

Book Review

“IS THE HYDRA THE ENEMY?”

A Review of *English Language as Hydra: Its Impacts on Non-English Language Cultures**

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The book, part of the series on *Linguistic Diversity and Language Rights of Multilingual Matters*, seeks “to promote multilingualism as a resource, the maintenance of linguistic diversity and development of and respect for linguistic human rights worldwide through the dissemination of theoretical and empirical research” (ii). The context for this advocacy is English whose dominance is perceived to have reduced linguistic and cultural diversity;

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this encounter is the core concern of the book, as the title suggests. The contributors unabashedly articulate their disgust and rage against this hydra through a seemingly inexhaustible arsenal of metaphors – *thief*, *bully*, *juggernaut*, *an intractable governess*, “*a partner in crime*,” “*an overstaying auntie*,” etc. The tone is combative, sometimes veering dangerously close to simplistic name-calling and clichéd emotionalism. So it seems.

The contributors’ position is not new, but the book offers fresh and concrete evidence that the hydra stalks the postcolonial world pervasively and persistently. “The beast is certainly not mythical,” as Philippon warns us in the Foreword. And we cannot sit complacently. Five chapters deal with English in the Pacific (six, if we include the Philippines). Such attention is justifiable considering that little is known about this region in which a quarter of the world’s languages are spoken by less than 0.1% of the world’s population (19). Ethnocentric Australian policy perpetuated the dominance of English at the expense of local languages and cultures in the Republic of Nauru (18-23) and the Cocos Islands (37-57); it has also refused to acknowledge aboriginal English as a dialect of English (61). In New Zealand, Hingangaroa Smith and Rapatahana consider English as the nemesis of Maori (76-97); they propose the use of Maori English and new, modern Maori (vis-à-vis older, classical Maori) for the survival of the language.

The book does not limit itself to the Pacific. It also includes other areas such as Asia (Hong Kong, Korea, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines and Sri Lanka), South Africa, and even South America (specifically, Colombia) where Spanish and not English is the dominant language. Some of the articles make it seem as if English had its own force; they fail to stress that its perpetuation even in the postcolonial period is driven by structures the colonial powers put in place, in partnership with the native elite. One wonders, in fact, even in the closing pages of the book, how much linguists, educators, and creative writers shape the language situation determined by socio-economic factors on the local as well as on the global scale.

But “thick description[s]” in which the personal merges with the social, and the local with the global, allow us a nuanced view of the connections between English and non-English language cultures. Such breadth and specificity of evidence paves the way to homegrown critiques of the practice of English in the multilingual landscape.

Most authors demonstrate an awareness of such complexity in their analysis. In speaking of aboriginal Australians, Ober and Bell in chapter four cite Harkins who says that English may not be as much a problem as racism and economic exploitation (64). In her study of aborigines in the Yipirinya School in the late 70s, Harkins notes that they were “learning and using English in a multilingual environment, while developing a distinct variety of English with its own rules and grammatical structures, in order to meet their communication needs.” They also knew that language was an instrument to acquire knowledge and identity. Unfortunately, assimilationist government policy perceived these as low forms of English or as a deficient type of English.

For another author, the politics of exclusion is not just performed in a dominant foreign language such as English but within the hierarchy of indigenous and local languages. Haji-Othman explains this fact in chapter ten entitled “It’s Not Always English: ‘Dueling Aunties’ in Brunei Darussalam.” This chapter discusses how Malay, along with English, is observed to have suppressed non-Malay indigenous languages. In New Zealand, the struggle is not really against English but for the valorization of Maori which, in its growth and regeneration, has to contend not only with the threats of English but with the struggle between classic and modern Maori.

Moreover, the dominance of English is not only imposed; it is exacerbated by the complicity of speakers of indigenous languages who see the economic advantage of English. In chapter eleven, Lands points out that in South Africa, the Constitution recognizes nine indigenous languages, along with English and Afrikaans, as its official languages, but English is considered as linguistic capital. It is also seen to disadvantage all indigenous languages. For these reasons, parents and politicians push for the use of English.

Chapter thirteen shows how similar pragmatic concerns drive Singaporeans to support the government’s bilingual policy for English and Mandarin. Such post-independent moves have, however, encouraged intra-language discrimination between Mandarin and Chinese dialects and between English and Singlish, consequently working against language diversity. This language discrimination is also seen in Colombia and in Korea. In Colombia, De Mejia notes that the official bilingual program has upheld Spanish and English, to the detriment of indigenous languages (248) but it is also valued

as symbolic capital (Chap. 14). In Korea, Sung Yul Park speaks of the divide brought about by English craze and the feelings of exclusion brought about by English-dominant societies (215-217).

While anger against the hydra and its cohorts is unabated, the authors demonstrate a rational approach to combat it. Just like the hydra, the invincibility of English is aided by the myths enveloping language and language education. Slaying the hydra, or even just containing it, would entail dismantling these myths.

For instance, in chapter nine, Yanilla-Aquino attributes deeply ingrained beliefs in the importance of English in the Philippines to American colonial policies. However, citing local research, she asserts that the use of mother tongues actually promotes cognitive and literacy growth among children. Given this, she suggests the implementation of a culturally and developmentally sound language and literacy program developed by Ocampo, in 2006 (qtd. in Yanilla-Aquino 171). In chapter eight, Eoyang, et al. argues that Hong Kong's official preference for native speakers in English is actually based on the misconception that native speaking skills ensure "standard" English (150-152). They consider this policy as a new form of linguistic imperialism and call for a de-colonized English shorn of class, gender and racist prejudices. In chapter nine, Parakrama draws primarily from the Sri Lankan experience and offers ten propositions to reverse long-held misconceptions on language. Among these are questions on standards, native speakers, bilingualism, and literacy. Two of these propositions are:

- (1) Standards are arbitrary, but not innocent, and since all standards discriminate (against women, minorities, multiple marginal groups), the broadest local standard is the least iniquitous (1100);
- (2) The historical complicities of linguistics with colonialist knowledge production and the fetishism of objective science continue today in the hierarchizing of languages, the Indo-European theocracy, mainstream ELT and in concepts such as native userhood (1130).

In chapter fourteen, De Mejia notes how the Colombian academe has reacted against the discourses that have promoted English as a means towards equality and against the sourcing of international organizations like the British Council at the expense of local knowledge.

In chapter 13, Rubdy proposes additive bilingualism and a reconception of the mother tongue to include more than the three now recognized in Singapore, in place of Singaporean Minister Goh's insistence on UK English as standard English. This view is aligned with new thinking on globalized communication in which the usage of English is shaped by global demands determined by local agents and local practices (240).

The hydra then may not be English itself or a language with its own grammar and lexicon. This theme runs through the majority of the articles, although in varying degrees of emphasis. It is quite fitting thus that the book should end with Pennycook's "Afterword: Could Heracles Have Gone about Things Differently?" It is not English, he says, (and here, we should say, any dominant language such as Chinese, Malay, Spanish) that needs slaying, but the intersections of discourses in English with hard realities in "economics, employment, migration and education" (2610). To these, of course, we should add racism and bad practices in education which hide conveniently within the shadow of the hydra.

Accounts from internationally recognized literary figures frame the book, with Ngugi wa'Thiong'o of Kenya in chapter one entitled "The Challenge: *Ndaraca ya Thiomi*: Languages as Bridges" and Muhammad Haji Salleh of Malaysia in the concluding chapter entitled "Coda: One Great Tragic Epic: English in Malaysia and Beyond." This is significant as both writers were educated in an English system and earned their initial literary fame as writers in English. However, at a certain point in their career, Ngugi shifted from English to Gikuyu, and Salleh, from English to Malay. These shifts may be taken as declarations of the power of indigenous languages to produce knowledge and art. Ngugi's vision is that of a network in which a multiplicity of languages are equidistant from each other and there is no one language as the center. He proposes translation as the principal means for connecting languages. Salleh, on the other hand, urges writers to write in their mother tongues for it is through this alone that they can express the unique sounds, feelings, and rituals of their cultures.

Like Ngugi and Salleh, the editors, Vaughan Rapatahana and Paulina Bunce, experienced life-changing decisions within linguistic and social divides generated by the hydra. These struggles, both personal and social, moved them to conceptualize this valuable piece of counter-discourse.

The book shows us the hydra as it really is. It tells us how various sectors, among them linguists, discourse analysts, literary critics, educators, fictionists and poets can work to decapitate the multi-headed monster that devours indigenous languages and cultures. Ironically though, it also drives us to think:

Is the hydra really the enemy?