Misconceptions of Linguistic Imperialism: the spread of English as a global language

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The spread of English as a global language undeniably finds its roots in the colonial past, but, ironically, not in the way many people assume. It is often taken as accepted knowledge that British, and later American Imperialism forced the language on other “lesser” cultures as a means of simplifying communication for the colonial rulers. This is, however, the complete reverse of what was initially intended. A native subject gaining command of English was indeed initially perceived as a threat. Far from being encouraged, the spread of English and of those who could use it, were actively discouraged. This can be seen right up to the beginning of the Second World War, as recorded by Roald Dahl in his autobiographical novel Going Solo. In 1938 Dahl was sent by his employer, the oil company ‘Shell’ to ‘Tanganyika (now Tanzania)’ (Boy and Going Solo: 206), and comments on the reason for his having to learn the local language:

The first thing you had to do when you came to work in Dar es Salaam was to learn Swahili, otherwise you could not communicate either with your own boy (servant) or with any other native in the country because none of them spoke a word of English. In those benighted days of Empire it was considered impertinent for a black man to understand English, let alone to speak it. The result was that none of them made any effort to learn our language, so we had to learn theirs instead. (209)
This official attitude was apparent from the early nineteenth century and is made 
explicit in Thomas Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Education’ written in 1835. In this 
Macaulay drew on his experience as a member of the Governor’s General Council 
in India, envisaging a need for ‘a class of interpreters between us and the millions 
whom we govern - a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in 
tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’. 2) He is recognising the practical need 
for interpreters, but is using them as a buffer between the governing class and the 
population at large. They may be ‘English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in 
intellect’, but are still importantly ‘Indian in blood and colour’, most emphatically 
not being English. The importance of this distinction has been pointed out by the 
post-colonialist critic Homi Bhabha, who describes such an Indian interpreter as 
a ‘mimic man’ who ‘is the effect of the flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be 
Anglicized is emphatically not to be English’ (Bhabha: 87). As a perceived threat, 
the copy has to be kept in place as no more than a copy. For Bhabha, the process 
of colonial imitation is located in an ‘area between mimicry and mockery, where the 
reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its […] double’ 
(86).

This idea of a threat to colonial identity and dominance through the imitation 
implicit in developing language skills, is a constant undercurrent theme in colonial 
era literature. A good illustration is to be found in Edgar Wallace’s immensely 
successful series of books following the adventures of Sanders and his small team 
of colonial administrators in the ‘Territories’. These represent Britain’s colonial 
possessions in sub-Saharan Africa, in the early twentieth century. Sanders’ job 
is to bring law and “civilisation” to this vaguely defined and still largely savage 
corner of the continent, dispensing justice according to his interpretation of what 
is right and wrong, and above all of what he considers to be appropriate behaviour
within the unwritten, but nonetheless rigid codes of colonial hierarchy. In one of the books in the series, *Bosambo of the River* (1914), Wallace relates the events which unfold after a native, Tobolaka, is taken as a boy by missionaries to be educated in the United States, and then returns ‘a Christian and a Bachelor of Arts’ (*Bosambo*: 48) to rule his people. Wallace’s view that this education is inappropriate, and indeed merely a veneer, is immediately made clear in his description of Tobolaka’s accomplishments. Tobolaka’s ability to write ‘passable Latin verse’ is juxtaposed in the same sentence with the dismissive comment that he ‘wore patent leather shoes with broad silk laces’. Towards the end of the account, this implication of artificial superficiality is made even more explicitly when Tobolaka has a man flogged to death. He has ‘never seen a man die of violence’ before and finds ‘extraordinary pleasure in the sight’ (68-9). His true nature is being revealed to us: ‘[there] stirred within his heart sharp exultation, fierce joys which he had never experienced before’ (69). He then ‘[finds] himself loosening the collar of his white drill jacket as the figure pegged to the ground [writhes] and [moans].’ The veneer of civilisation which he has assumed is finally literally stripped away:

Then, obeying some inner command, he stripped first the coat and then the silk vest beneath from his body. He tugged and tore at them, and threw them, a ragged little bundle, into the hut behind him.

Thus he stood, bareheaded, naked to the waist.

The view that a Western education is inappropriate and ultimately superficial is forcefully expressed through the use of this dramatic symbolism. The same idea is also reinforced by Sanders’ attitude to the use of language. When Tobolaka arrives and meets Sanders for the first time he attempts to speak to him as an equal, somewhat pretentiously “aping” the famed greeting given in 1871 by the explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley to Dr. Livingstone, for whom he had been searching:
“‘Mr. Sanders I presume?’ said Tobolaka in English, and extended his hand’ (53). Sanders’ reaction to this “aping” is immediate and very blunt: “Chief,” said Sanders in the Isisi tongue, “you know that I am Sandi, so do not talk like a monkey; speak rather in the language of your people, and I will understand you better—also you will understand me.” Tobolaka even tries to use Latin, quoting Cicero to show his learning, and is again put in his place: “Do not bother about Cicero,” said Sanders coldly. “It is not what Cicero said, but what Bosambo will say: there are philosophers on this river who could lose the ancients’” (54). Sanders’ view is clear; native language and customs are the only things that are appropriate and indeed permissible in the land under his jurisdiction.

Tobolaka makes further attempts to cling to some of his education through the use of English, efforts that are again ridiculed. When Sanders visits Tobolaka’s city, he finds an attempt at Westernisation:

He walked through Isisi city.

The king had been busy. Rough boards had been erected at every street corner.

There was a “Downing Street,” a “Fifth Avenue,” a “Sacramento Street,” a “Picadilly,” and a “Broadway.” (57)

That these signs are completely out of place is stressed by the significance given to them by the Isisi people, who see them as ‘certain devil marks which [the] king has put up to warn witches and spirits’. Sanders’ exasperation with Tobolaka finds its expression in constant rebukes to ‘[speak] in the language of the land’ (59), finally boiling over in an expression of frustration with which colonial era readers would have been expected to sympathise: “‘Nothing tires me quite so much as a Europeanised-Americanised native. It is as indecent as a niggerised white man.’” Sanders describes Tobolaka’s mixing of culture and language as
'indecent’, expressing it in terms which we, of course, find offensive today. This racial justification of the necessity for the strict separation of language and culture is an embodiment, however, of its central rationale. This point is made clear in the outraged reactions of administrators and natives alike to Tobolaka’s final abomination. He decides to get married, not with a local woman from his tribe, but with a certain Millie Tavish, a maid he met in America. This would be bad enough, but given that she is white, becomes unthinkable. On meeting her and realising the terrible truth, Sanders is astounded: ‘A look of horror, which he did not attempt to disguise, swept over the face of the Commisioner. ‘You’ve come out to marry him-a black man?’ he gasped’ (62). This reaction is echoed by the natives themselves, and is so strong that even Tobolaka is taken aback. One of his councillors, even though described as a ‘sycophant of sycophants’ feels he has to stop him:

“Lord,” stammered Cala, throwing a lifetime’s discretion to the winds, “Sandi would not have this-nor we, your people. If you be black and she be white, what of the children of your lordship? By Death! they would be neither black nor white, but a people apart!” (68)

This same sentiment is also expressed by Bosambo, a black chief who knows what is permissible and what is most certainly not:

“May he rot in hell!” said Bosambo, shocked to profanity. “But what manner of dog is your master that he does such a shameful thing? For between night and day is twilight, and twilight is the light of evil, being neither one thing nor the other; and between men there is this same. Black is black, and white is white, and all that is between is foul and horrible; for if the moon mated with the sun we should have neither day nor night, but a day that was too dark for work and a night that was too light for sleep. (72)
Bosambo is well travelled and speaks from experience:

I have seen nations where white and black are mingled, and these people are without shame, with no pride, for the half of them that is proud is swallowed by the half of them that is shameful, and there is nothing of them but white man’s clothing and black man’s thoughts.

In expressing this need for racial purity, and echoing the imagery of clothing as mere superficiality, Bosambo is playing the part of a “good” native. His own use of language backs up this role. When he stops Millie from going to her wedding he tries to reassure her in his version of English:

“Lady,” he said in his best coast-English, “you lib for go with me one time; I be good feller; I be big chap-no hurt ’um-no fight ’um.” […]

“I be dam good chap; I be Christian, Marki, Luki, Johni; you savee dem fellers? I be same like.” (75)

His English is at once what a native’s English should be, and an illustration of why he shouldn’t be speaking it. It is coast-English, a bastardised language spoken, as Bosambo describes, where ‘white and black are mingled’, by a bastardised people who ‘are without shame, with no pride’. It is a way of speaking which Sanders particularly dislikes, elsewhere calling it “infernal” (221), but it is acceptable in so far as it serves a purpose, that of keeping natives in a position of inferiority in relation to their white administrators. It is Tobolaka’s perfect English that poses a threat and must be suppressed at all costs. The clear separation of languages is an essential part of the barrier between cultures that is integral to the continuation of the colonial system. Tobolaka’s command of the language threatens to break down this
barrier, as it exposes the myth of supposed racial superiority. The horror of mixed marriage is an extension of this threat that he is perceived to represent.

Native fluency in English is therefore not something that was seen as desirable. Another particularly clear example is to be found in Wallace’s *Lieutenant Bones* (1918) when a native woman called Sigibi, who has been taught English by a missionary, leads a rebellion against the government. It is her perfect command of the language, however, as opposed to her military strength, which makes her so dangerous. Such is her command of the language that Bones, the English administrator deputising for Sanders, is rendered temporarily powerless:

“O Sigibi,” said Bones in the Bomongo tongue, “we hear of your power and your fine soldiers, and my lord Sanders desires that you shall come to him [⋯].” The girl smiled [⋯]. “My dear Mister Tibetti,” she drawled in English, “how perfectly charming of you to visit us! I hope Mr. Sanders is enjoying his customary health?” Bones looked at her in blank dismay. All his confidence, his inbred assurance, departed from him in a flash. Sigibi, the native woman, he could handle, be she witch or devil, but a proposition which drewled the conventional phrases of polite society had him beaten before he started. (*Lieutenant Bones*: 218)

To deal with her Bones has to shake her out of her civilised role, speaking in “the native tongue” (222) and playing on her native superstitions: “‘Be sure, too, O Sigibi,” he said, “that I have a powerful ju-ju, more terrible than M’shimba m’shamba.’” She initially responds in English saying “‘How childish!’ [⋯] “My dear Mr. Tibbets, how can you be so ridiculous?”’, but the power of superstition eventually prevails and she “[flings] herself grovelling on the ground before him’. She is now just ‘a wild-eyed native woman hugging a naked child’, her veneer of civilisation
having been stripped away. The triumph is, of course, for the white administrators, but the danger of imitation is very clear. Difference, through the use of language, must be maintained to avert the disaster of native rebellion and the reversal of power roles.

These literary examples of active linguistic repression, disturbing though they may be, are nevertheless useful in understanding of the real dynamics of the spread of English as a global language. Power, as the examples show, is the preserve of the English speakers. Preservation of local language and culture on the other hand, far from being a benign sign of respect for ‘Otherness’, was in fact a means of control. It is only by forcing Tobolaka and Sigibi back into their roles as savages, that they can be kept in their proper place. The implication here is that clinging to local tradition and language is a hindrance to self-assertion and progress. This is indeed one of the main themes developed by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), where he describes how supposedly romantic Western portrayals of an ancient and unchanging “Orient”, a place that ‘is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself’ (Said: 301), were imposed as part of a pattern of colonial domination:

Indeed, so fierce was this sense of a resistance to change, and so universal were the powers ascribed to it, that in reading the Orientalists one understands that the apocalypse to be feared was not the destruction of Western civilization but rather the destruction of the barriers that kept East and West from each other. (263)

The preservation of barriers, both cultural and linguistic, was thus seen as essential for the perpetuation of Western dominance. The logic that follows from this is that it was only in rejecting their own traditions and language, that an “Oriental” country could hope to catch up with the West, and stand on an equal footing as a country. This was the rationale behind the Meiji modernisation of Japan, and a major cause
of the unease that this copying, or “aping” of the West inspired. Rudyard Kipling commented on this, comparing the Chinese, who remained as they “should” be, with the Japanese, who disturbingly didn’t. He bases his assessment of the Chinese and Japanese on his own Indian experience, differentiating ‘natives’ from the European ‘Sahib-log’ (lord people), and experiences confusion when faced with a Meiji Westernisation which defies his fixed model: ‘The Chinaman’s a native […] That’s the look on a native’s face, but the Jap isn’t a native, and he isn’t a sahib either. What is it?’ (Kipling: 16). His conclusion conforms with Bhabha’s idea of the ‘ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite)’ (Bhabha: 86), as he expresses a certain admiration but then confirms them as natives after all: ‘Well, I’m very fond of the Jap; but I suppose he is a native any way you look at him’ (Kipling, 75). His condescending tone emphasises the insincerity of his remarks. He is not ‘fond of the Jap’ at all, but deeply disturbed by the Japanese refusal to conform to the accepted norms of colonial hierarchy.

In the light of these observations on the original disapproval of the spread of the use of English and its accompanying Westernisation, it is ironic to note that a reverse interpretation has become fairly widely accepted. A backlash in favour of preserving local customs and languages is evident in many countries, and the global dominance of English is seen to be largely to blame for their demise. This view, whilst perhaps reflecting a more recent trend of commercial dominance, is a misinterpretation of colonial history. The spread of the English language and Western culture around the world did indeed contribute to the destruction of much cultural heritage, and the marginalisation of local languages, but it did so paradoxically as a strategy of resistance to the colonial status quo. Far from being imposed by arrogant colonisers as a means of social control, it flourished, quite to the contrary, as a very powerful means of rejecting Western perceptions of “Otherness”, and the unjust hierarchies that were an integral part of them. Dahl’s rueful comment that ‘[in] those benighted
days of Empire it was considered impertinent for a black man to understand English’, very clearly illustrates this point. The hierarchy implicit in the word ‘impertinent’ was what defined the relationship of colonised and coloniser. To gain command of English was to reject the label of impertinence, and to finally stand up and communicate as an equal.

Notes

1) All references to a cited text will appear after quotations; passages without page reference are from the last-cited page. Unless otherwise stated, all italics are the author’s and all ellipses mine.


Works cited

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This article takes a look at the influence of colonialism on the spread of English as a global language, with the aim of correcting popular misconceptions. Using examples from colonial-era literature, it shows how the use of English was in fact actively discouraged, as command of the language was seen as a tool of empowerment, threatening the hierarchies that constituted an essential part of Western rule. The use of English did indeed spread as a result of the colonial system, but only indirectly, as a means of opposing it. The dominance of English today, at the expense of local native languages and culture, is therefore far from being a deliberate product of a policy of linguistic imperialism. It is indeed quite the reverse, being a rejection of the colonial perception of “Otherness”, and a reflection of the desire of the colonised peoples to communicate as equals.