

MARGINAL LIMITATIONS: REPORT FROM A VANISHING EMPIRE

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Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given (dan) but is always an essence posited (zadan) - and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia. (Bakhtin:1981,270)

The grand récits are great narratives and the narrative has an end in view. It is a programme which tells how social justice is to be achieved. And I think the post-structuralists, if I understand them right, imagine again and again that when a narrative is constructed, something is left out. Where an end is defined, other ends are rejected, and one might not know what those ends are. So I think what they are about is asking over and over again, what is it that is left out? Can we know what is left out? We must know the limits of narratives, rather than establish the narratives as solutions for the future, for the arrival of social justice, so that to an extent they're working with an understanding of what they cannot do, rather than declaring war. (Spivak:1990,18)

The originary moment, both random and intentional, spins off from unpacking the two questions addressed as highly topical:

- 1) what does linguistics offer the language professions?
- 2) what do the language professions require from linguistics?

By setting up this exchange, these questions have been bracketed by an assumption of a relationship between the categories "linguistics" and "language professions". In the exchange mechanism there is an implication of the hierarchical discrimination of base and superstructure, of a status which is both inclusive and exclusive.

In the relationship, linguistics is the source for the grand récits. Its condition as the scientific study of language and the provider of a generalized theory is to be the source for the norming of practice. If linguistics sets the standard, then the language professions are to be marshalled to and by that standard.

Before the battle is re-engaged, however, before the breach is entered once more, the epic narrative requires the remembrance of the past and the recounting of histories. At Pretoria University, the study of English is still lodged under the spacious roof of a traditional department of literature and language: the curriculum incorporates the history of the language, phonetics, and the transcription of Middle English. But they do not represent the glorious survivors of an otherwise vanished grand design, monuments beyond decipherment. They are still the foundation, upon which rests the principle of a chronological structure and which determines the selection and prescription of texts. Here is the groundplan which sets the limits, patrolling the margins to keep the interior space intact and inviolate.

What trace remains of how these frontiers were first secured? The merger was cemented by English going public as a process of professionalization and institutionalization was undertaken. In the public sphere, language is designated the site of a struggle for the control of meanings but is declared to be a sanctuary, a space from which all sign of conflict has been erased.

In order for this sanitizing manoeuvre to be successful, the normative control of professionals must seem to derive from consent and their power to implement procedures of certification must win popular acceptance: "English" is established and "Englishness" is constructed.

The daily renegotiation of language positions, the surge of battle in which territory is won and lost, has been replaced

by a systematized and monolithic order. English can be placed in the full public glare because the mechanisms for empowerment are withdrawn from sight. English, seeming servant and ineluctable master, is an inscrutable mask for naked power.

The concealment of power is the practice of a bureaucracy as opposed to the transcendental display of feudal institutions. In this new order the sacred mysteries of governance are secularized and made profane, creating the space into which English may be inserted as national guarantor, assisted by devoted attendants and attracting crowds of devotees. The priests of English and their followers will be the agents and foot-soldiers for the increase of the nation-state in its period of hypersthenia. They would become the mappers of empire.

The new margins for "Englishness" would include millions of "others", and the encounter amid the swamps of assimilation would demand new terms of exclusion and inclusion. In this process new communities would have to be imagined, as well as new ways of imagining community.

After the clash of conquest had ended, the disciples of English could be accommodated to the role of imperial policeman, a less repressive force for establishing an homogenous order. But what change would English undergo in order to serve this purpose?

If the new venture were to be successful, the material and political fissures that had riven the mother country would need to be concealed. The revolution in industry and capital that had created the pressure for the exportation of Englishness, had ruptured the social fabric, but the tear would be occluded, the focus would fall upon what unites rather than that which divides.

The confluence of industrial expansion and the movement for political reform elevated the "need" for English to a

national priority. Industrialised society requires exceptional levels of uniformity and presses the demand for basic literacy. The reform movement would result in the extension of the franchise and awaken fears of rule by demagogues. In a centralised state with an industrial mode of production, direct control, experienced as force and coercion, was undesirable and difficult to sustain. Rule would need to become more diffuse, using hegemonic systems of control with greater emphasis upon self-discipline and consensus, without a loss of power from the elites.

Real struggle with the power to provoke oppositional cohesion to all forms of domination, including the production of meaning, would be displaced from physical reality and reinscribed in internalized values ensuring submission and obedience. Provincial and local loyalties were increasingly centralized upon national symbols and social stratification was rationalized to appear both natural and unimportant through being submerged in the production of the myth of an organic state.

In these circumstances, English was identified as the most valuable asset in the national treasury. Literacy would encourage standardization: a standard which would both measure deviance and provide internalized feelings of inferiority, as well as be the banner to rally the sense of national purpose.

The implementation of Standard English, by lessening the hold of local and provincial dialects upon popular imagination, contributed further to the centralization of power. Through Standard English a set of values would be assimilated as normative. The referents and world view of a single class thus acquired would assure its dominance whereas conflict and divisiveness would be submerged by the national interest.

These endeavours found the exemplum in schooling, which would be able to meet the demand for literate workers as well as reinforce a coercive but invisible conformity. To be successful, national standards would need to be applied in the schools in order to provide uniformity in methodology, in the curriculum content, and in testing procedures, in other words, professionalization.

National education was "feminized" and domesticated, the mother tongue the perfected instrument for ideology construction. Through identifying the appearance of a "national character" in the canonized texts and of "special" qualities to English - lucidity, flexibility, virility - an association was postulated between the language and the contemporary "spirit" of progress and development. Despite its homogenizing role, a reified and valorized English signifies the deep divisions in society.

The national curriculum was streamed, the texts graded, and the testing model provided access to the different levels of the civil service. The unity that the educational system forged was within classes, by means of which the individual would be able to identify herself to her social equals in all circumstances. The procedure extended to the furthest corners of empire the ability to establish community and the structured relationship of the individual to the metropolis not only provided insulation from dangerous contact with native populations, but, as a mirror image of metropolitan class divisions, counteracted any revolutionary colonial options.

At the limits of empire, as was the case at the centre, English would serve an ideological function. Particularly in times of transition as the forms of imperial activity shifted from province to colony; from the arena of government to a place of settlement.

In the initial stage of imperial experience there is a radical split in the ways in which self and other are

inscribed. In places where it was not thought desirable to incorporate the conquered peoples, the preservation of difference was a necessary procedure for self-modelling. Once the first stage of violent conquest was over, "protection" could be granted to the cultural forms of indigenous people, primarily as mummified museum pieces, objects to be studied by the disciplines of ethnography, anthropology, and linguistics.

Although, at this stage, the conquerors might co-operate with collaborating factions of the native people, the image of the mother country was generally sufficient protection against integration and offered a sense of identity that nullified the danger of rebellious satrapies being erected.

As conquest shifted towards settlement, the introduction of large numbers of mother tongue speakers into the formula would strain what had been a successful ideological model for imperialism. Initially an asset, because of their capacity to provide mutual reinforcement, these settlers might become a more serious threat to the metropolitan centre than the indigenes. On the basis of shared experiences, governors and settlers might form an uneasy alliance of mutual self-interest. Their misrecognition of identity, fuelled by feelings of neglect and injustice directed at the centre, would strengthen the centrifugal forces creating the conditions for breakaway satellite states.

The flexibility of the model derived from the ability to duplicate conditions so that the stratification of subject roles at the centre was repeated on the periphery. The daughter colonies, riven by the same divisions occurring in the mother country, displayed the condition of lateral violence and as deeply antagonistic societies the submissive relation to the phallocratic centre was not threatened. Moreover, the ties of "race", "culture", and "language" were productive of the responses of misrecognition and denial, blocking the knowledge that they were experiencing the same

process of epistemic violence that was felt by the colonized.

As a hegemonic rather than monolithic political reality, the imperial enterprise is effortlessly transformable, in its ideological arm as well. Crisis management of the transitions away from direct repressive control relied on a successful implementation of the ideological function for English.

The crises coincide with large-scale reorganisation that would fit English for the new role assigned to it. The first stage of development takes place at Cambridge after the First World War. Here fierce battle was engaged in attempting to establish an independent department of English literature. At stake in this engagement was the question of its status in relation to older disciplines and victory was only won by turning its back upon its pragmatic conception and intercourse with the second-rate.

The vectors of status and prestige were twofold, dependent upon its position as defender of a liberal humanist tradition and, at the same time, attempting to evolve a "scientific" methodology that would accord it respectability. Further crises in imperialism would strengthen both developments, despite the apparent contradiction.

The interests of literature and of language study were diverging, even becoming antagonistic. An aggrandised linguistics, claiming to be a "hard" science, was felt to threaten the organicity of the concept of culture assigned to literature and enshrined both in the canon of great works and in the reverential task of preserving the timeless and universal values distilled in them.

At the metropolis, the role of English in effecting a consensus was either complete or had been assumed by other cultural forms. However, English still had an effective

hegemonic role to play in the colonies, specifically because imperialism was moving towards the more subtle and complex expression of neo-colonialism.

The attraction of English for settler communities desperate to maintain their link to the metropolis, even though it continued to define them as inferior and marginal, is obvious. But indigene elites trained in accordance with the same pedagogical model would, in consequence, after "independence" adopt a collaborationist stance in their relation to their former rulers. The base of the appeal of English would be broadened to encompass those elites who had been trained by replications of the central academic model.

Whatever the political content of the narrative of its development, English as an academic subject was still struggling for self-definition. The parameters of the discipline forever changing as literature and language studies fought out their marginal positions along permeable boundaries.

The dilemma for criticism lay in being able to refute a reputation for amateurism without surrendering its role as the guardian of a precious national heritage. The narrative of its professionalization began with the excision of literature from history and its fashioning into a self-sufficient object imposing rigorous and tight formal demands upon both methodology and subject matter.

Although gaining professionally by this strategy, criticism lost its oppositional status: the "special" quality by which it transcended other disciplines in thrall to a vulgar positivistic and tyrannical logic.

Despite the ambiguity of its position, literature had prided itself on the refusal to become a conveyancer of knowledge. The celebration of the literary at the expense of the professional, might afford a grudging welcome to theory as a gesture against professional sterility but if criticism were

to surrender the benefits of its new status it would be beaten once again into the isolation of aesthetic inconsequentiality. Retirement to a position of traditional opposition offers freedom without power, weightlessness in a world of weighty institutions.

One such body is linguistics. It too had undertaken a narrative of professionalization, sharply defining the nature of its competence as a mode of enquiry. In order to answer charges of ideological complicity, linguistics pleaded an autonomous, value-neutral object of investigation in the form of universal grammar.

The allegiance to "scientific" principles of enquiry, allied linguistics with other "hard" disciplines and made it competitive in the race for lucrative grants and institutional influence. Both scientificity and quantitative criteria of enquiry are erasures of history and the traces of discursive violence in order to deny the existence of ideology in intellectual values which includes the presupposition of a particular definition of science.

Linguistics as a descriptive and empirical science allegedly registering a unitary language has functioned to form one. The creation of an "ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community" arises from a policy of exclusion and reduction in proposing a mythological monoglossic system. Linguistics, banishing any account of the historico-social conflicts within any particular language, posits staticity as the usual state of language: "an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualisations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is characteristic of all living language" (Bakhtin:1981,288).

A "revolt of their clients" created a crisis in the professions. Dissatisfaction with the status quo of professional notions of competence and a therapeutic role

mobilized in complicity with the bureaucracy, has led women and other groups to press the demand for a retreat from an unhistorical basis and a professional structure sequestered in academia by a return to the public domain. In rejection of professional indifference, they assert that what is not part of the solution is part of the problem.

This paper is not intended to be yet another skirmish in the ongoing battle over turf, nor is it a riposte to the political and cultural monocentrism of colonialism. Post-coloniality interrogates the theories of style and genre, laying bare the assumptions underpinning the "universal" features of language, epistemologies and value systems, as well as other false notions which deny particular cultural traditions.

Language control has been a signal feature of imperial oppression, perpetuating hierarchical divisions and acting as the medium for the imposition of conceptions of "truth", "order", and "reality". Is it still possible for linguistics and the language professions to do the work of recentring the colonial subject?

The erosion of an active sense of self through dislocation and cultural disintegration has produced an alienation of vision and a crisis of self-image. Because of the rupture between the experience of place and the language available to describe it, there is an imperative demand for an "appropriate" usage by means of which the sense of otherness can be expressed and the interrogation and subversion of imperial cultural formations can take place. Although imperial monocentrism may be dismantled by a pluralist impulsion of energy from the margin which de-centres the metropolis, is there a role for post-colonial language theory in South Africa?

Linguistics is locked in the exclusiveness of its professional competence and cannot countenance the reinscription of its own axiology in a cultural programme

which recognises that there are no primitive cultures. English literature continues to implement a gate-keeping role on the margins of empire, fearfully awaiting the arrival of the barbarian now that the imperial police have withdrawn. Can the subaltern speak?

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