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English as the World's Language

by

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Professor Eugene Chen Eoyang is Professor of English of Lingnan College. His first extended schooling was in Karachi (then India) at an English Grammar School. Since then, he has been fascinated with English as a language, and with the teaching of English as a mode of education. In "English as the World's Language," he considers the misconception of language purity, the vitality of English as an adaptive language, and the irony behind the fact that English has become the language of choice in the expression of ethnic oppositions to traditional "mainstream" Anglo-American culture.

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English as the World's Language

Eugene Chen EOYANG

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged, to borrow an opening phrase from Jane Austen, that English is becoming the world's language. Every corner of the globe reflects this conviction, and the worldwide reach of the Cable News Network and of the BBC reminds us how the English language can be found virtually everywhere on the face of the planet. This observation has become now so familiar and so banal that we rarely question its veracity or examine its import. Yet, there are ways in which this assertion is, not so surprisingly, untrue, and other ways in which it is, surprisingly, true. What I should like to consider are the senses in which English is, and is not, the world's language. In the process, I will touch on a number of issues which I hope you will find of interest: (1) the heterogenous nature of language in general and of English in particular; (2) the phenomena of "subaltern" authors being, on occasion, more "English" than the English; (3) the growing literature of ethnic identity written in English; (4) the need for new perspectives on language teaching in general, and the teaching of English in particular; and (5) the place of English in the liberal arts and at Lingnan College.

"Pidgin" English

At a banquet a successful Japanese executive was the honored speaker; the master of ceremonies, after a fulsome introduction, said the guest would speak in English, which he characterized as "the language of international business." In a brilliant rhetorical ploy, all the more effective for being true, the honored guest remonstrated with the host when he began his remarks in halting English: "I must beg to differ with my honored host. It is not true that English is the language

* Talk given at Lingnan College, sponsored by the Centre for Literature and Translation, September 23, 1996, presented in memory of Professor A. Ronald Walton of the University of Maryland, pioneer in the systematic study of language learning and language instruction who, tragically, died recently.

of international business. The language of international business is – ‘broken English’.” Whatever the “universal language of business” may be, it is most certainly not the King’s English or the Queen’s English – a dialect spoken only by a handful of educated expatriates worldwide, by the graduates of British universities, and by what was once known as the “upper crust.” The authority on cross-cultural studies, Geert Hofstede has written: “Trade languages are ‘pidgin’ forms of original languages, and the trade language of the modern world can be considered a form of business pidgin English.”¹

Indeed, if “broken English” has become the “lingua franca” of our day, we may well pause to explore the notion of “lingua franca” itself. In common and unthinking usage, a “lingua franca” is generally understood to designate a language that can be understood internationally, “something,” the Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary tells us, “resembling a common language.” What is subliminally assumed is that this is a distinct, consistent and autonomous language. Yet, the etymology of “lingua franca” as “the Frankish tongue” belies the fact that the term referred in the seventeenth century to “a mixed language or jargon used in the Levant, consisting largely of Italian words deprived of their inflexions”; it has been extrapolated to refer to “any mixed jargon formed as a medium of intercourse between people speaking different languages” (OED). One of the ironies of the term “lingua franca” is that it should be a Latin phrase that refers to Italian words which it labels as Frankish. Of course, by the nineteenth century, “lingua franca” referred to almost any mixture of languages, whether “half Italian and half Portuguese” or “that undefined mixture of Italian, French, Greek, and Spanish, which is spoken throughout the Mediterranean” (OED).

The “Purity” of Language

Of course, the entire question of the “purity” of languages is a controversial issue, caused by a mixture of misplaced chauvinism and a disregard for history. I once challenged a teacher of French about keeping the French language pure: how pure was French during the time of Charlemagne, I asked: where would modern French be if Charlemagne’s Frankish tongue had not adapted, evolved, modified itself through corruption as well as refinement into what later became

¹ *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), p. 212.

“classic” French. There is a seductive notion of “purity” which always privileges a particular period in the evolutionary cycle. The French, say, of Racine, is “classic,” but it evolved out of the French of François Villon. In the study of English, one recognizes Old English, Middle English, and modern English. Even though we admire the Elizabethan vernacular of Shakespeare, and we still recite the Jacobean accents of the King James Version of the Bible, no one condemns subsequent versions of English – whether the baroque elaborations of Sir Thomas Browne, the terse neoclassic couplets of Pope, the dithyrambic accents of Shelley, the hyperbolic sweep of a Carlyle, or even the multilingual patchwork quilt of James Joyce – as degradations of Elizabethan English. In a creative writing course, an ultra-conservative student dismissed the attempts of another student at experimental fiction with the comment, “This is the sort of thing that degenerates into Faulkner.” Fortunately, while there are standards of good or poor English, there is no one standard of English from which to “degenerate.” How many students of English literature wished they could “degenerate” into Faulkner!

English is itself a composite of Anglo-Saxon, Danish, Celtic, Norman roots, among others. All modern languages are, similarly, *linguæ francæ*, in the sense that they are composites of bits and pieces from previous languages. Proponents of language purity fail to recognize the derivativeness of all languages – even French. The argument also applies to notions of purity in culture. (It has always amused me that those who vaunt the purity the Anglo-Saxon race and of Anglo-Saxon culture, fail to notice the hyphen in Anglo-Saxon.) If English is becoming the *lingua franca* of the world, it is at least partly because it has exploited the composite character of the way language evolves.

Ethnic English

By contrast, England itself and being English has taken on a different coloring from what one might have expected. Stuart Hall, who, along with Raymond Williams, may be said to have fathered the cultural studies movement, one of the most significant intellectual exports from England, is a Jamaican migrant. Lady Antonia Fraser writes, in her 1985 novel, *Oxford Blood*: “the ultimate upstanding Englishman . . . just happens to be Chinese, and the proverbial Scottish nurse . . . just turns out to be West Indian.” The most punctilious novel of manners published in England in the last generation, *The Remains of*

the Day, was written by Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese immigrant. We are accustomed to seeing the United States as multicultural, but England has also become culturally heterogenous in the last few decades. Stuart Hall has observed: "Third generation young Black men and women know they come from the Caribbean, know that they are black, know that they are British. They want to speak from all three identities. They will contest the Thatcherite notion of Englishness, because they say Englishness is black."²

Subaltern English

What makes the English language so remarkable is that it has developed, almost chameleonically, into an instrument of ethnic expression for many writers who are not English. This ability to reflect different ethnic and cultural experiences suggests that English has survived precisely because of its multicultural flourishes: having given voice to the Irish, the Welsh, the Scots, the Canadians, the Americans, the Australians, it now expresses the sentiments of Trinidadians, East Indians, Singaporeans, Nigerians, South Africans. To speak the arbitrary (and inaccurate) color code for race, English is often the preferred medium, not only of many whites, but also of the yellow, the brown, and the black races. No other language can claim this versatility. English, Salman Rushdie maintains, is "no longer an English language," it "now grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language for themselves."³

Consider as one index a comparison of Nobel Prize winners of literature. Those who wrote in English but who were not British citizens outnumber those who were by a margin of three-to-one: — among them, Faulkner, Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser, Pearl Buck, John Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, Toni Morrison, from America; Patrick White from Australia; Wole Soyinka from Nigeria; Derek Walcott from Jamaica. Even expatriate Europeans, like the Pole Czeslaw

² "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." In *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, edited by Anthony D. King (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 59. Also quoted by Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 217.

³ Quoted by Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 48; also appears in Buell, p. 226.

Milosz, the Jew Isaac Bashevis Singer, and the Russian Joseph Brodsky, enhanced their considerable achievements by composing works in English, as well as, respectively, in their native Polish, Yiddish, and Russian. Contrast this with the winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature who wrote in French. Of the fourteen prize winners, only one – Maurice Maeterlinck of Belgium – was not a citizen of France, *un enfant de la patrie*.

Another way of saying this is to suggest that whereas all languages are fragmented, heterogenous, decentered, English may be more “postmodern” than most. While my linguistic limitations prevent me from speculating about the volume of anti-Western, and specifically anti-Anglo-American hegemonies in languages other than English, I doubt that one will find in those other languages as many oppositional works condemning the native tradition as one finds condemning England and Anglo-American imperialisms as have recently been published in English. To take but one well-known example, Edward Said’s 1978 book, *Orientalism*, the most searing critique of Western, including English, attitudes toward non-Western cultures was written and published, tellingly, in English. Consider the fate of that book if it had been composed in Arabic. That one is unlikely to find many counterparts in Arabic – i.e., excoriations of Arabic attitudes toward the West in Arabic – might be surmised by the sanctions, which still persist even after his death, that the Ayatollah Khomeini invoked against Salman Rushdie. Would Arabic culture celebrate a critique of Arabic oppressions written in Arabic with the same fervor and general approbation with which the English-speaking world has received Said’s *Orientalism*? The Khomeinis in Arabic culture would hardly tolerate it.

If English is no longer the exclusive discourse of the English, and if England itself is no longer purely Anglo-Saxon, becoming more and more the language of choice for ethnic expressions worldwide, and if English has been recognized as the most important second language in the world, why does the teaching of English suffer under a cloud of disdain in many quarters? This is the question I wish to address next.

Language Learning as a Heuristic

It has been claimed, with some plausibility in my opinion, that the teaching of Latin is a heuristic educational experience. Even if no one speaks Latin anymore, the argument goes, the intellectual discipline of learning this language is an exercise that develops the mind. Certainly, there is an intellectual cachet in knowing and using Latin. Hardly anyone considers the teaching of Latin a frivolous occupation. (Indeed, the study of Latin has undergone something of a boom in the United States in the last twenty years.) The study and teaching of ancient Greek is, if anything, even more respected. By contrast, the teaching of English has no such prestige. What I can't understand is: why is the teaching of a dead language respectable and the teaching of a living language not? Are we assuming that only when a language is dead and no longer useful or current is it worth studying?

Even among living languages, the situation is not at all equal. I submit that some languages are widely considered to be more respectable to study than others. For example, for a non-native to study French or Chinese or Arabic is an immediate cause for admiration. But someone who professes a desire to learn English is often regarded as engaging in an act of remediation, that is, learning something that they should already know, learning something that everyone else already knows. Yet, by all accounts, English is among the most difficult languages to learn: it is not as regular as, say, German; its grammar is not as easy as, say, Chinese; its morphology and its phonology is not as logical as, say, Korean (George Bernard Shaw's famous spelling of "fish" as "ghoti" – "gh" as in "enough", "o" as in "women", "ti" as in "nation" – makes the point memorably). Consider the difficulties of explaining the following common English expressions to a non-native: Why is it that feet smell and the nose runs? How does one explain the meaning of "head over heels" as in "head over heels in love" – where would our heads be normally, if not over our heels? Why is it that when the moon is out, we can see, but when the lights are out, we can't? Can anyone explain why one drives in the parkway, but parks in the driveway? Have you ever tried to follow the common warning, "Watch your head!"? If you followed this instruction literally, you would be cross-eyed with a head covered with bruises: "Trying to watch your head," Richard Lederer has suggested, "is like trying to bite your teeth."

Denigrations of Familiarity and the Native-Expert Myth

Surely, it is an intellectual challenge to teach and learn English. Why, then, is it so denigrated as a profession? There are, in my opinion, two reasons, one of them inevitable, the other fundamentally misguided. The teaching of English is not highly regarded because so many people do it, and because everybody thinks that anyone can do it. The first reason stems from demographic fact, but the second is based on a myth. When someone does not know a language, it is immediately assumed that a speaker of that language is an infallible expert, and qualified in the teaching of that language. By that token, there are over a billion qualified teachers of Chinese and qualified teachers of English would number in the hundreds of millions. Over the years, when I encounter American students planning to go to Japan or China or Korea without visible means of support, I ask: "How are you going to support yourself?", to which the reply is, invariably, "I'm going to teach English." With no formal training in teaching English, no Masters of the Arts of Teaching from Columbia's Teacher's College, yet, without exception, none of them have any doubts that they are qualified to teach English. Some of them, I daresay, have not even mastered English very well: there are times that teaching *them* feels like "teaching English as a foreign language." These students, ersatz teachers of English, are fluent but, in the brilliant formulation of Elinor Jorden, the doyenne of teachers of Japanese in the United States, their fluency is "abominable" – full of grotesque expressions and deviant constructions. The sad part is that, if these self-certified natives assume they are qualified, how is a non-native going to challenge their credentials, especially when the worldwide demand for English is so intense?

The native expert myth bedevils the teaching of any language to non-natives, whether it's French or Chinese or English. Indeed, I once met in Beijing a French fruit-peddler who went to China to teach French and was instantly accorded the status of "foreign expert" with all the perquisites and prestige of a visiting nuclear physicist. On the other side, there are native Chinese in the United States who would have hardly qualified as academics if they had stayed in China, but who occupy august positions on university faculties (1) because they happen to know Chinese natively in a country generally ignorant of Chinese, and (2) because at least early on, their numbers were few and

the Chinese willing to teach the language were not easy to find. I may be too harsh, but I think that there are altogether too many natively ignorant people teaching their native language abroad. I do not deny that some native speakers of the language, through intuitive insight and concentrated experience, have become superb language teachers, but I would insist that being native to a language does not automatically qualify one to be an effective language teacher.

If the native-expert myth bedevils language teaching in general, it compromises the teaching of the English language most specifically because English is the most widely studied second language in the world. The disciplined teaching of any language is more than mere code-switching: there is a bit of ethnography, history, phonology, logic, epistemology, philosophy in language instruction. Natural languages are not codes, they are radically different from such computer programming languages as COBOL, PASCAL, LISP; they are not semaphores and they are much more than a Morse code. They are emblems of discourse, embodiments of human experience, enactments of meaning. They can't be taught apart from the cultural context out of which they developed. They can't be taught by what I have called "the Berlitzkrieg" method of language instruction, which trains people to fake the appearance of a native in several easy lessons. I've always found insulting the claim that a foreign language can be learned easily. Why should the learning of another person's life experience ever be easy? How would we feel if the language that's taken us a lifetime to master could be acquired in a few short, painless lessons? Languages are not so much learned, as earned.

Promoting Good Language Instruction

Those who more than earn their keep, in my experience, are the good language teachers: in their dedication to real time interaction, their devotion to the individual student, their valiant efforts to create an entire language-speaking community, to provide a specific model for language emulation, their commitment not only of time and energy, but of faith and encouragement, they can be said to teach the student and not the language: they are not mere transmitters of knowledge, they are the catalysts of learning; what they convey is more than information, more than knowledge, more even than insight: they impart to the student the confidence and the capacity to learn. They must become the implied or explicit model for the teacher of the future, where there will be information overload, where knowledge doubles

every seven or eight years, where theories are superseded with dizzying speed, and computer-assisted learning take over the more mechanical aspects of language learning: what the good language teachers teach – indeed good teachers in general teach – is not what to learn but how to learn.

I believe that the objectives of traditional language teaching are utopian and unnecessary. One has assumed that the ultimate objective of the language teacher is fluency in the target language. Yet I wonder how feasible that objective is for the preponderant majority of students. Does anyone truly believe that a language can be mastered in a few years? Can we say that any of us acquired mastery in our native language in a few years? The difficulty lies, I think, in a basic misconception of language as merely a communication skill. I am not a theoretical linguist, but I do not believe that language production is a function of completing thoughts that are pre-lingual and then translating them into language; many of my language teaching colleagues have taken a position of being against translation. (I first took this as a personal affront, since I have been, on occasion, a translator.) But what these language instructors meant was that, in using a foreign language, one should not first formulate one's thoughts in one's native language and then translate them into the foreign language. One must conceive the thought at the very start in the target language. No one has ever suggested that learning Latin or ancient Greek is to acquire a communicative skill. They are cognitive models, paradigms for thinking. Learning how to use e-mail is a communicative skill; being able to transmit Morse Code is a communicative skill, but learning a language, ancient or modern, is a cognitive skill that in the case of modern languages also involves communicative skills. Learning a language means, above all, learning to think in that language. Until that occurs, one can never be fluent in the language.

The more realistic and more feasible objective for the language teacher is not to confer native fluency (if only that were possible), but to empower and motivate the student to develop fluency in the target language on his or her own. The good language teacher is more than just a professor of research, more than just a coach and motivator, more than a virtual language community, more than a caring and responsive interlocutor, more than an intellectual mentor – he or she is all of these things. Which is why I believe that good language teachers more than earn their keep.

I believe there is a worldwide demand for certifications of language teachers, with the greatest need for certifications of teachers of English. Such a certification would take the form of what I envision as a Masters of Language Arts, or M. L. A., to distinguish it, on the one hand, from the M. A. in language and literature, and on the other hand, from the M. A. T. in teaching methodology. The current demand for M. A.'s is, I think, negligible, and the M. A. T., the Masters of Arts of Teaching, which flourished a generation ago in the United States, has virtually disappeared from the scene. In the first case, the M. A. in many institutions has become a second-rate degree awarded to those who are prevented from pursuing the Ph.D; in the second case, the M. A. T., which became so concentrated a study of teaching methodology that it was largely empty of intellectual content, has fallen into disrepute. By contrast, the need for an M. L. A., certifying qualified teachers in all language instruction, is undeniable, particularly in the teaching of English.

What would I envision in an M. L. A. degree? Although others more expert might disagree with my particular desiderata, I would require of an advanced M. L. A. degree the following: (1) proven proficiency, oral and written, in the language being taught; (2) general knowledge of the literature and culture of that language; (3) familiarity with the techniques of language teaching, including training in the enormous enriched technology of computer-assisted learning; (4) understanding of the theory and practice of language acquisition.

My first desideratum, specifying language proficiency, might seem laughably obvious, even unnecessary, but alas, it is very much needed. Let me illustrate with anecdote. In the late seventies, I took my family to visit China: one day, we were virtually the only ones in a historical museum in Xian. As we toured the museum, speaking in English, we were followed at close range by a Chinese, which, being Americans, we found somewhat disconcerting and annoying. When our guide asked him why he was "tagging along with us," the Chinese said he wanted to listen to us talk because he was a teacher of English. "Well, then," our guide replied, "Join us, and you can practice your English!" To which our Chinese replied, in Chinese, to my astonishment: "No, no, you don't understand. I teach English, but I don't speak it!" How many people teach languages they don't speak?

Without proper training, without proper certification, the next generation of students of any second language, and particularly of English, will continue to be taught haphazardly, devastated by the

enormous waste of failed attempts to learn: the attrition rate of language learners after the first year is at least 50%, another 50% after the second year – which means that our yield rate in teaching students of language is less than 25% after two years. I don't know how many students continue to study the language after three years of study, but the percentages couldn't be very high. In other words, the current system of language teaching fails in, roughly, ninety-percent of the time. That is a complete failure, and a total waste, unless we apply the argument of Latin that I alluded to before, that we have somehow trained the student's mind to think, even if s/he isn't fluent in, say, Chinese, French, or English. But how many students could claim they were taught to think in a language course? Not many. Isn't the testimony of students more likely to be: "I studied that language, but I've forgotten everything now!"

Prospects for the Future

The content of what a student learns in the classroom will not be the only thing that is forgotten. Most of the subject areas we teach in colleges and universities will, in time, be forgotten as well. I wonder how many of the academic courses being taught today will be offered a hundred years from now. I predict that computer science, physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, psychology, political science will be so transmogrified that they will be virtually unrecognizable. Even the study of literature, in many parts of the world, has already been transformed into a distinctly unliterary form of cultural studies. I fully expect that the majority of what is taught today will either disappear or be superseded by other courses, other disciplines. But it is hard for me to imagine – a hundred years from now – that the teaching of English won't still be an essential part of the academic curriculum. (This is not to say that the predominance of English will last forever: I can safely predict, since no one here will be able to contradict me, that *Chinese* will become the world's language in the twenty-second century.) But if English is to be a meaningful part of that discipline, it must attain academic and intellectual respectability; it must offer something of certifiable value to the community at large. It must be useful, or else there will be no demand for it, and it must be intellectually and academically rigorous or it will be meaningless. We can no longer afford teachers of a language who can't speak that language, and we can no longer afford teachers of a language who, though natively fluent, are incapable of teaching anybody anything.

This institution, Lingnan College, is trying – laudably – to establish itself as a premier liberal arts college: it has the chance to become the first bilingual, bicultural liberal arts institution in the world. That would be quite an achievement by any measure. But there are some initiatives to “upgrade” the reputation of Lingnan by stressing research. As someone who comes from a research university, Indiana University, who was trained at a liberal arts school – I distinguish Harvard College from Harvard University – let me make the following observations. The best liberal arts colleges in the United States – such as Amherst and Swarthmore in the East; Oberlin and Kenyon in the Midwest; Reed in the West – make no pretences about being research institutions, even if some distinguished researchers may be found on their faculty. In an era of expanding demand and shrinking resources, building a first-rate research institution from scratch may not be at all feasible. It may also be unnecessary: we may have enough research universities and research institutes already. Nor is enhancing research the only way to augment one’s institutional prestige; it is certainly not the most appropriate way for an institution whose motto is, not “Education for Research” but “Education for Service.”

Lingnan can achieve excellence – even within limited budgets – by stressing teaching as service, and achieving distinction in the training of language teachers. I do not understand why there is a prevailing denigration of service courses: what is so ignoble about providing courses and instruction for which there is widespread demand and a palpable need? If service is recognized as the mark of distinction, no educational service is more important, in my view, than the teaching of language, including the teaching of English. English is the language of the present and of the future. If it is not the world’s language, it is the closest thing we have. Isn’t it time we start taking English – and the teaching of English – seriously?