If You Write Back, Do It in English[1]

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Abstract
During the entire European colonial era, the colonisers were able to impose their language/s to the subalterns due to political, economic and social superiority of the Centre/s over their colonial Peripheries. Moreover, in certain aspects, the Centres have managed to maintain that dominant position in some of the former colonies even after they gained independence, at least regarding the use of the coloniser's language. Notwithstanding the national and political factors, not to mention the logical choice of an indigenous language, many postcolonial states have chosen to retain a European language as the formally recognised one, and to keep it as the major medium of instruction, from primary to higher education, to this very day. Thus, for instance, though numerous local languages are spoken in India (over 1,600) and Pakistan, English is one of only two official languages there, in addition to Hindi in India, and Urdu in Pakistan. A similar situation is found in Sri Lanka, where the two official languages are Sinhalese and Tamil, but English also plays an important role as the Constitutionally recognised *link language*. Besides education, English is mostly used in science, economy and commerce in these countries, with the explanation that it helps position them globally. The authors of this paper will endeavour to analyse the reasons for and against future education in the coloniser's language, within the framework of post-colonial theory reflected in the famous book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, and some other seminal works.

Keywords: Education, the English language, post-colonialism, The Empire Writes Back

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Introduction

English colonial rule in South Asia[2], or more precisely the Indian subcontinent, was initiated at the onset of the 17th century, when the so-called Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies, nowadays better known as East India Company, was granted a Charter by Queen Elizabeth I, on the 31st December 1600. What started as trade contacts in the 16th century, soon became administrative control, and then turned into political domination and colonial exploitation as from the 18th century, lasting until the mid-20th century, when most British colonies were given independence.

Together with their laws and factories, the English colonisers also brought to India their culture and language, which were accepted by the native population for various reasons. In addition to that, the English were more lenient and polite than other European colonisers, and they also showed interest in and respect for the culture and habits of the indigenous population, which even led to numerous interracial marriages, hence many of them decided to stay and live in India.

However, the English administration was quickly developing and soon there were not enough clerks for the civil service, so they started recruiting local population. Of course, the English were given senior positions, but even the native staff in lower positions were required to speak the coloniser's language. That is why they were not only trained as administrators but also taught proper English, while special schools in which it became the primary medium of instruction were also established at that time.

The Role of English in India

This contact between English as the imported language and the local Indian population was soon further boosted by several factors, which Kachru defines as three distinct phases that were at first independent, but later on joined and led to English becoming firmly rooted in India for ages to come:

> The first phase comprises the efforts of the missionaries who went to South Asia essentially for proselytizing purposes. The second includes the efforts of a small group of Lankans and Indians who were fascinated by the progress of the West and desired to use the English language as a vehicle for scientific and material progress. The third was a political phase which firmly established the English language in South Asia. (Kachru, 1983, p. 19).

Although it is true that English missionaries went to the East above all in order to propagate the Christian religion, which implied Western culture and ideas, they also played a major role in spreading the English language, primarily by introducing the Western system of education, in which knowledge was accessible only to those fluent in English. In his analysis of Charles Grant's[3] Observations on the state of society

[2] Above all the area which presently consists of three independent countries: India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Though this paper focuses on the situation in India, the status of English is quite similar in the remaining two countries.

[3] Charles Grant (1746-1823) was an influential British politician, a Member of Parliament, and Chairman of East India Company.

among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain (1792), Homi K. Bhabha rightly points to the fact that

> Grant's dream of an evangelical system of mission education conducted uncompromisingly in the English language, was partly a belief in political reform along Christian lines and partly an awareness that the expansion of company rule in India required a system of subject formation – a reform of manners, as Grant put it – that would provide the colonial with 'a sense of personal identity as we know it'. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 87).

This concept of social and even political control gained by reforming colonial subjects was further developed to its extreme by the renowned Lord Macaulay[4] whose impact on all walks of life in India is still more than significant. Having highlighted in his Minute on Indian Education (1835) that "the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects", since for the coloniser this seemed as truth and reality, Macaulay reached the well-known conclusion, which forever changed the Indian civilisation:

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (as cited in Thirumalai, 2003).

Not only did Macaulay advocate English as the instruction medium, but he also opted for Western content and concepts to be taught in Indian schools, in order to further disseminate Occidental knowledge throughout the Colony/Periphery. The Indian education system was thus supposed to start training the 'mimic man' – as V.S. Naipaul[5] would put it – through the process which Bhabha named 'mimicry', that can be traced in many literary works as 'colonial mimesis' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 87). Once the English language was introduced, not only in Indian schools, but even as the official language of the entire country, it was there to stay until this very day. Furthermore, Macaulay compared the importance of English for Indians to that of Greek and Latin for Europeans of the early 16th century, as a language which helps diffuse knowledge, purify taste, and develop arts and sciences (cf. Thirumalai, 2003) – briefly said, the modern *lingua franca*.

The spreading of the coloniser's language and of the Occidental model of education was in fact much more than it seems on the surface, since English was also the carrier of Western knowledge, norms and culture, or as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin duly underline in their famous work *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*:

> One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan

[4] Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) was a famous British politician and historian, who served as a member of the Supreme Council of India for four years (1834-1838).
[5] Nobel prize winner V.S. Naipaul (1932-) published his novel *The Mimic Men* in 1967.

> language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities. ... Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2004, p. 7).

Another suitable and very powerful medium for conveying Occidental values and norms to the natives was English literature, which started being taught in Indian schools regardless of differences between the two civilisations:

> The strategy of locating authority in these texts all but effaced the sordid history of colonialist expropriation, material exploitation, and class and race oppression behind European world dominance ... the English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state (Viswanathan, 1987, p. 23).

The importance of the introduction of the coloniser's literature in Indian schools is also emphasised by Gayatri Spivak, who warns that the nineteenth-century British literature should not be read "without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored." (Spivak, 1999, p. 113).

Naturally, all of this was possible only thanks to what Kachru calls 'the second phase', or in other words, with the help of Indian intellectuals "who preferred English to Indian languages for academic, scientific and other international reasons." (Kachru, 1983, p. 21). This is how Macaulay on his side explains the status of English in India:

> In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government. It is like [*sic!*] [*recte* likely] to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East. It is the language of two great European communities which are raising, the one in south of Africa, the other in Australasia; communities which are every year becoming more important, and more closely connected with our Indian empire. ... There are in this very town natives who are quite competent to discuss political or scientific questions with fluency and precision in the English language. (as cited in Thirumalai, 2003).

When Kachru points to what he calls the third, or 'political phase', in the introduction of the English language in India, he specifically implies what Macaulay means by mentioning 'the ruling class' and 'the higher class of natives at the seats of Government', although he adds that "there were clearly two views about educating the people of South Asia in English": those who favoured the coloniser's language, and the others who were "against the use of English as a compulsory language" (Kachru, 1983, pp. 21-22). However, this political impact was the strongest in the 20th century, when two greatest politicians in entire Indian history – Gandhi[6] and Nehru[7] – encouraged the use of English:

[6] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), better known as Mahatma Gandhi, was the main leader of the Indian independence movement in the colonial era, and the President of the Indian National Congress.

> In the long, uneasy, and interminable task of making English an Indian language, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru are central figures. Each took the alien language of rule and found ways to make it intimate, fluent, and cantankerous. English made the empire, but they showed how it could be used to unmake it – how the language could be a tool of insubordination and, ultimately, freedom. (Khilnani, 2013, p. 151).

Besides writing their speeches and works (autobiographies, essays and articles, among others) in English, Gandhi and Nehru also "kept a political commitment to English as a language of public communication ... recognising it as a vital link not just to the wider world but also between Indians themselves." (Khilnani, 2013, p. 152). Nonetheless, until the 1940s, both Gandhi and Nehru had a rather negative and critical opinion regarding the use of English in India, and it was only later that "their views about the social and cultural functions of English changed" (Khilnani, 2013, p. 172), and they started realising the extent to which the coloniser's language was important for the nationals of their country, so that near the end of his life Gandhi even wrote that "The rule of the English will go because it was corrupt, but the prevalence of English will never go." (Khilnani, 2013, p. 173), while Nehru's statement "English is our major window on the world." has become almost proverbial.

Gandhi's prediction turned out to be so true when the Constitution of 1950, which provided for abolishing the status of English[8] in India, was amended by the Official Languages Act in 1963, due to wide-scale protests in the states where Hindi is not spoken and their inhabitants feared that it would be imposed upon them as the sole official language. In fact, their fears partially came true because both English and Hindi continue to be obligatory languages in all public schools[9], together with the third, locally spoken language. In private schools English is the primary medium of education, with Hindi or the official language of the state in which the school is located being a compulsory subject as well. English is also the teaching language at Indian universities, a few of which have recently started offering courses in state languages, but only in addition to English as the basic language of higher education. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that education is only a part of the wider picture, and that postcolonial states – India among them – "were often tied to former colonial administrative, legal and economic systems that limited their independent action. This effectively allowed the continued control of many of these states in the period after independence" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2007, p. 175).

Of course, the continued role of English has been objected to by numerous renowned Indian personalities, and even several widespread nationalistic campaigns requesting that English as the symbol of colonial rule be immediately eradicated. Among these, the most prominent were *Angrezi Hatao* (1957) and *Jan Sangh* (1963), the movement which included such influential figures as the tenth Prime Minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Although the use of English in India still has many supporters,

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[7] Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) was the first Prime Minister of India, since it gained independence on 15 August 1947, until his death.

[8] The first Indian Constitution of 1950 stipulated that English would be used as one of the two official Indian languages only for fifteen more years, as a transitional measure until 1965, when Hindi would become the only official language.

[9] In India, there are some 688,000 primary schools, 110,000 secondary schools, 17,000 colleges, 47 central (national) and 274 state universities (http://www.mapsofindia.com/education/).

primarily those who are opposed to Hindi becoming the only national language, those have been criticised from all sides. They are usually ridiculed as Anglicised, scornfully called 'Macaulay's Children'[10], and accused of having neglected their own language(s), culture(s), and tradition(s). There are also some people who cannot forget that this is the language of the former coloniser, hence the opinion that "The clumsy Victorian English hangs like a dead albatross around each educated Indian's neck" (Jyoti, Cutts, and Sen, 2006, p. 400).

Similarly, the works of Indian authors writing in the English language, the so-called Indian English literature, is considered to be "a historical aberration and a literary dead-end" (Mehrotra, 2003, p. 15), or even worse, "a post-colonial anomaly, the bastard[11] child of Empire, sired on India by the departing British; its continuing use of the old colonial tongue is seen as a fatal flaw that renders it forever inauthentic" (Rushdie, 1997, p. xii). Another group of opponents, those with a nationalistic mindset, consider that English as a foreign language simply cannot communicate the thoughts of Indian people:

> Questions regarding the use of English and the identification of the Indianness of the subject matter have been the main concern of the critics. Nationalistic rejection of English was coupled with an acceptance of the Whorfian hypothesis that a consciousness conditioned by an Indian Language could not be conveyed through English. (Uraizee, 1993, p. 220).

The most striking statement, however, was made by one of the greatest Indian writers ever, Sri Aurobindo Ghose[12], who himself created his works exclusively in English, but this did not prevent him from thus challenging the authors who choose to do so:

> The language which a man speaks and which he has never learned, is the language of which he has the nearest sense and in which he expresses himself with the greatest fullness, subtlety and power. He may neglect, he may forget it, but he will always retain for it a hereditary aptitude, and it will always continue [*sic!*] [*recte* continue to be] for him the language in which he has the safest chance of writing with originality and ease. To be original in an acquired tongue is hardly feasible. The mind, conscious of a secret disability with which it ought not to have handicapped itself, instinctively takes refuge in imitation, or else in pathos and the work turned out is ordinarily very mediocre stuff. It has something unnatural and spurious about it like speaking with a stone in the mouth or walking upon stilts. (Sri Aurobindo, 2003, p. 107).

Contrary to Sri Aurobindo, one of the fathers of the Indian English literature, Raja Rao[13], did not consider English to be an 'acquired' or 'alien' language, and he had an extremely logical explanation for the widespread use of English in India:

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[10] Or even "Macauley's bastards" (Desai, 1985, p. 122).

[11] It is rather interesting that Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie both use the same word to refer to the persistence of English in India.

[12] Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), a Hindu poet and philosopher, was very active in the Indian independence movement, while his most noted literary works are the epic poem in twelve books *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (1950/51), and *The Life Divine* (1939/40) about the Indian metaphysical thought.

[13] Together with Mulk Raj Anand and Rashipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan, Raja Rao (1908-2006) is considered to be a forefather of the contemporary Indian English literature. His main works are novels:

> 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 in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. (Rao, 1971, pp. 5-6).

Another famous writer of Indian origin, Salman Rushdie[14], considers that for Indians English is a convenient 'tool', and that it has become "an essential language in India" owing to its use in the fields of technical vocabulary and international communication, "but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates." (Rushdie, 2010, pp. 64-65). According to Rushdie, an additional reason why English is so popular in India, especially among contemporary writers, is the fact that translation of works from Indian languages other than English is scarce, and even the best writers who create in other Indian languages are not known outside India, since those writing in English "seize all the limelight" (Rushdie, 2010, p. 69). Stressing that the spreading of the English language throughout the world is only partly the consequence of the British colonisation, since the role of 'linguistic neo-colonialism' of the United States of America cannot be neglected, Rushdie rather positively concludes the following:

> I don't think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial – or is it post-colonial? – cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it. Assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers. (Rushdie, 2010, p. 64).

This is probably what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin mean when they assert that postcolonial writers are facing the challenge "to adapt the colonial language to local needs" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2003, p. 284). In their influential work *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, they point to the fact that the colonised use the coloniser's language in order to bridge the gap that exists between their different worlds. During this process of using/appropriating it, bridging the gap, or writing back, that language of the former coloniser "is adopted as a tool[15] and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2004, p. 38). The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* add, however, that this proces is not at all simple because its essence is in fact the response of the Periphery to the Centre and the rejection of its power, because the

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Kanthapura (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), *Comrade Kirillov* (1976), *The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988), and collections of short stories: *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (1947), and *The Policeman and the Rose* (1978).

[14] Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay in 1947, is the winner of *The Best of the Booker* for his novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), and the author of many other books, including: *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *Fury* (2001), *Shalimar, The Clown* (2005), *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012), and *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015).

[15] It should be noted that they use the same word – 'tool', as Rushdie did in *Imaginary Homelands*.

coloniser's language is seised/captured, brought under the influence of the language of the colonised, appropriated/reconstituted/remoulded to new usages, and thus de-colonised. The very meaning which some words used to have in the coloniser's language is reversed and new, sometimes even opposite, meanings are 'inscribed' in these words, thus deconstructing the linguistic stability and cultural authority of the Centre (cf. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2004, pp. 37-38). Or – as Salman Rushdie once said – to "conquer English is the only way to make us free" (as cited in *Lingua Franca: Chimera or Reality?*, 2011, p. 29).

Conclusion

Despite the controversy regarding the use of English in India, the language of the former coloniser has persisted up to the present time – entire seven decades after the country gained its independence. On the basis of the previous analysis in this paper, we can conclude that there are many disadvantages, but also many advantages of this cultural and linguistic phenomenon.

On the one hand, the huge number of languages spoken in India[16] has always hindered communication between different ethnic groups. One of the two official languages – Hindi, despite being the language spoken by the majority of the population, is related to the privileged elite in the northern states of the country, and therefore opposed to by its southern inhabitants. That is why English as the second official language is a wise compromise, because it has taken up the role of unifying the nation, once upon a time played by Sanskrit. Secondly, regardless of the North-South divide, all over the country underprivileged castes used to be negatively marked by the languages they spoke, so for them English is the symbol of liberty because it erases the differences between castes, religions, and ethnic groups.

On the other hand, the importance and power of English were recognised early by the Indian rich elite and intelligentsia, whose members have traditionally been educated at the best British universities. They are aware that the English language provides them with increased opportunities, not only when they speak it abroad, but also in their motherland, where they assume some of its power and prestige. Even the governmental authorities understood the value of English and for that reason kept it as the medium of official communication, because it was obvious that this would contribute greatly to all aspects of India's growth, as well as its inclusion in the global economic developments.

To top it all off, the following quote shows an extreme example for the case when even those who want English to be eradicated still prefer to use it in their campaign: "A few years ago during a march in support of Hindi *against English* organised in India, demonstrators carried banners *in English*" (*Lingua Franca: Chimera or Reality?*, 2011, p. 25, emphasis added). It is precisely this power of the English language that will probably help it keep its top place in India for many years to come, given that

> Throughout India, there is an extraordinary belief, among almost all castes and classes, in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English.

[16] To be more precise, exactly 1,652 languages (cf. Prakash, 2007, p. 62).

> English is seen not just as a useful skill, but as a symbol of a better life, a pathway out of poverty and oppression. ... we cannot ignore the way that the English language has emerged as a powerful agent for change in India. (Graddol, 2010, p. 124).

Therefore, we can conclude that, although the fight against the supremacy of the former coloniser's language has not stopped, even those who oppose it realise that English is an extremely powerful medium which can be used to make oneself heard farther and to reach wider audiences.

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