse with (the language of) the English, and of having changed masters.

Such a nuance would not only have been impossible to communicate in the English play but would not have been tinged with the recall of language politics in South Asia. It was not until 1813 that the Charter Act was passed and the British assumed greater responsibility for education in India, leading ultimately to the introduction of English as the language of administration in Bengal. The decisive 'Anglicist' moment came with Macaulay's minute of 1835. English replaced Persian as the language of administration and became the language of instruction for higher education in India (Boland-Crewe and Lea 2003, 17). It is important not to ignore that this legislation was introduced in the era following the fall of Tipu in 1799. The

elimination of residual resistance from the Maratha confederacy (1818) followed quickly on the heels of Tipu's demise. In hindsight, the death of Tipu Sultan represents a pivotal moment in the establishment of the unequivocal supremacy of the EIC in India. It is an audience that lives dual lives in English and Urdu that can have a deeper appreciation of Tipu's reaction to Jehan Ara's use of English — and of Tipu's fall. Tipu's interaction with Jehan Ara shows that the introduction of English constituted a discursive fissure in the subcontinent, but the audience's foreknowledge of the triumph of English despite Tipu's wars against the Company, opens the space to creatively exploit distinct ways of creating meaning. Here is then an opportunity to utilise the heterogeneity existing in bi- or multilingual post-colonial societies.

Bi/ multilingual creative practice also engenders the possibility of 'recovery'. I use the term in the context of Schneider's celebration of the spread of English to the detriment of other languages. With early childhood exposure to English in Britain and the status of English as the official language of the state of Pakistan, my Urdu is inadequate, to say the least. In this backdrop, the adaptation/ translation of the play into an Urdu-English text revealed subtle cultural scripts in operation behind language. Here is a portion of the original (English) text. Syed Mohib, one of Tipu's courtiers, addresses two members of the royal guard. The situation: Tipu's last stronghold has been taken. Amidst the confusion and chaos of an enemy storm, the three remaining members of Tipu's entourage discuss if it is worth staying at his side when the end is near, or switch to the English to preserve their chances of survival.

Syed Mohib: It is time to choose.

Qutubuddin: From what?

Syed Mohib: A day with Tipu Sultan or a lifetime with the English.

Qutubuddin: A day.

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Ahmed Khan: A lifetime.

Qutubuddin: Just a moment to decide.

Up until this point, the translation is straightforward. The Urdu captures the import of the original and conveys it quite transparently. Syed Mohib then argues that it is in this moment that they can trump a lifetime by choosing to live a day with Tipu. In his appeal, he resorts to the elements:

Syed Mohib: Remember this day men, for on this day, none of you is a slave. Your country belongs to you. The sun scorches you, the wind ruffles you, the rain drenches you. It is all yours. Today, this moment, you stand alone. You will not stand long. But as long as you stand, Mysore is free. The English approach. The choice is yours.

My intention in invoking the elements was to convey the intensity of the South Asian climate. In the plains, the rain is seen as respite from the blazing sun. But when it rains, it lashes and the wind occasionally uproots trees and blows makeshift roofs right off the top of mud houses in the country. In rendering the sentence into Urdu, my friend (the Urdu literature professor) played with shades of meaning which can be re-translated into English:

Syed Mohib: Remember this day, friends . . . The rays [of the sun] melt on you. The rain pours down on you. The wind expends itself on you.

The exchange in the original attempts to show that Tipu and his men choose their native elements despite the ferocity which is innate to them. It is a sense of ownership which they will relinquish if they choose to switch sides, for as the probable victors, it is the British who will describe the landscape, the climate, the speech, dress and manners of the natives. What I want to highlight here is the way in which the Urdu translation transforms the content of Syed Mohib's exhortation. The elements lose the intensity that the English version stresses, and are seen showering their devotions on the people. The sun, ever harsh and intense across the plains of the subcontinent, exists *for* them. *Pigalna* is to melt, the term evokes the image of a candle. The candle, *sham*a, and the moth, *parwana*, are standard tropes in Urdu poetry with

the moth as the (male) lover, circling the (female) flicker that represents the beloved. The moth circumambulates the flame until it has expended its life force in his devotion. But the futility of the struggle — for the moth's worship is unrequited — or the brevity of his existence (he only lives for the one night of its worship) do not detract from the sanctity of the libation. For the *parwana*, to live is to orbit the beloved until it drops dead having accomplished its purpose. But the flare too is unstable, short-lived. The candle will burn out expressing a mutuality of devotion. It is a self-referential situation for it does not look outside of its symbiotic relationship for meaning. The Mysorean sun is one such flame in the bilingual play. The reference to the monsoon, 'the rain pours down *on* you', conveys more than it says through the myriad connotations of rain — of the farmer's joy at the nurture of his soil, of the city dweller's respite from the heat, of the monsoon season *barsaat*, romance *rumaniat*, and mirth *bahaar*. The wind does not ruffle but 'expends' itself on the people of Mysore. In this instance, it is the Urdu exchange that is essentially more organic and intuitive. 'We should be able to connect to our base,' says Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'and then connect to the world from our base. Our own bodies, our own languages, our own hair' (qtd. in Marshell 2018). The bilingual play connects more intimately with the soil than the English one.

It is through the Urdu translation/ adaptation that I begin to fathom what the original English version cannot achieve. To see the sun as a tyrant, the rain as lashing those on whom it falls, and the high winds as agents of destruction is to look at them from an outsider's perspective. I can now trace such descriptions to my first trip to Pakistan. On landing in Lahore from London, for the first time in my life, I noticed how warm the sun was, and that the air was literally brown with dust. It was the inevitable comparison with the elusive English sun that made this one so merciless. The tropical downpours seemed excessive only in retrospect, only when compared with the English drizzle. My 'default country' was England. Syed

Mohib's speech in Urdu 'recovers' meaning of which the English text was not even aware.

Editing *India Through Hindu Categories* (1990), McKim Marriott critiques the Western predisposition to view 'other' societies through the prism of deficit resulting in the negation of native forms of knowledge and social practices, at the same time universalising Western modes of thought and action. We should see that 'all social sciences develop from thought about what is known to particular cultures and are thus ethno-social sciences in their origin' (Marriot 1990, 1). For Marriot, 'the investigator who seeks ways of asking in rural India about equivalents of Western "individuals," "social structures," "kinship," "classes," "statuses," … "ideology," "religion," "purity," etc. risks imposing an alien ontology and an alien epistemology" 'on the inquiry (1990, 1-2). What I intend to show through this digression is that English words/ concepts are often taken to be universal, a tendency that might hinder a true appreciation of native realities. A related dimension is the status of English as the language of higher education in the Global South, and its position as the default language of the Academy: 'There are dangers inherent in this, especially if this status of English as the default language of analysis and interpretation is not recognized and if alternative methods of analysis and interpretation are not deployed that would allow English itself to be looked at from a non- English and non-Anglo perspective' (Wierzbicka 2014, 10). Of primary importance here is to approach and appreciate cultures (and English itself) from a non-Anglo perspective. To do so, I argue, we require alternative frames of reference and different vocabularies of comprehension. The 'other-ed' language is not a value-free framework for comprehension but an alternate tool for comparison.

With the emphasis on 'other-ed' linguistic traditions, we must also acknowledge that it is not language alone that ensures a decolonising stance. British Orientalists, led by the likes of

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William Jones (1746 – 1794), employed Persian, Sanskrit and Arabic experts to penetrate indigenous knowledge, translate and compile information on conquered territory and people in a bid to categorise and control India (Cohn 1996). In this respect, it is the blending of language(s) with setting, plot and characters in meaningful combinations that unsettle hegemonic narratives. One such narrative I wish to contest through the English-Urdu play is the appropriation of political action, of 'freedom' and 'liberty', as Western ideals. Imperial thought has often arrogated to itself the formal undoing of Empire (Gopal 2019). That 'liberty' and the 'nation' are Western ideals is so deeply entrenched that even in cultural portrayals of disruption, it is white protagonists who lead the resistance against colonial regimes, as in Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) or James Cameron's Avatar (2009). My choice to tell the story of a South Asian prince who correctly predicted the imperial conquest of India and stood to resist it is aimed as a corrective to such portrayals. Whose story gets told is intimately related to how it is told in my play, where bilingual narration unsettles the elevated position accorded to the prestige language, thus decentring English. Where the use of English references a colonial past and reflects the imperatives of global communication, the use of Urdu acknowledges a counter tradition, an abiding and thriving linguistic alterity that has neither been subsumed nor completely relegated by English.

Urdu, nonetheless, comes with its own baggage. It is the national language of Pakistan spoken natively by less than 10 percent of the population (Wadley 2013, 66). How can this be explained? As the Muslim nationalism of the north Indian aristocracy came to define itself in exclusivist terms in the late 19th century, it linked Islam with the Urdu language (Aziz 1992). Not only were the cultural aspirations of the north Indian elite taken up later by the postcolonial state of Pakistan, but the relationship between Islam and Urdu became the

mainstay of the new country's foundational narrative . In the long run, the stress on Pakistan as 'one united nation bonded by Islam and the Urdu language' (Cilano 2014, 30) has often 'other-ed' regional languages, many of which have much longer histories than Urdu. The sporadic occurrence of language riots, the first as early as in 1947 (Rahman 1996, 32), shows that postcolonial language politics eschews ready solutions. Yet, there is still room to make the case for the promotion of Urdu and regional languages in Pakistan.

Urdu has the strongest claim to being a literary language. It was at the court of Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah (1719 — 1748), that Urdu poetry was accorded court recognition (Spear 1961, 173). Urdu was also promoted by Tipu Sultan in Mysore. It is the language of a constellation of admired poets like Mir Taqi Mir (1723 — 1810), Khawaja Mir Dard (1720 — 1785), Mirza Ghalib (1797 — 1869) and Pakistan's 'spiritual father' Iqbal (1877 — 1938), all of whom constitute the vibrant literary tradition of the subcontinent. Despites its status as the language of the 'federal centre', the Urdu poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911 — 1984), Habib Jalib (1928 — 1993) and Ahmad Faraz (1931 — 2008) were declared subversive by Pakistan's successive martial law regimes. Since Pakistan's early days, a school of 'progressive' poets, writing in Urdu and regional languages, has often taken up the cause of marginalised sections of society (Mir and Mir 2006). In recent years, the authoritarian deep state has occasionally attempted to crack down on what it sees as anti-military posts on social media (Hill and Motwani 2017). Many of these posts are in 'Romanised' Urdu, that is, Urdu in Roman script. 'Roman' Urdu continues to gain popularity in advertising, print and social media, often to the chagrin of language purists (Parekh 2009). Most of all perhaps, Urdu is the language of Pakistan's mainstream print and electronic media. It is not everyone's language, but it is a language everyone understands. Lest this discussion convey an impression of privileging Urdu over any of Pakistan's regional

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languages, I might add that insistence on a single language would negate the objective of this writing. The aim is to promote and celebrate linguistic variety and multiplicity, and circulate literacies that languages embody. The purpose is not to justify my use of Urdu, but to encourage bi/ multilingual creative practice while making the best use of English in postcolonial societies.

Bi/ multilingual creative practice also makes use of my diasporic positionality. What Fanon considered a psychic split engendered by a life in two cultures and linguistic traditions, can also serve as a vantage; a double knowing fostered by two languages that do not necessarily run counter to each other. But if the two languages are kept apart, the two world views that they reflect remain separate. The bilingual text brings them together in meaningful encounters. In Stuart Hall's conception, the sense of displacement experienced by diasporic communities — and by language migrants, I might add — compels them to search for visions of a more amenable pre-colonial past (Davis 2004, 185). For Hall, the 'recovery' of this image is a productive contemporary event: 'It is an imaginative act of discovery, which gives an imaginary coherence to a broken and fragmented sense of identity' (185). The exercise in bilingual creativity is perhaps also an exercise in the creation of a vision; a past where the 'other' has not yet been colonised, and the coloniser is not yet paramount. A place where the white man (!) has not been deified and the person of colour has not been dislocated, dehumanised and disinherited. A place beyond English yet conceived in it, for that is the only morphology I command. In *Shair-e-Mysore,* the strategic use of 'other-ed' languages in conjunction with English attempts to displace English from its pedestal, dispute its centrality to the articulation of anticolonial discourses, and show it to be one among many languages. In the play, as Tipu faces the British, he convinces himself of victory on a higher plane; one that never took place but one that can at least be imagined. The bilingual play creates such an

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ephemeral space – Mysore.

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