Involuntary Associations

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Conclusion: English Remains, Englishes Remain

The tensions in the use of a universal standard are seldom clear to those in a dominant position with regard to it for they do not need to suppress local innovation in order to participate in a universal network.

David Singh Grewal, *Network Power*

From a sceptical perspective, postcolonial studies remains locked into an oppositional framework. While that framework acknowledges that postcolonialism is in many ways about what Young calls ‘unfinished business, the continuing projection of past conflicts into the experience of the present’ (2012, 21), the need for new perspectives is also frequently expressed. This book has argued that one possibility for finally breaking out of that framework is to engage with World Englishes studies. In common with other approaches to aspects of globalization, World Englishes studies assume less a centre-periphery model, however valuable such a model may still be for some contexts, and more a dynamic network. Of course, the power of a node in such a network depends not only on what it is in itself, but also on how connected it is. However, connectedness still implies the potential significance of a node’s self-identity, and there will still be moments when centre and periphery are the best terms to describe what is under consideration. David Singh Grewal (2008) writes of English in terms of network power, describing the fact that people are rational agents, to some extent, but also that the context in which they make a choice may well compel that choice, leading to a widespread feeling of being coerced. The process of tacit social coordination that ‘decides’ on global standards proceeds inevitably to eliminate alternatives capable of fulfilling the same function, and this seems to be the case with English understood as a global language. But, as is clear, there are other possibilities within World Englishes; the spread of Englishes and the increased acknowledgement of linguistic hybridization work alongside the tendencies of network power that favour a standardized global English.
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Keeping this balance in mind, this book has argued the following: World Englishes demand that postcolonial studies look towards a future that, whether it 'speaks English' or not, will need to be characterized by a different idea of communication. Even when celebrating the use of English in, for example, literary texts, postcolonial studies has persevered with a notion of communication based on the assumption of native–non-native interlocution; that assumption is implicit in a notion such as 'writing back'. But, as World Englishes literature might suggest, and as World Englishes more generally prove, that assumption is no longer tenable. Nor is any model of communication that assumes smooth accessibility, transparency, and consensus; such a model of globalized imperialism will be experienced as, in important ways, imperialist. As the instances of China and India (often taken to be the future of English) in their different ways indicate, World Englishes imply a more diverse set of models of communication, models that linguistics has been theorizing for some time. But, logically, the Anglophone university, after which all similar institutions seem increasingly and myopically modelled, cannot be our only source of such theories, and the future of bi- and multilingual research will be key to new developments in postcolonial studies and beyond.

Engaging with such a multilingual future, and exploring some of its implications, paradoxically demands that we (some of us at least) also engage more fully with the English language as it was, is, and will be. As postcolonial studies has appeared to focus so much on forms of Anglophone literature, it would seem obvious that at the very least it had paid a great deal of attention to the English language, alongside other major colonial and postcolonial languages. It is the contention of this book that the attention it has paid English can be built upon, broadened, and extended in some surprising ways. Sometimes this book has argued that English is far more 'colonial' than has been allowed, and at other times it makes a more positive assessment of English's role and potential. The key distinction to be made, even if it cannot be made with any finality, is between English and Englishes. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002 [1989]) long ago distinguished English from English, and in making that distinction they were following in a powerful tradition of colonial and postcolonial literary writing. But that clarification, enabling a clear sense of the independence of New literatures in English or postcolonial literatures, does not cover quite the same ground as that between English and Englishes. If nothing else, the later distinction is part of a disciplinary formation (see Seargeant 2012) that draws much of its energy from varieties of linguistics, with much overlap in cultural studies approaches, and so to some extent it implies a displacement of literary studies from the study of postcolonial language. Relatedly, it focuses our attention on narratives of contemporaneity (see Biccum 2009) that draw a fuzzy (and sometimes not so fuzzy) line between histories of empire and developments in globalization. That line enables a move 'beyond the postcolonial' (as in Dawson Varughese 2012), taking us away from the preoccupations that have animated but also possibly fixated postcolonial studies as a discipline or inter-discipline. Of
course, as Biccum argues, these narratives of contemporaneity also imply that however English came to be so widely used it would be pointless to allow that firmly complete past to interfere with our smoothly communicative present. At the beginning of my introduction I quoted Randolph Quirk and Mario Pei, with their rather different views of English’s position in the 1960s. Quirk’s suggestion (1962) that English’s wide usage owes nothing immediate to the dominance of the UK or US is more neutral than Pei’s unashamed celebration of an American cultural imperialism (1967), but each certainly implies that ‘we’ best keep the past in the past, and focus instead on what it has done for ‘us’. That sentiment is inadequate today, as it was when originally expressed.

Despite diverting attention from postcolonial literary studies, there is still much to be gained from keeping literature a central part of the postcolonial conversation, as I have already discussed at some length, and I would like in conclusion to use a literary example to explore some open questions concerning the future of World Englishes. That example is Ryszard Kapuściński’s *Travels with Herodotus* (2007), a reflection on the important but troubling writer’s journalistic career. Although of course Kapuściński must be a controversial figure from a postcolonial perspective, this book is very suggestive in taking us back to a recognizable but notably different international linguistic context. It begins with recollections of early reporting in India and China, two highly significant foci when thinking about English today and in the future (in common with many commentators, Graddol (1997; 2007) identifies the two as central to the future of the language). This example gives us immediate scope for thinking differently about English as a global language. Whatever perspective we adopt towards the English language’s present scope, its preeminence and dominance can appear unchallengeable. Yet both preeminence and dominance are unlikely to be long-lived, and each is a relatively recent phenomenon. To take a key example, it is clear that despite Chinese having the greatest number of native speakers English has a very large number of learners within China itself, definitely in the order of hundreds of millions, and, according to recent statistics gathered as part of a national language survey, perhaps as many as nearly 400 million (see Wei and Su 2012). China may indeed have over a million English teachers of various types (McArthur 2003). While that may be the present situation, in the recent past the main foreign language learned in China was instead Russian (which is gaining some importance again), as Adamson (2004) demonstrates. Sudden switches between favoured foreign languages are hardly unheard of, and looking back to this recent past reveals both a very different global linguistic environment and the lineaments of the situation we currently inhabit. It may seem difficult to credit, at this point, but at the time Kapuściński was engaging with that China, as well as India, English was also supposed to be finally fading from postcolonial India’s linguistic scene.

This strikingly different linguistic context should at least give us pause to rethink our sense of present and future Englishes. Writing a little later than Kapuściński’s experiences, Pei discusses the potential future of English in the
context of state communism, which already recalls a quite different context for discussing English’s spread. In geopolitical terms, Pei is not very apologetic about anything, arguing that cultural imperialism, neo-colonialism, etc. are just what they are: backward nations submitting to the power of the forward-thrusting modernizers, and so on. In the context of this (to Pei) quite welcome if not indeed necessary ongoing domination, English ought to be central. As Pei writes: ‘We, the speakers of English, should proudly flaunt the banners of cultural imperialism, neo-colonialism, and commercialism. The first places us in the forefront of intellectual and educational progress; the second proves that we are scientifically and technologically in the lead; the third points the way to a better material life for everybody concerned’ (1967, 174). Forty years later, Pei’s dynamic optimism and faith in cultural supremacy appear both disgraceful and surprisingly myopic. At the same time, English itself seems a clear case of a hold-out against all too obvious (if complex) shifts in power between West and East, particularly towards China and India, the rivalrous neighbours. Kapuściński’s book transports us back to earlier European experiences of the two, and gives us insight into specifically linguistic issues that have become more and more central to discussion of English.

Setting out from Poland as a young and confessedly extremely naive reporter, Kapuściński travelled to India, China, and numerous other places both unfamiliar and wondrous. Of course, his writing has been long criticized for what Ryle (2001) calls ‘gonzo orientalism’, and his reputation for honesty concerning details of his experiences has come under sustained attack (see Domosławski 2012). Indeed, Kapuściński’s travels through these powerful civilizations are no more immune to reductive racism than his works on Africa. Nonetheless, his reflections on English in India and China in particular give a revealing glimpse of a different linguistic world. A record of and reflection on his travels through India, China, and elsewhere, Travels with Herodotus foregrounds issues concerning language, although its frequent references to his lack of English betray the fact that it was actually published rather late in his life, three years before his death in 2007. Dwelling on his earliest foreign travels, he reflects on how poorly prepared he was for India, with no real contacts and very little knowledge of English. Early in the book he buys a copy of For Whom the Bell Tolls, in the hope that Hemingway will help him improve his English. Undoubtedly, Kapuściński is not the only learner of English who has felt, or has been instructed, that Hemingway writes with uncommon clarity and directness. Unfortunately, that particular novel seemingly had an effect opposite to that desired:

The more I tried to understand this text, the more discouraged and despairing I became. I felt trapped. Besieged by language. Language struck me at that moment as something material, something with a physical dimension, a wall rising up in the middle of the road and preventing my going any further, closing off the world, making it unattainable. It was an unpleasant and humiliating sensation. It might explain why, in a first
encounter with someone or something foreign, there are those who will feel fear and uncertainty, bristle with mistrust. (Kapuściński 2007, 20)

These perhaps rather basic comments about language and intercultural contact need to be understood in the context of the young Pole travelling for the first time in the 1950s. Later he remarks that his first reaction was to flee to the familiar, and to forget India in particular, symbolic as it began to seem to him of personal failure. It is the specifically linguistic problems that seem most troublesome, and it is here that the focus on English makes more explicit sense. Thinking about how Herodotus himself might have handled this oppressive sense of linguistic materiality, Kapuściński remembers the status of Greek as lingua franca (in fact it is doubtful that Herodotus spoke any other language, even the Carian of his own background). But are these reflections on lingua francas supposed to comfort the young reporter (if indeed they could have occurred to him at the time)? As he remarks in passing, Greek was replaced by Latin, French, and ultimately English, and so he would seem to be back where he started.

Determined to be more positive in his approach, Kapuściński begins to engage India through the English that surrounds him. A world of astonishing sensual drama is focused (and perhaps reduced) by the language of the relatively recently departed colonial culture. This English constitutes a materiality that enables Kapuściński to grasp something of India’s ipseity, however counter-intuitive that might appear. While he himself registers the problem in grasping the country through this foreign language, it is not exactly clear that passages such as the following allow him to deal with the political and cultural difficulties he is facing through his European partiality and its divide-and-rule approach:

I walked around the city, copying down signboards, the names of goods in stores, words overheard at bus stops. In movie theatres I scribbled blindly, in darkness, the words on the screen, and noted the slogans on banners carried by demonstrators in the streets. I approached India not through images, sounds, and smells, but through words; furthermore, words not of the indigenous Hindi, but of a foreign, imposed tongue, which by then had so fully taken root here that it was for me an indispensable key to this country, almost identical with it. I understood that every distinct geographic universe has its own mystery and that one can decipher it only by learning the local language. Without it, this universe will remain impenetrable and unknowable, even if one were to spend entire years in it. I noticed, too, the relationship between naming and being, because I realized upon my return to the hotel that in town I had seen only that which I was able to name: for example, I remembered the acacia tree, but not the tree standing next to it, whose name I did not know. I understood, in short, that the more words I knew, the richer, fuller, and more variegated would be the world that opened before me, and which I could capture. (Kapuściński 2007, 22)
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There are a number of assumptions and elisions in this passage, of course, but it could be argued that Kapuściński’s approach to English as an Indian language has received significant confirmation in more recent studies of English as it is used today (most influentially in Kachru 1986). But, to return to the assumptions and elisions, it is of course not a simple statement to say that Hindi is the indigenous language, even if it was the one given most prominence. Additionally, he appears to be making a claim for English as an indigenous language, while still accepting the usual assumptions about its status as a colonial tongue. Furthermore, the separation of spoken and written language from all the other languages of India (visual, olfactory, etc.) is rather simple-minded, even though it is a separation we may all assume from time to time. This passage is opaque in its reflections on language and its ability to grasp India, but it is nonetheless clear enough in some of its statements: English is Kapuściński’s ‘indispensable key’ to India. As already mentioned, much of the recent discussion of English in India is explicit in its treatment of English as an Indian language. Despite the limits of his perspective, Kapuściński is perceptive in his treatment of English in India as one of the World Englishes.

However, in treating Indian English in this way, Kapuściński is of course also glossing over the many controversies that exist concerning the language today, and that were at least as significant at that early stage of independence. He is seemingly ignoring (or worse, condoning this ignorance when writing fifty years later) the cultural politics and linguistic imperialism that he is experiencing and taking part in. And yet he is not entirely ignoring these factors, as a little further on in his reflections we read the following:

Only in India did I realize that my unfamiliarity with English was meaningless – insofar as only the elite spoke it here. Less than 2 per cent of the population! The rest some one of the dozens of other languages. In this sense, my not knowing English helped me feel closer, more akin to the ordinary folk in the cities or the peasants in the villages I passed. We were in the same boat – I and half a billion of India’s inhabitants!

While this thought gave me comfort, it also troubled me – why, I wondered, am I embarrassed that I don’t know English but not that I don’t know Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Telugu, Urdu, Tamil, Punjabi, or any of the many other languages spoken in this country? The argument of accessibility was irrelevant: the study of English was at the time as rare a thing as that of Hindi or Bengali. So was this Eurocentrism on my part? Did I believe a European language to be more important than those languages of this country in which I was then a guest? Deeming English superior was an offence to the dignity of Hindus, for whom the relationship to their native languages was a delicate and important matter. (Kapuściński 2007, 43)

To understate the matter, it seems unlikely that his apparently poor English really did bring Kapuściński any closer to the mass of India’s population that did not speak English. However, he is at least showing a sense of what focusing
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on English ignores when approaching India. Again, though, his understanding of just why English might really be a useful and necessary aspect of Indian life (some or perhaps even many Indian lives) is lacking. His recollections are certainly confusing, perhaps even to himself, as it is hardly clear that believing English to be part of Indian life entails any form of belief in its superiority. Furthermore, it is not obvious that his generalizations about Indian culture are any less Eurocentric than if he believed English superior because it is identified as ‘European’. Indeed, it seems likely that Kapuściński is projecting the concerns of this century back on his younger self.

Accordingly, it can be argued that Kapuściński’s comments about English in India point to an awareness of the localization of the language while remaining caught in instructive and even perhaps necessary guilt. It might be argued that this combination is very much one we find today, whether in relation to English’s roles in India or elsewhere. Yet it is perhaps the case that it is his trip to China that most clearly reveals the unspoken assumptions behind English as lingua franca. For the language Kapuściński speaks with the locals who are in effect managing his trip to China is of course Russian. Even at that relatively recent point when, according to many narratives of its rise, English was already well established as the world language, there was a very serious alternative. As already mentioned, Russian was the main foreign language in China for a long time. While this may have been an ideological choice, and was indeed subject to fluctuation according to changing political circumstances (as Adamson (2004) has shown), Russian’s relatively recent high status in China focuses our attention on the fragility of languages that function internationally. For many reasons it is possible to predict that English will be replaced as a lingua franca. Alternatively, as already discussed, we might even think of English as likely to be the last lingua franca (see Ostler 2010). There is nothing dramatically distinct or unique about the English language per se that explains its seemingly meteoric rise, or that will insulate it from the political, economic, and cultural changes that will lead to a loss, however relative, of its international standing. Kapuściński evokes a world in which the possibility of this loss was clearer than it is today, partly because it might appear by now that the English language has triumphed as an international language. His own confusions are, I would argue, hardly his alone, and in plunging into the wide world of the postcolonial and Cold War period he raises many of the questions that continue to frame engagement with the politics of English.

Having said all of this, Kapuściński still manages to make an argument for English as the language of border crossing. India and China evoke similar feelings for him, and this is partly a matter of the meaningful qualities of writing systems in themselves. Referring to ‘the Great Wall of Language’, he observes that ‘It was actually not dissimilar to how I had felt in India. There too I could not penetrate the thicket of the local Hindi alphabet. And were I to travel farther still, would I not encounter similar barriers?’ (2007, 63). That would appear to be a good argument for sitting down and studying a language in some depth. Nonetheless, perhaps as a matter of temperament
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(as he reflects on Herodotus’ ethnicity), he himself has become obsessed with crossing the border: ‘Cultures are edifices with countless rooms, corridors, balconies, and attics, all arranged, furthermore, into such twisting, turning labyrinths, that if you enter one of them, there is no exit, no retreat, no turning back. To become a Hindu scholar, a Sinologist, an Arabist, or a Hebraist is a lofty, all-consuming pursuit, leaving no space or time for anything else’ (2007, 71). It is no surprise, then, that despite all his knowledge telling against it, Kapuściński is so worried about the state of his English. But it is not just that border crossing is something that English does, or something that it enables an English speaker to do with greater ease than those who do not speak it. It is more that that border crossing, as in the case of the English that Kapuściński finds in India, is something that is found within the language itself, and within the linguistic ecologies that English affects and that affect English. India is in some ways an exemplary place to discuss these issues in that it is a central location for one of the World Englishes. And those Englishes prompt us to rethink (without rejecting) the numerous connections made between English and colonial legacies.

These examples of recent history also invite us to question the easy assumption of continuities between histories of empire and colonialism, and the shifting configurations of globalization. Indeed, whether focusing on Tibet, Xinjiang, various African countries, or any number of other widely scattered locations, commentators are increasingly likely to raise the issue of China as a colonial force itself – however, if that suggestion is accurate, perhaps a perceived contrast with previous colonizers is key. That being the case, attention is now being paid to the potential for Putonghua to become a world language (rather than the already massive regional language it is), or for it to be considered a colonial language. For example, the Confucius Institutes might be seen as not unlike Alliance Française or the British Council, but then, depending on your perspective, that similarity qualifies them precisely for suspicion and criticism. This issue is increasingly interesting at a time when English has been well established as a ‘Chinese language’ itself (see Jiang 2003), rather than simply being a language widely learned in China; as Kachru would make the distinction, English is now understood to be of, rather than merely in, China. Clearly these developments could be related, might be in conflict, and in any case ought to be articulated. Postcolonial studies, reconfigured in relation to World Englishes studies, as well as other currents in globalization studies, needs to play a role in making such articulations, given the well-developed and provocative conceptual apparatus it has developed.

As this book explores in different contexts, postcolonial studies already contributes to many of the discussions that arise from the present state of English, and it would be surprising if this were not so. It can be argued, however, that in extending itself postcolonial studies ceases to be the discipline we have known (if we have ever really known it to be ‘one’), and becomes more an aspect of a broader perspective on the making of meaning in all media, in much the same vein as Miller recommends for the humanities
as such: ‘Here is the future for the humanities: comprehensive, omnibus survey courses about how meaning is made, circulated, and received in all media – running across science, capital, fiction, sport, news, history, and politics’ (2012, 122). Obviously enough, the World Englishes will be for some time a central aspect of each of these media, and will be key drivers in the unpredictable transformation of each of these contexts. What exactly will a renewed postcolonial studies offer such shifting contexts? Through putting postcolonial studies into dialogue with World Englishes, this book has suggested different ways that it might participate in Glissant’s ‘theory of specifically opaque structures’ (1989, 133). There are, of course, many possibilities that derive from the spread of a global English, but, as the diagnosis of linguistic imperialism suggests, a central possibility is that communication becomes a form of coerced accessibility to Anglophone globalization. World Englishes themselves are potentially rather inaccessible, hence the frequently staged opposition between mutual intelligibility and cultural expressiveness. Ultimately, however, World Englishes reinstall the need for a labour of reading in our engagement with other contexts and cultures – whoever we may be. On the one hand, they hold out a greater facility for mutual engagement; on the other, they withhold the promise of transparency. It is necessary for us to analyse how they function, what they enable, and what they block, in diverse and specific contexts. In short, World Englishes have no necessary meaning, their potential and implications being ripe for direction and shaping; sooner or later, if not already, they will constitute a worldwide responsibility.