

The Idea of English in Japan

CRITICAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY STUDIES

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The Idea of English in Japan

Ideology and the Evolution of a Global Language

Philip Seargeant

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Preface

That 'globalization' has become a catchall word in a variety of academic and nonacademic domains now is a truism. Government policy-makers sometimes attribute their country's economic woes to its onslaught, environmentalists lament the destructive impact of its onward march and advocates of indigenous communities blame the disappearance of smaller cultures and minority languages on it. The multiple and disparate ways in which this term is used has turned this concept into a global symbol of sorts, with its meanings becoming inflated and the risk of its becoming a cliché. However, it is when we attempt to understand it in terms of local realities – the forms and nuances it assume in very particular articulations, in specific places on our planet – that the worn nature of this term is contested. There is in applied linguistics a growing awareness of global flows (Alim *et al.*, 2009; Pennycook, 2007), the role of language, specifically English, in cross-national movements (Tan & Rubdy, 2007) and the ways in which language ideologies permeate and position people and communities, that open up ways to address the untidiness and spillage associated with the term globalization.

It is precisely this set of issues that informs the present volume. Seargeant's insightful analysis of how English is positioned in Japan, both as a linguistic system and as a set of free-floating ideologies, shows us how different forms of knowledge about language have an effect upon the way in which language is regulated within society. This focus on language ideology is a significant one for studies of global English. Some critical approaches to the spread of English see ideology as a reflection of a neoliberal, English-speaking empire (Phillipson, 2008), the means by which the inequitable relations between English and other languages are maintained. Seargeant, by contrast, draws on broader studies of language ideology (see Blommaert, 1999; Kroskrity, 2000), which, deriving from an anthropological tradition, are interested centrally in the ways in which language is understood locally. This work is of great, and as yet rather untapped, significance for applied linguistics generally and studies of the global spread of English more specifically since it looks at ideology not as a top-down imposition reflecting only an economic order but rather as a local manifestation of how language is understood.

Amongst other things, this focus allows on the one hand for a much more complex understanding of language ideology: The ways languages are understood is a product of local cultures, histories, aesthetics, educational orientations and so on. And on the other hand, it helps us to question the very solidity that is ascribed to language: If it means different things to different people, then what constitutes English is less clearly defined by recourse to grammar, lexicon or naming practices, and instead is a product of particular conditions of locality. As Seargeant points out, defensive positions and clamours to hold on to traditions – partially revealed in Bunmei Ibuki's (Japan's Minister of Education) comment on the need to ensure that students write and speak decent Japanese – calls attention to English's binaristic positioning in that landscape. 'The English language is assigned a particular emblematic meaning...' (p. 25), and Seargeant evocatively captures this by showing, among other things, how McPal (and the initiative that tries to use McDonald's as a site for English language learning) sets in motion an ideology that brings together food, Americanization and ELT pedagogy and justifies it in terms of 'citizens expecting a better life in the 21st century' (p. 28).

The dynamics of such local ideologies are needless to say, imbued with power (Blommaert, 2005; Kubota, 1998, 1999). The hierarchies and stratifications they reproduce point to their material articulations while their *mentaliste* aspects (world views and beliefs) make us aware of the prediscursive space before enactments happen. The entanglements and complexities that make up the ineffability of ideologies (impossible as they are to pin down either through language or artifact) call for modes of inquiry that go beyond traditional methods associated with sociolinguistics to others that capture 'concepts' of ideologies. This is an important deviation because it proceeds from the assumption that the best way to address power dimensions in ideologies is through variously scattered signs and icons. Seargeant's focus on such 'symbols' – whether it is through a commentator in the media describing Japanese as being 'deep, profound, at times esoteric language [which is] very different from the shoot-from-the-hips English' or the analysis of particular written texts including educational policies regarding EFL, or how the tourist industry partially dictates particular kinds of self-presentation – underscore how particular vignettes in cultures provide very valuable insights into the messiness, collisions and deliberations in and around ideologies. The globalizing surges that bring in English loanwords, create contexts for Japanese rap lyrics (Pennycook, 2003) and open up possibilities for changing language policies in educational settings permit us glimpses into the completely intertwined nature of both Japanese and English in modern Japan. Indeed, English, in some contexts becomes a powerful way to

present oneself and anticipate a future identity (Norton, 2000; Norton & Kanno, 2003).

These snapshots of local ideologies move us toward conceptualizing 'the local' in Applied Linguistics. While the local-global dichotomy may be commonplace now in some contexts of the field, the local is a vital space in the discipline since it is a site of meaning construction (around Japanese and English in the present case) or power struggles (moments of defensiveness while also surging forward), and social action and agentiveness (in the face of societal constraints). So rather than think in terms of local and global as opposites, it may be more productive to view them as mutually constitutive. Such an orientation is one that the three of us support in this series, and which also emerges in forthcoming work on English in East African contexts (Higgins, 2009). It lends support to Appadurai's claim (1996) that local knowledge is not only local in itself, but even more important, for itself (thus affording an interesting contrast to the Geertzian notion of the local being a somewhat autonomous site). Locality is always supralocal; it emerges only in relation to other localities (just as the global force of English emerges only in relation to local languages). This point is an important one because it is at once translocal and critical – indeed a particular kind of critical translocalism – and is ideal for addressing ideologies and globalization. It focuses on connections between several local spaces (Ramanathan, 2005), exploring local-to-local networks, and works in some ways to counter the center-periphery dichotomy. As Seargeant's work effectively points out, it removes the West from the center of intercultural relations and moves English away from its native speaking population to reveal uneven in-betweens, movements that are at once intercontextual and interdependent.

In terms of disciplinary locales, the space that Seargeant's book carves for itself is between English and a certain cultural geography, with a vision toward economic geography in its related political, cultural and applied turns. Geography – spaces, actual physical domains in the natural world – is crucial here and it is its role in future economic prospects of the country through English that is relevant. The wider ideational scope of this project explores questions around this crux of issues, and in so doing locates itself at the crossroads of contemporary issues in cultural and economic studies of ELT. These theoretical currents – cultural studies, critical geography and political economy – applied to ELT derive both the post-structural shifts in social theory as well as the complex political, economic and cultural conditions at stake as a result of processes of globalization. In all of this, Seargeant is clear that the complexities around English as a global language far exceed current disciplinary debates about it, especially those pertaining to intelligibility. As he points out, 'if intelligibility were

the primary concern for the success of a global language, then decisions about a model for teaching could be resolved on the basis of rudimentary linguistic knowledge. . . . But a global language is not simply a matter of mutual intelligibility. The role that ideology plays in language conceptualization and language use results in a far more complex picture of what a global language is', opening up the possibility of viewing language itself as a political construction (Pennycook & Makoni, 2007).

The various disciplinary narratives around English that such a position both draws on but also moves beyond need careful articulation and Seargeant shows how complexly his work culls from various strains in the field – world Englishes, English as an international language or English as a lingua franca – but goes beyond them as well (Ramanathan, 2008). He also shows us how 'ethnography' is not enough since what we regard as 'ethnographic' always proceeds from implicit or explicit modes of critical and theoretical interpretation. Theory affords us mappings of worlds so that we can understand, among other things, relationships between various ethnographic claims, and Seargeant shows us, by an explicit articulation of some theories, how diverse representations and interpretations position English in simultaneous conflicting and competitive struggles for authority. People's lives and communities are enmeshed in such tensions and this book compels us not only to think about the relationship between an icon and its referent differently, or between languages and their associative meanings in unusual ways, but about how English is positioned evermore in local-to-local connections that indicate *supralocality* – connections between several different local sites, sometimes in the same geographic territory, but not necessarily – and less and less on center–periphery links that perpetuate dependence. Seargeant accomplishes this with finesse.

Vaidehi Ramanathan, Alastair Pennycook
and Bonny Norton

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