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Language Learning: From Colonial to Global

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ABSTRACT

Language has power which provides the terms by which reality may be constituted, the names by which the word may be 'known'. The system of valued it conveys – the suppositions on which it appears to be based, the concepts of geography and history it articulates, the attitudes to difference inscribed in its words, the myriad gradations of distinction encompassed by its lexicon and grammar becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourse is grounded. Like, most of the battles fought over language in global theory stem from a confusion between language as a communicative tool and language as a cultural symbol. As colonial languages were the vehicles of such a pervasive and intrusive cultural control that it was almost inevitable that many people in global societies assumed that language itself was inherently the key to that control. The crucial function of language is now a medium of power that demands the language as the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. The article focused on what colonized people do with language, and to understand how and why language works in global writing, particularly, to understand the remarkable transformation of English literature from postcolonised societies.

Keywords: Colonial, Communicative tool, Cultural Symbol, Discourse and Postcolonised societies.

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INTRODUCTION

Language has power. It provides the terms by which reality may be constituted, it provides the names by which the word may be 'known'. The system of valued it conveys – the suppositions on which it appears to be based, the concepts of geography and history it articulates, the attitudes to difference inscribed in its words, the myriad gradations of distinction encompassed by its lexicon and grammar becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourse is grounded. Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' established. The struggle between indigenous and global languages compels us to be very clear about what potential language might have for communication and self expression. Leonard Bloomfield posited three levels of people's response to language: "the 'primary response' of actual usage; 'secondary responses' which are people views about languages; and 'tertiary responses' that are the feelings that emerge when anyone questions these views." The secondary and tertiary responses are so strong that they very often become conflated. What people think about and feel about language may become mistaken for language itself.

Most of the battles fought over language in global theory stem from confusion between language as a communicative tool and language as a cultural symbol. As colonial languages were the vehicles of such a pervasive and intrusive cultural control that it was almost inevitable that many people in global societies assumed that language itself was inherently the key to that control. Indeed, the colonizers themselves thought so. Because colonization occurs most subtly and comprehensively in language, because language itself is so manifestly connected to power, it seemed natural to see that languages somehow embodied the "thought process and values of imperial cultures". The English language was imposed on colonized peoples by cultural hegemony. Colonialism imposed a way of talking about the world privileged certain kinds of distinctions and representations. This way of talking became so connected with the power of the colonial society that it often became confused with a way of being.

The postcolonial writers have expressed their objections to a colonial language in terms of the way it has been used, the way it has been represented, and what it has stood for an institution of power. The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that postcolonial writing

defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. There are two distinct processes by which it can be done:

(i) The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication.

(ii) The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remolding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege, for e.g. Raja Rao puts cultural experience to 'convey in a language that is not one's own, but it is the spirit that is one's own".

So, we can say that global language is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences. These differences may exist in cultures which appear to be quite similar. For in one sense all postcolonial literatures are cross-cultural as they negotiate a gap between 'worlds', a gap in which the simultaneous process and abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determine their practice.

The most exciting feature of postcolonial writing has been the constant and varied demonstration of the way English can be used. This appropriation of language is to make a different cultural work from that of the colonizers is metonymic of postcolonial cultures themselves. Therefore, this process of decolonization, which sometimes becomes a search for an essential cultural purity, does not necessarily harness the theoretical subversiveness offered by postcolonial literatures. Thus the conditions of postcolonial experience encouraged the dismantling notions of essence and authenticity somewhat earlier than the recent expressions of the same perception in contemporary European poststructuralist theory.

While practicing a language there are three main types of linguistic groups within postcolonial discourse: monoglossic, diglossic and polyglossic. Monoglossic groups are those single-language societies using English as a native tongue, which correspond generally to settled colonies, although, despite the term, they are by no means uniform or standard in speech. Monoglossic groups may show linguistic peculiarities as significant as those in more complex linguistic communities. Diglossic societies are those in which a majority of people speak two or more languages, for example, in India, Africa, the South Pacific, for the Indigenous populations of settled colonies, and in Canada, where Quebecois culture has created an officially bilingual society. In diglossic societies English has generally been adopted as the language of government and commerce, and the literary use of English demonstrates some of the more pronounced forms of language variance. Polyglossic or 'poly-

dialectical' communities occur principally in the Carribean, where a multitude of dialects interweave to form a generally comprehensible linguistic continuum.

The world language called English is a continuum of 'intersections' in which the speaking habits in various communities have intervened to reconstruct the language. This 'reconstruction' occurs in two ways: on the one hand, regional English varieties may introduce words which become familiar to all English – speakers, and on the other, the varieties themselves produce national and regional peculiarities which distinguish them from other forms of English. The resulting versatility of English has often been regarded as an inherent quality of English itself. In The *Swan and the Eagle* C.D. Narasimhaiah claims that the variability of the contributing sources of English make it ideal for the complexity of Indian culture:

> "that is not the language of any region is precisely its strength, and its extraordinarily cosmopolitan character – its Celtic imaginativeness, the Scotish vigour, the Saxon concreteness, the Welsh music and the American brazenness – suits the intellectual temper of modern India and a composite culture like ours. English is not a pure language but a fascinating combination of tongues welded into a fresh unity.

Therefore, the proposition that power is mediated in language is by no means universally accepted although colonized intellectuals have predominantly held that view. But it is important to recognize that power does not operate in a simple top-down way, percolating down through a hierarchy of institutions exerting and disturbing it through strata of dominated subjects.

As Foucault says:

> "Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere. It comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations."

Imperial power, for instance, is transcultural, it circulates through subjects, and when it operates in language such transculturality is demonstrated by the capacity of speakers to transform the language by interpolating their own styles of usage into wider consideration. Foucault's radical re-evaluation of power is important for understanding how imperial power operates. Most contemporary analyses of power portray it is only negative and repressive. This is common in analyses of colonial power which tend to constitute it as hierarchical, teleological, invasive and repressive, which it undoubtedly is in terms of its historical and institutional perpetuation. But negativity and oppressive force do not explain what makes

power so powerful, just as military force does not explain the power of cultural hegemony, the desire of the colonized to adopt the colonizing culture.

The discursive power of language, that is, its function within the ensemble of relations which constitute the power of imperial discourse, can be seen in Prospero teaching Caliban how to "name the bigger light and how the less." His language 'produces' reality and in the colonial situation becomes a key agent in the 'production' of Caliban himself. The immediate power of Prospero's language lies in his role as 'teacher' that is enabled, in turn, by his physical enslavement of Caliban. This power however, is not considered as an inherent property of language; rather it is a social practice; it becomes intelligible in the techniques through which language is used. The linguistic system is not the source of (imperial) discourse but one instance of a set of relations of force that constitutes power.

> "The colonizer's language and discourse are elevated to the status of arbiter of truth and reality, the world comes to be as the authoritative discourse says. For discursive practice does not simply represent colonialism after the fact but rather functions as a means to order colonial relations and to establish meaning of those relations, in short, to define the world for the benefit of the colonizer."

This power is metonymic. This can be evident from *The Tempest* by Shakespeare where we find; Prospero's capacity to teach Caliban how to "name the bigger light and how the less' signifies the discursive range of Prospero's power itself. The names he provides metonymies the power of imperial culture to determine the way the world is. It is absolute character of Prospero's language, his books, his art, in the face of all other possible discourses that characterizes the colonial relationship. It is not that Caliban does not recognize the difference between the sun and moon, nor does it mean that he could not name them in another way. The question is, how different a person would he be if he did? The key to the engagement of postcolonial discourse with power is that language does not only repress Caliban, but produces him. It produces him in very material ways, for not only does it produce his self-representation but what he can say, where he can say it and when are all constrained by other dominant participants. In 'discourse analysis' i.e. the analysis of language as a social practice, "power is all about powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants". How Caliban engages language will be vitally linked to how he engages powerful participants and will hence be a key to how he transforms power to work for him.

This power acquired as cultural capital from the colonial education system has also brought c change in the Global education. The discipline of English literature, more or less launched by Lord

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Macaulay's intervention, a discipline that became, after the Newbolt Report in 1921, the very centre and lynchpin of British Commonwealth education, was affected by two intellectual revolutions in the post-war period: the structuralist revolution and the rise pf postcolonial writing. On the one hand the structuralist revolution, which introduced a notion of the text that still holds today, and initiated the rise of prominence of literary theory in general, was revolution in the institutional character of English study that went hand in hand with the post-war growth of university education in the English speaking world. On the other hand, the radical growth of writing by writers from formerly colonized societies, and from neo-colonized societies, changed the nature of the practice of literature, changed the nature of what we take to be English.

In this way, postcolonial writers who were taught in colonial education system appropriated the cultural capital resident in the literacy, interpolated the systems of publishing and distribution that kept the power of English in place and acquired a power in a way that had not been foreseen. Norrel. A. London, discussing how the study of English focuses on a period late in the colonial administration but it demonstrates the way in which education could be used as a means pf empowerment. His discussion emphasizes the function of power in the colonial education system; a power that constituted different colonized group as undifferentiated, uneducated and ripe for an education, a power that operated, as it had throughout imperial history, as a process of civilizing.

We can say that any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers which they carry, for e.g. postcolonial texts may signify difference in the representations of place, in nomenclature, and through the deployment of themes. But it is in the language that curious tension of cultural 'revelation' and cultural 'silence' is most evident. Significantly, most of the strategies in which difference is constructed and english appropriated, are shared by all the postcolonial societies, be they monoglossic, diglossic or polyglossic. One way to demonstrate an appropriated English is to contrast it with another still tied to the imperial centre. This contrast very often stands as a direct indication of the extent to which postcolonial writers have succeeded in constituting their sense of different place. For e.g. Kiran Desai in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* creates two audiences and faces two directions, wishing to reconstruct experience through an act of writing which she uses as the tools of one culture or society and yet seeks to remain faithful to the experience of another. Even Raja Rao, in his novel *Kanthapura* explains the problems faced by writer in conveying cultural specificity in a different language:

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> "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought – movement that looks maltreated in alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make up- like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and English."

Such writing is, in effect, ethnography of the writer's own culture. The postcolonial writer, whose gaze is turned in two directions, stands already in that position which will come to be occupied by an interpretation, for he/she is not the material of interpretation, but the first interpreter. The postcolonial use of English problematizes all those questions of identity that linger round our possession of a mother tongue. This pragmatic view of language can be seen in the poem *An Introduction* by Kamla Das:

> "Iam Indian, very brown, born in
> Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
> Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said
> English is not your mother tongue
> ……..
> The language I speak
> Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
> All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
> Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest
> It is human as I am human.

It was another South Asian who coined the term 'chutnification' in *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie a response to linguistic and cultural essentialism. More than any other aspect of our social life, language, in its various modes, participates in the constant struggle to define some version of our 'self' over and against some 'other'. It is in the language learned and shared in the family that we discover that 'we' are different from 'them'. So, we can say that language introduces us to an identifiable world, initiated us into a family, providing those most basic concepts – 'me', 'us', 'them'. Language itself identifies us, announces us, even, it seems, defines us, and defines the space of being itself. Our language "is not just a language", says Edgar Thompson, "it is our language, the language of human beings."

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CONCLUSION

Overall we can say that this active engagement with language, this constant performative use, is a key to the role of language in constructing a private, religious, national or cultural identity. The language we speak is very often crucial in establishing who we are. But it need not define the limits to what we can be. So, we can say that language is not simply a repository of cultural contents, but a tool, and often a weapon, which can be employed for various purposes, a tool which is itself part of the cultural experience in which it is used. The meaning achieved through language is a social event negotiated by real people, not a simple function of its structure or grammar or lexicon. Language therefore can be made to change, to be used in different ways of talking about the world and in a metaphorical sense, to lead to changing the world itself.

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