SOME SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES OF ENGLISH AS THE GLOBAL LANGUAGE: Everything Is Changing, Everything Is Going, Going, Gone Now

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to inquire into the ways in which e-language works, considering such issues as how language constructs culture, the global culture, globalization as colonization, and non-English-speaking cultures by addressing the question, “In what ways is the English language implicated in globalization?” The paper is built upon postmodernist ideas of textuality and discourse with close reference to Gregory Ulmer’s “mystery.”

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Critical Framework

This paper resides in the postmodernist research dimensions of the “mystery,” the qualitative methodology grown from the work of the Canadian academic Gregory Ulmer (1989). In his development of an idea that there is no detachment in academic writing, he proffers the idea that academic writing is a construct. This contains elements of one’s own experiences, the researched, the conscious intellectual semiotic, and storytelling. He calls this a “mystery.” This word encompasses the mystery of the self, research, culture, and the story that is told. A “mystery” puts under erasure all claims to fact in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalization. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical.
Critical, literary, and cultural theories have converged in the late 20th century. They provide a rich prism through which to view the many facets of the new millennium. The major way these theories are utilized is to show how you can “read” and “write” each situation and person in life, including self, as a text and how you can enter into dialogue about the text. Thus, “textuality” and “discourse” have a new meaning in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These words and their correlative underlying concepts no longer refer to publications and oracy that clarify and reveal social, personal, and cultural givens: they indicate that every aspect of human existence is open to problematization and to re-thinking.

These theories have not just arisen as a result of an idiosyncratic or even mischievous intellectual debate that is essentially selfish and sterile. They are a response to many of the imponderables that have affected humans since industrialization, the growth of capitalism, and World War II. They have become particularly apposite since the introduction of popular and mass media and the new electronic communications technologies. When we take cultural norms for granted, we are blind to the ways in which they act to empower one group over another or to enact one series of behaviors and activities as “natural,” thereby marginalizing as “unnatural” all who are different from them. The goal of this examination of our cultural imperatives is to show the search for meaning to be singular and tentative.

Introduction

This “mystery” is about how we can come to understand the cultural impact of global language of the new millennium. Although this era of globalization has many completely new attributes, we can learn about its impact through looking at the history of European colonization. Just as computerization is making a borderless electronic world today, European colonization was moving across the geographic globe from the 16th century (Braudel, 1983). It completely ignored and de-valued “native” culture and language as uncivilized and pagan. Just as today, it valued European languages above all others.

Britain was the most successful colonizer, and the British colonizers valued the English language to the detriment of all others. Just as today it is the language of electronic globalization, for many centuries English was the language of geographic globalization. The impact of this “cultural imperialism” upon the colonized languages and cultures was strongly negative.

In his remarkable novel, Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe (1994) speaks with the heart of an Igbo from Nigeria in the language of the colonizer: English. In a series of lectures at Harvard, he reflects upon the impact that an education in the English language about British literary classics had on himself and his Igbo culture:

…it was only these foreign aspects of my upbringing that we dignified with the title of education. For us that word was not about Igbo things; it was about
faraway places and peoples; and its acquisition was generally painful. Igbo things did not vanish from our lives; they were present but taken for granted, unacknowledged. (Achebe, 2000, pp.19-20)

British culture was one of the strongest global experiences of cultural imperialism through the use of language and hence the construction of community. This was evident even in storytelling. Children in African tribal groups grew up hearing about Peter Pan, meeting the unlikely characters from Jane Austen’s novels, or reading about Emily Bronte’s Heathcliffe on a moor they would never see and could not visualize. So “native” children in Africa, Asia, America, and Australia learnt in the English language about elves and fairies and how the nightingale sang and the role that England’s topographical beauty played in keeping alive the light of civilization through the dark heart of the far-flung empire. Their own languages and lives were devalued. Their own community practices, laws, and beliefs began, in Achebe’s words, to “fall apart.”

Global Culture

Once, communication involved some conceptualization of the practice of self as an individual within a given community. In the dominant Western culture today, traditional ideas of connectedness and togetherness embedded in the concept of community no longer rely upon local contact. Media and multimedia mean that reality and virtual reality now have blurred outlines: they are merging into an eculture. Globalization means that, for the first time in human history, the nuances of shared meanings are no longer dependent upon geography. This does not mean that the Western world comes to other cultures with an interest in exchange and equality: rather, it subsumes them through electronic colonization just as it did with geographic colonization.

Nevertheless, within this “big picture” dominated by globalization through computerization, we do continue to lead lives of the local and immanent. But this local and immanent is now also electronically expanded beyond time, space restrictions, or the barriers caused by gender, age, skin color, and lifestyle. Languages and the cultures that the local communities express and contain are becoming homogenized according to Redman (2002) who argues, “English spans the divide between people and cultures. It isn’t owned by Britain and America: now it belongs to everyone” (p. 45). This may inevitably mean that everyone belongs to English and other languages and cultural practices disappear and are lost forever. (Burnett, 2004)

The “e” is a Western invention. Although globalization may have been an inevitable consequence, it can also be seen as an electronic colonization, an electronic cultural imperialism. In this way, it is innately destructive towards non-English speaking communities. Globalization is a centralizing influence. Take English as the global language, for example. Despite the resurgence of some languages such as Hebrew, Hawaiian, and Gaelic, most languages—and therefore most communities—are faced with the question of how to continue, much less to thrive, in a globalized world. Bill

Globalization is so influential that English will overtake all other languages and hence all other cultures because it is “buttressed by the formidable panoply of the mass communications industry…” (Dalby as cited in Morrison, 2002, p. 26). So English is not only the global language online, but also in the global film and T.V. industry, the music, song, and clothing industry, and even the car industry.

Predictably, being a social critic rather than a global businessman, Jean Baudrillard (2002) has a rather morose and difficult view of globalization:

The establishment of a global system is the result of an intense jealousy. It is the jealousy of an indifferent and low-definition culture against cultures with higher definition, of a disenchanted and de-intensified system against high cultural environments, and of a de-sacralized society against sacrificial forms. According to this dominant system, any reactionary form is virtually terrorist. (p.3).

Baudrillard sees this terrorism as being both cultural and geographic.

Cultural ideologies are the unspoken “givens” that tend to “glue” the social group together. They are easy to identify when we look at the supporters of a football club. They are much less easy to identify when we reflect upon our own culture and its social practice. We are coming from that culture, so we are formed and informed by it…and perhaps “blinded” to its social constructions of “the natural” (Eagleton, 1989). The Indian cultural theorist Gayatari Spivak (2000) says, “…leaders read the world in terms of rationality and averages, as if it were a textbook. The world actually writes itself with the many-leveled, unfixable intricacy and openness of a work of literature” (p. 95).

Baudrillard (2002) argues that the much-touted globalization that is everywhere utilizing the prefix “e” is a form of slavery, albeit benevolent oppression. He sees it as having led to the humiliation of the non-Western world because non-Westerners are seen to receive and never permitted to give. It has also led to the humiliation of the self in the West because we, too, are in despair because we have submitted to “…an omnipotent technology, to a crushing virtual reality, to an empire of networks and programs that are probably in the process of redrawing the regressive contours of the entire human species, of a humanity that has gone ‘global’” (p.4.).

**Global Language and Global Culture**

The English language is taking over global communication and hence local culture.

Every fortnight, somewhere in the world, a language dies…Already half the world’s population speak just 11 mother tongues between them. Mandarin
Chinese is top of the list, English and Hindi (or the closely related Urdu) vie for second place, with Spanish close behind... But if you look at the number of people who can handle a language competently, as well as those who speak it as their mother tongue, it is obvious that there is only one great white shark in the pool: English. (Morrison, 2002, p.26)

Increasingly, then, people from all language groups speak English as well as their so-called “mother-tongue.” The implications of this for a sense of identity are enormous. As each language is diminished in its use, a culture dies with it. “If diversity is a prerequisite for successful humanity, then the preservation of linguistic diversity is essential, for language lies at the heart of what it is to be human” (Morrison, p.26).

It cannot be over-emphasized that the frame for electronic communications is essentially drawn from the dominant Western culture. In addition, the ownership of mobile phones and computers, the availability of software programs, the use of the English language, and the ability and finance to access and utilize the World Wide Web privilege developed countries such as America and Europe more than anywhere else. Is globalization then a cancer, a vertigo, perhaps a fatal displacement of cultural certainties, as Baudrillard sees it?

**Non-English-speaking Cultures**

Increasingly, countries that had been dominated by Western imperialism sought their freedom after World War II. Geographically, this movement continues today. Many of these ex-colonies have struggled to gain recognition as nations in their own right. They pushed out colonial governments, settlers, and educational practices. They tried to revive many of their own customs and languages that had lost status and even fallen into disuse under the colonizers.

The Declaration on the Granting of Independence To Colonial Countries and People, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1960, states in part:

> Convinced that the continued existence of colonialism... impedes the social, cultural and economic development of dependent peoples and mitigates against the United Nations ideal of universal peace...DECLARES that:...All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

This is post-colonial thinking, but is post-colonialism possible in a global world? Post-colonialism endeavors to bring back cultures destroyed or diminished by the dominant colonizers; it builds an understanding of the ways in which European preconceptions that debase their cultural practices can be combated and works against the normalizing effect of a dominant European culture (See Landow in Eastgate Systems, 2006).
In What Ways Is the English Language Implicated in Globalization?

As we know, English is the global language. This seems pretty simple and convincing at first glance. It is particularly seductive for those of us who speak, listen, think, read, and write in English. We easily accept the idea that technology is such a force that every aspect of life is undergoing change because of it and the binary of real/reality and hyper-real/virtual reality is being bridged via the English language. Yet how “real” is this for most of the world? In cyberspace most of their languages, the workshops of their culture, are subsumed into the new global language: English. Thus a new cultural and linguistic “reality” is built.

Mandarin may have the largest number of native speakers (about 800 million), but English, with 1.9 billion speakers – including some 350 million native speakers – is far and away the largest global lingua franca. The next largest, Spanish, claims 450 million competent speakers worldwide, while French is spoken by a mere 130 million. The most vital statistic is that some 1.5 billion people around the globe speak English as a second language. ’It has become the working language of the global village,’ says ESU (English Speaking Union) chairman Lord Alan Watson…. (Redman, 2002, p. 45)

As a cultural commentator, Baudrillard (2002) sees a far more insidious political agenda in this global domination of all other cultures by “the West.” He claims that the West has a “mission” and that mission is “….to use all available means to subjugate every culture to the brutal principle of cultural equivalence” (p. 3). Furthermore, he claims this is inevitably the force that produces terrorism, for “once a culture has lost its values, it can only seek revenge by attacking those of others….The goal is to get rid of any reactive zone, and to colonize and domesticate any wild and resisting territory both geographically and mentally” (p. 3).

Global Equality

Access to power in the eGlobal is clearly as unequal as access to power in the geographic global itself (Dodge, 2004). In Albania, there are 3.45 million people and 12,000 Internet users (3.478%) compared with 3 million in the Congo and 500 users (.0166%), the United States with 280.5 million and 182.13 million users (64.93%), and a similar percentage in the United Kingdom of 59.8 million population with 34.3 million users (57.357%) (Dodge, 2004).

Similarly, the geographic starting and reception points for Internet activities show just how restricted the eGlobal is in practice. Most of the traffic is from the American major cities to the major British and European ones. The traffic shows that the borderless ideal of the eGlobal is not apparent in reality. Just as in real geographic space those of us who are already enabled are further enabled in cyberspace (Mappa Mundi, 2005). eGlobal interactions on the Internet indicate that most users are from a particular geographic space and a particular demographic. As in the geographic world, the most
prominent subtextual influence on the eGlobal is the dominant ideology of the Western culture: late capitalism. Clearly, the eGlobal means something totally different in the Congo or Albania from what it means in the U.S.A or the U.K. Such evidence shows that any ideal of a cyber world with access for all is unlikely to be sustained. In fact, eGlobal culture and meaning in both its text and subtext are produced in our society by powerful Western and Western-oriented money-makers largely through dominance of the media.

The Borderless World

Our “real” earthspace experience of colonization tells us that we will take our prejudices and beliefs with us into “virtual” earthspace, the eGlobal, so we may safely assume that human strengths and weaknesses pertinent to Western post-industrialist societies are implicated in the construction of the cyber (Arnold, 2002). Yet, there seems to be a simplistic acceptance of the positive semiotic of the eGlobal. Trevor Barr (2000) comments that “much of the literature on globalization implies that such changes are inevitable in a world where apparently all that mere mortal human beings can do is adapt to the ‘borderless world’ as best they can” and reminds us that, at all levels of government and power, “resistance to the onslaught of global economic forces remains marginal” (p.32).

Has the eGlobal already enabled humans to become techno-organisms? The feminist Donna Haraway (1991) sees the cyborg (cybernetic organism) as something more than a human being with a technological add-on such as an arm that is also a gun. She describes the cyborg as a state of being in which humans rely on technology to perform themselves and their lives. This dependency can be seen in the car, the T.V., radio, electrical homewares as well as the computer itself. As the computerization of such technology increases, it is evident that our state of cyborg-ness becomes more entrenched and “natural” or “normal.” Thus, modern cars have electronic seat adjustments for the driver’s bottom and back, air-conditioning adapters according to the outside temperature and so on.

Once, computers were seen as a way of enhancing our humanity: they were thought to be able to be built so that they could be more human. Now humans are comparing themselves to computers. The cyborg is, thus, human adaptation to technological advances and an entrenched reliance upon them. Such a technologically driven culture has been an intrinsic part of human society. The eGlobal moves it, however, from the organic human condition to the digitized.

Global Freedom

It is increasingly difficult for societies to remain “closed” against free thought. It is increasingly easy for citizens in repressive political situations to express themselves globally. Moreover, many argue that the “e” provides a global freedom that enhances
and even enables the democratic formation of the self within the culture. This assertion of self goes beyond group security as the net helps build identity from a sense of “we” to a sense of “self”: “…the internet helps promote what are called alternative or counter public spheres that can offer a new, empowering sense of what it is to be a citizen” (Van de Donk et al., 2004, p. xiii).

Blogging provides us with this new empowering sense of citizenship, just as virtual reality may seem to free us from the confines of the ordinary, from the repression of the imagination by external forces. In gaming and three dimensional interactivity, the players see objects from many angles, move in and out of range to close ups or broad views, perform actions and interactions both with the characters or visualizations and with the performative gaming itself, make choices and introduce new elements, and generally act to produce a synthetic picture within a virtual reality that is becoming less and less identifiable as not real. The linguist and semiotician Goren Sonesson (1988a) has his own warning about this: “The time has come in which we may all, Like Wu-tao-tze, paint a picture on the prison wall and enter it. But it remains to be seen whether another prison is awaiting us on the other side of the landscape” (p. 6).

This global culture is personal and immediate at the same time as it is driven by technology and available online globally. It is often described as the culture of “a global village.” Whereas culture has previously been seen as the particularization of local habits, the new technologies are bringing a global individualization through many of these techniques I have discussed. Such compressions of a-synchronous time and space overcome all previous boundaries to communication (Kellner, 2005)

Conclusion

Many argue that the “e” provides a global freedom that enhances and even enables the democratic formation of the self within the culture because the Internet offers “alternative or counter public spheres” in which people could express their opinions as citizens.

Users of computers, especially Generation@, have become experts in the instant knowledge download of the vast WWW network. We have come to believe that we somehow know stuff because we can connect to the Internet and get instant information on almost any topic. While gaining information may be easy, gaining knowledge is much more challenging, and making that information and knowledge into some form of wisdom is extremely challenging indeed. Higher order thinking is not readily available because the technology is there to deliver materials, and materials delivered by the WWW are not innocent in themselves. Perhaps we have even come to believe that we exist because we can use the WWW to express ourselves.

The social imperatives of our cultural groups are difficult to identify and critique because of our self-construction within the cultural determinants. The intellectual challenge is to
step outside the margins of the cultural constructions so as to identify them. Working against the “givens” leads to fresh awareness and insight: it is a vehicle of personal and cultural growth.

We are formed by the cultural constructions in which we live, and most especially by the language that we speak: “After two centuries of cultural dislocation and dispersal, as well as the forced imposition of English in missions and workplaces, Australia has arguably the worst record of indigenous language loss anywhere in the world” (Heysen & Potter, 2006, p.15). Or, as one Yolngu woman, the actor Frances Djulibing, says of her languages and culture: “Everything is changing, everything is going, going, gone now” (Heysen and Potter, p. 15).

References


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