LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM
THE TEACHING OF ESL
IN SOUTH AFRICA

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In Shakespeare's The Tempest, Prospero the magician colonizes an island inhabited by one Caliban, a semi-bestial savage. Prospero tries by his arts to 'civil-ize' and 'humanize' Caliban, in part by teaching him language. Caliban responds by attempting - most un-gratefully - to ravish Prospero's daughter, and is finally imprisoned in rock.

Prospero rails:

Abborred slave,

... I pitied thee,

Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour

... But thy vile race,

Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures

Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou

Deservedly confin'd into this rock.1

The current situation in ESL teaching is not that dif-ferent. English has been used as weapon of civiliza-tion, simultaneously colonizing black South Africans and - ultimately - excluding them, incarcerating them

in prisons of perceived inferiority and inadmissibility to the ranks of free speakers. Small wonder that it is claimed that English, together with many other disciplines, is 'perceived by many students as elitist and divisive, exclusively serving entrenched establishment interests, and resisting the forces of change'.2

Terms like 'remedial' or - even - 'handicapped' English, the insistence on the nonnative speaker's need to 'catch up', the constant paranoia about 'our standards', current research on students' 'problems' in SLA, all reinforce the notion that there is something 'wrong' with second language English speakers in South Africa, and above all that students, not teachers, are the people who must adapt or die.

Most ESL teachers are stalled in one of two colonial stages. (These stages were identified by Mina P. Shaughnessy among her fellow teachers at the City University of New York, in their responses to the flood of ethnic minority students who enrolled under the University's new 'open admissions' policy in 1971.) The first stage is called 'Guarding the Tower':

'During this stage the teacher is in one way or another concentrating on protecting the [establishment] from the outsiders, those who do not seem to belong in the community of learners. The grounds for exclusion are various. The mores of the time inhibit anyone's openly ascribing the exclusion to genetic inferiority, but a few teachers doubtless still hold to this view.'3

The common attitude expressed is one of exclusivity and protectiveness. Teachers feel called upon to guard the golden heritage of a precious culture, a priceless language, the product of centuries of refinement and embellishment. At all costs, the onslaught of barbarous hordes wielding their syntactic and phonological clubs of 'I are going to throw you with a stone', or 'I have a proh-blem', or 'No commént', is to be warded off. A type of elitist paranoia sets in and we withdraw to our academic ivory towers, leaving the savages to batter at the doors.

The second stage is called 'Converting the Natives':

'The teacher has now admitted at least some to the community of the educable. These learners are per-

ceived, however, as empty vessels, ready to be filled with new knowledge. Learning is thought of not so much as a constant and often troubling reformulation of the world so as to encompass new knowledge, but as a steady flow of truth into the void. Whether the truth is delivered in lectures or modules, cassettes or computers, circles or squares, the teacher's purpose is the same: to carry the technology of advanced literacy to the inhabitants of an underdeveloped country.'4

Moreover, there is no querying of the absolute nature of the truth we are delivering, very little awareness of the fact that 'as we mindlessly entrap ... students so that we stuff school English down their throats, especially the kind we so fashionably call 'second language', we are at the same time reinforcing the barricades that the whole socio-political system buttresses'.5

English as a Second Language is currently taught at most institutions as an almost exclusively Anglocentric discipline. Theorists claim that the use of the language 'means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization'. Through this, the colonized person is 'elevated above his jungle status'.6 Courses are heavily literature oriented; the literature taught is almost exclusively British (with perhaps a sprinkling of American); idiom, pronunciation, and even punctuation are as close as possible to British standard.

For example, non-standard pronunciation (i.e. deviation from the narrowly and autocratically defined British-English South African hybrid) is labelled as 'error', and ascribed - with considerable irritation - to 'interference' from the native language (the linguistic equivalent of 'you can take the native out of the bush, but you can't take the bush out of the native').

Translation of native language idioms into English, and use thereof, is branded as unidiomatic and therefore unacceptable usage, even when they serve as a delightful enrichment of the repertoire of English. (An example is the idiom 'to be welcomed with warm hands'.)

An even more disturbing trend is the current ESP (English for Specific Purposes) bandwagon. In the United States, Indochinese and other immigrants are

taking courses with names like 'English for Waiters', or 'Streetsweeping English', in which students are taught only the kind and level of English which they need to deal with the demands of the job concerned. The intent was - and often is - laudable, but the potential for so-called 'Survival English' to become 'Imposed Social Stratification English' is extremely alarming.

By thus arbitrarily and imperialistically enforcing some transplanted standard of language, culture, and idiom we effectively 'blast language from the lips of its users or make [their use of it] appear inconsequential, at best a difficult nuisance [and] reduce it to an incoherent stutter'.7 This has serious implications. Because of the intimate, inextricable link between thought and language, we thus also limit and imperialise thought, and inhibit vital processes of conceptualization. Because, further, of the alchemical nature of language and ego/self-image, we doom thousands of students to feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, culture shock, and interpersonal dissonance. This is all inevitably mirrored in our society, in our stereotypes of each other, in the way we interact and communicate.

What is the alternative? It is nothing less than a paradigm shift, a lateral leap in thinking, in attitude, in approach. We must accept that 'no one owns a language to the extent that they can limit or control or monitor the direction it will take on the lips of other users'.8 We must realise that the imperialistic imposition of a language and culture spells doom for any real communication or any crossing of interpersonal and cultural barriers. We must query by what right we impose a culture and ideology on students as part of the language parcel - a grim 'buy one, get two free' deal. The leap (of faith, if you like) is that from ESL to EIL - English as an International Language. In ESL, English 'is regarded as the sole property of its native speakers, and nonnative English-speaking students are thought to be the only ones who need training in order to reach...communicative competence'9, ideally in something that linguistically, phonologically, idiomatically and culturally approximates the British model. Simultaneously, we assume that the culture of native English speakers (which in itself is colonially inherited, and not entirely indigenous) has to be adopted by the nonnative speakers if they are to be granted the status of fluency.

'In EIL, English is regarded as the property of its users - both native and nonnative.'10 EIL thus recognizes many varieties of English, and stresses the fact that 'English' can mean the English of both nonnative and native speakers, and that each should be accepted in its own right.

EIL further recognizes that 'a language is not inextricably bound to one particular culture. The use of English is always culture bound, but it is bound to the culture of the individual user, not to any other.'11 English can be used to express any culture or ideological point of view. Thus the cultural and literary component of EIL teaching material is not restricted to that of native English-speaking cultures. Cultural discourse conventions and speech acts taught should be those of both the native and nonnative speaking communities.

Native English speakers - and here I am thinking of teachers in particular - need to be made aware that 'their native-speakerness does not automatically make them the best judges of what is 'correct' or 'appropriate' for all communication situations. ... Attitudinally, there is no room for phonological or lexical chauvinism in EIL.'12 Nonnative speakers should, obviously, ideally develop fluency in English, but they need not, for example, have native speaker pronunciation as their target.

At an Academic Support Programme conference in December last year, Vusi Khanyile - chairman of the National Education Crisis Committee, currently in detention - identified the major challenge facing South African education as 'the ... struggle ... to replace an undemocratic, coercive, ineffective and irrelevant education system with a democratic, participatory, and relevant alternative'.13 I believe that the position taken by EIL that English is a world language which belongs to the citizens of the world, and that when one teaches EIL the cultural bases emanate from these users, not from native speakers exclusively, goes some way towards creating such an alternative.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Es'kia Mphahlele for this analogy, which he explored extensively in his article 'Prometheus in Chains : The Fate of English in

South Africa', **English Academy Review** 2, 1984, pp. 9-104.

2. Vusi Khanyile, Keynote Address, ASP Conference, Pietermaritzburg, December 1986.

3. Mina P. Shaughnessy. 'Diving In : An Introduction to Basic Writing' in **The Writing Teacher's Source-book.** Tate & Corbett (eds). OUP (New York) 1981. p. 63.

4. Ibid., p. 64.

5. Mphahlele, Es'kia, **op. cit.**, p. 99.

6. Fanon, Frantz. **Black Skin White Mask** Quoted in Mphahlele, **op. cit.**, p. 93.

7. Mphahlele, **op. cit.**, p. 97.

8. Smith, Larry E. 'EIL versus ESL/EFL'. **Forum**, XXIII, 4, October 1985, p. 4.

9. Mphahlele, **op. cit.**, p. 90.

10. Smith, **op. cit.**, p. 4.

11. **Ibid.**, p. 5.

12. **Ibid.**

13. Khanyile, V. Keynote address.