Linguistic Imperialism:
The English/ASEAN Tension

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ABSTRACT

In February 2009 the Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was officially founded. Article 34 of the Charter states that, 'The working language of ASEAN shall be English'. Today, this shared English language crosses cultural boundaries to unite communities both within and between ASEAN nations. ASEAN and even non-ASEAN countries are now able to trade and communicate on a global platform. This presentation will examine the first historical points of contact between the Eastern and Western worlds to understand how and why English language is so widespread in Asian countries. It will show that European nations introduced English to their Eastern colonies in the late eighteenth century with the intention of controlling and Westernizing the colonised, for political and economic gain. This imperialistic legacy has held fast in the West into the twenty-first century. A study of its history helps us better understand how the relationship between Europe and the ASEAN countries has shifted in previous centuries, from imperialism and political struggle to globalisation and mutual advancement.

Keywords: linguistics, colonialism, power, globalisation, English, Asian, language, discourse, postcolonial

I. INTRODUCTION

The discourse of European rationalism is fundamental to the uncomplicated relationship between *'signifier'* and *'signified'* in the English language. Where 'discourse' refers to the transient or malleable philosophical parameters of grammar, those of Britain and Asia share a common exclusion of the unutterable – Foucault's *'vital frontier'* marking *'what can be said inside a discourse and what cannot'*.[2] This essay proposes that manipulation of language allowed the British to colonise areas of Asia more absolutely. This practice extended colonial jurisdiction beyond the tangible and into the discursive. The glorification of English language triggered two pivotal stages in the process of colonisation: the discovery and deconstruction of traditional Asian politics and society, and the subsequent creation of a discourse of Orientalism which would justify the 'education of the East'. Language shapes human experience; the deliberate exposure of Eastern countries to Western languages, and vice versa, stimulates a discursive shift. The process of depersonalising a 'native' experience of language was a British endeavour to extract and rework the latent constructs of Asian languages and their histories.

II. LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND POWER

The relationship between language and discourse is inherent. The rationalism of the English language, which is structured around signification, was fundamental to the social and political makeup of post-Enlightenment Europe.[3] The Western pursuit of individual freedom, which is secured through willing submission to a democratic government, conflicts with traditional Eastern culture. Asian and European discourses could therefore not coexist in the colonial context without an ideological compromise. Foucault conceives a mutually interconstructive relationship between knowledge and power whereby knowledge must, as a foundation of social and political discourse, shape and be shaped by power.[4] In the context of colonial India, for example, indigenous Indian forms of knowledge must therefore have been displaced by European ones to consolidate British authority. As the means by which discourses are articulated and constituted, languages were a fundamental aspect of

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[2] Sudipto Kaviraj '*The Imaginary Institution of India*' (New York, 2010) p. 86.

[3] Roy Porter, *'Enlightenment, Britain and the Creation of the Modern World'* (London, 1990)

[4] Michael Foucault, *'Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977'* (London, 1980)

this process. If education is '*the instrumentality through which the common sense of a society is created*'[5] the British conception of a '*new political world*'[6] within India, and the transition from Indian to European discourses, necessitated the re-education of Indian people. This process aided the colonial movement in two significant ways: it perpetuated an Oriental discourse which justified colonisation to an on-looking Europe, while bringing India under the greater control of the British with the deconstruction of traditional Indian politics.

Of particular interest to the colonial state, and demonstrative of this Indian political deconstruction, was Sanskrit; '*a secret language "invented by the Brahmins to be a mysterious repository for their religion and philosophy"*'[7]. Here, 'mystery' was indicative of a spiritual 'otherness'. The significance of 'religion' and 'philosophy' are particularly noteworthy within this source since it is widely acknowledged that religious and philosophical ideals shape social discourses.[8] If the spirituality of the Indian people could be understood through their languages, as Dow inferred, their social discourses could be more easily regulated. Cohn suggests that a similar process could be applied to understand political discourses through knowledge of Persian.[9] Thus, by learning languages such as Sanskrit and Persian, the British achieved a greater, more in-depth understanding of their colonies and, consequently, greater power with the break-down of the less immediate cultural and philosophical histories of India. The process of demystifying Indian languages served to heighten the Orientalist feeling that there was a need to 'discover' India, and simultaneously highlighted the logical inconsistencies of the discourse, which was rooted in lack of knowledge and understanding of Indian culture, by challenging its myths.

Particularly notable were Oriental 'myths' which opposed European rationalist conceptions of morality and social acceptability. While Asian social and political discourses were being deconstructed by the British and replaced through the teaching of the English language by European ones, an Oriental discourse was spreading. Edward Said describes this discourse as an imagined dichotomy between West and East, educated and uneducated, civilised and barbaric.[10] The discovery of this Eastern 'other' furthered the European Enlightenment project. As in the metaphor of Plato's cave, the Western world sought to redeem the primitive Asian 'prisoner' of his '*perpetual infancy*' and irrationality; the ignorant victim is enlightened by a saviour figure.[11] This served to justify linguistic imperialism and colonialism, disguising the pursuit of power as pursuit of liberation. The consequence was a continuation of a pattern of European colonial discourse from the early eighteenth century into the twenty-first. If '*to know English is to have available a better way of describing the world*', and to be '*endowed with a superior knowledge about the world*', it follows that English language speakers alone are enlightened.[12] Asian 'backwardness' was considered to be brought about, at least partially, by the perceived 'vulgarity' of Asian languages, which lacked capacity for reason. To attempt to think in these languages was therefore to be incapable of thinking at all. In the colonial mind, India required 'rescuing' from its own 'ignorance' through colonisation. Indians came to be seen as '*irrational*' and '*bloody*'[13] 'creatures'; the inevitable '*colonial construction*' of '*Self and Other*'.[14]

III.   POSTCOLONIAL GLOBALISATION

If language or accent indicate 'superior' or 'inferior' identities in this way, postcolonial globalisation

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[5] Kaviraj, *'The Imaginary Institution of India'* (New York, 2010) p. 18.

[6] Kaviraj, *'The Imaginary Institution of India'* (New York, 2010) p. 17.

[7] Alexander Dow, *'A Dissertation Concerning the Customs, Manners, Langauge, Religion and Philosophy of the Hindoos'* in *The History of Hindostan* (London, 1792) cited in Cohn, (Princeton, 1996) p.25.

[8] Michael Foucault, '*The Arcaeology of Knowledge'* (London, 1989).

[9] Bernard, Cohn, '*Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India'* (Princeton, 1996) p. 22.

[10] Jean Grenier, 'Les Îles' (1993) p.121 cited in Azzedine Haddour, '*Colonial Myths: History and Narrative'* (Manchester, 2000) p. 31.

[11] Jean Grenier, 'Les Îles' (1993) p.121 cited in Azzedine Haddour, '*Colonial Myths: History and Narrative'* (Manchester, 2000) p. 31

[12] Alastair Pennycook, '*English and the Discourses of Colonialism'* (London, 1998) p. 157.

[13] Lelyveld, *'Colonial Knowledge'* (Columbia, 1993) p. 665.

[14] Alastair Pennycook, '*English and the Discourses of Colonialism'* (London, 1998) p. 157.

problematizes traditional European identities. Migration and education dissolve national boundaries and in recent years there have emerged '"third-world" or "post-colonial" [intellectuals] (...) from "the periphery" (Africa, India, Australia, Canada)'.[15] There must be exist a European 'centre' in order for there to exist a 'periphery'; an illusion of European superiority is sustained. It is therefore useful to analyse the historical colonial movement in terms of contemporary post-colonialism and linguistic imperialism, as its problematic assumption that language is indicative and productive of a 'superior' or 'inferior' identity is recognisable even in the twenty-first century. The essential catalyst here lies '*in the anatomy of the language itself*': the '*insatiable*' global demand for the English language is '*a property of the language itself*'.[16] Its '*occult powers*' and the historical context of the Enlightenment – the pursuit of development and the belief in a libertarian utopia achieved through rational thinking – ensure that Western notions of superiority are immortalised by and in the language through which they are articulated.[17] This 'superiority complex' motivated colonial discourse.

This most abstract of explanations for the significance of language within colonialism is perhaps the most poignant, particularly given contemporary notions of knowledge of English as a figurative 'passport' to the developed and Western worlds. In accordance with Enlightenment ideals of order and control, Britain attempted to compress and restructure Asian discourse in order to make the country governable, deconstructing its national identity by displacing its language. That the language of a nation was so pertinent in shaping its identity was later recognised by Gandhi, who employed traditional Indian languages in order to further the 'Swaraj' movement of the twentieth century.[18] In colonial India, the glorification of English allowed European languages to become superior, 'Oriental' ones inferior – the 'native speaker' and the 'non-native speaker' dichotomy.[19] This faced some opposition, and

historians have identified that '[Indians] *tried to avoid* [English's] *mesmerizing and polluting contact by turning inwards into indigenous discourse*', arguably their only viable form of defence.[20]

Language for the British, then, was an almost tangible device for colonisation; an intellectual weapon with physical consequences and a powerful tool for the effective psychological governance of the masses. The sheer size of the Indian demographic, with an exponentially growing population from the 1800s, made problematic any British attempts to achieve Indian colonisation.[21] The British overcame this problem with a latent form of colonisation through language – one which, within Europe, appeared charitable and noble while simultaneously constructing an Oriental discourse which would prevail into the twenty-first century. This Oriental discourse is effectively constructed of mere myth; a simple '*representation*' of an imagined reality functioning '*as a mobilising force for colonist ideology*'.[22] Arguably, it is the fundamental philosophy behind colonisation itself; a '*celebration*' of a universal colonist doctrine which '*drained the culture of the colonised of its history*' – '*an unceasing haemorrhaging*' of the cultural '*essence*' of India.[23] A policy of linguistic imperialism, disguised as charity, confronted the cultural landscape and history of a pre-colonial India, reducing it to a state of governable objectivity by denying it the independence of language.

IV. CONCLUSION

It must therefore be taken into account that postcolonial Indian discourse was characterised by an especially European conception of the political world and the interventionist liberalism of the British state, '*from whose legitimate interference nothing in society was*

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[15] Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margeret Iverson (Eds), '*Colonial Discourse/ Postcolonial Theory*' (Manchester, 1994) p.1.

[16] Burnett (1962) p. 26 cited in Alastair Pennycook, '*English and the Discourses of Colonialism*' (London, 1998) p. 157.

[17] Sudipta Kaviraj '*The Imaginary Institution of India*' (New York, 2010) p. 42.

[18] M. K. Ghandi, '*Our Language Problem*' (Ahmedebad, 1965).

[19] Alastair Pennycook, '*English and the Discourses of Colonialism*' (London, 1998) p. 156.

[20] Sudipta Kaviraj '*The Imaginary Institution of India*' (New York, 2010) p. 42.

[21] Aijazuddin Ahmad, '*Geography of the Asian Subcontinent: A Critical Approach*' (New Delhi, 1932)

[22] Azzedine Haddour, '*Colonial Myths: History and Narrative*' (Manchester, 2000) p. 33.

[23] Haddour, '*Colonial Myths*' (Manchester, 2000) p. 31-33.

morally immune'.[24] It follows that any conclusion drawn by this essay must itself be a victim of the discourses it attempts to define, as a result of both the political standpoint it analyses history from and of the restrictions of its language. Kaviraj argues that '*to understand [colonialism] objectively it is important to stand outside its history; and if that means standing outside its consequences, that is clearly impossible.*'[25] To attempt to consider colonisation in an objective light is to deny the existence of the very discourses which inspired it. If these discourses are indeed 'immortalised' by the language through which they are articulated, then contemporary historians must analyse colonialism self-consciously. In identifying the English language as one of '*signs and correspondences*' rather than Indian '*substances*'[26], I highlight the crucial and inescapable difference between the two, acknowledging that my own language '*is sometimes derived from, (...) or in dialogic relation with [colonialism] discourses*' [26] due to its fundamental rationalism, making impossible an objective analysis of British colonialism.

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[24] Kaviraj, '*The Imaginary Institution of India*' (New York, 2010) p. 17.

[25] Kaviraj, '*The Imaginary Institution of India*' (New York, 2010) p. 39.

[26] Bernard Cohn, '*Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*' (Princeton, 1996) p.18.