

On EFL Teachers, awareness, and agency

A. Suresh Canagarajah

If the rhetoric of linguistic imperialism (hereafter LI) has been fashionable for some time, we are now seeing another rhetoric become more fashionable and pitted against it. What I will call the linguistic hybridity movement (LH) celebrates the fluidity in languages, identities, and cultures, thus pluralizing these constructs. In their extreme versions, while LI is absolutist in defining these constructs monolithically as constituted by one ideology or the other, LH is relativistic in seeing them as always shifting in meaning and shape. While LI is deterministic in perceiving these constructs as always pliable in the hands of dominant forces, LH is anti-nomian, in seeing them as perpetually unstable, and resisting control. While LI is activist in struggling against hegemonic discourses to reconstruct a more democratic order, LH leads to apathy (as languages are seen as deconstructing themselves, transcending domination) or even playfulness (as the provision of new meanings to these constructs is treated as subverting the status quo). Leaping from one rhetoric to another without engaging rigorously with any, or clobbering one rhetoric with the other, are easy and eventually unproductive exercises. These are, after all, times when academic discourses, spawned freely in opposition to each other, swing wildly between extremes like a pendulum. As a teacher, focused on the concerns of my students, I negotiate with these divergent rhetorics to consider how they may develop a richer awareness of language and social life, enabling me to act more rewardingly in the classroom.

The sins of LI Rajagopalan has to be applauded for critiquing the sides of LI that can render teachers ineffectual by imposing a false sense of guilt. LI's understanding of identities as shaped exclusively by English or the vernacular is rightly debunked. Individuals and communities can accommodate a range of languages and cultures to construct alternate pluralized identities. I have critiqued LI from other perspectives as well (Canagarajah 1993). LI's orientation to domination is too simple and unilateral as it ignores how linguistic and cultural conflicts are highly mediated encounters, with the values and traditions of the local communities filtering or negotiating dominant discourses in unpredictable ways. Because of this, LI is insensitive to the many outcomes other than domination—such as ways of modifying, mixing, appropriating, and even resisting discourses. LI also fails to acknowledge the critical consciousness subjects enjoy to negotiate domination. People are not always passive or blind to be converted heart and soul to new discourses. To use the missionary analogy Rajagopalan employs, colonial history shows the many strategies the people of Sri Lanka adopted to negotiate

the thrusts of Christianity—some took baptism for economic reasons, without believing anything about Christ; some accommodated Christ into the polytheistic pantheon of the Hindu tradition; others followed a version of Christianity that was more Hindu than Christian (as defined by the missionaries). Similar strategies were adopted to cope with English.¹ LI fails to understand that there is a relative autonomy for institutions, communities, and subjects to work out alternate meanings, statuses, and uses for the discourses intended to dominate them.

*The assumptions
behind LI*

However, Rajagopalan's characterization of LI's governing assumptions indulges in a straw-man argument. He states that LI's fundamental premises are '(a) that in a monolingual setting, communication is always perfect, and (b) communicative harmony is invariably threatened every time there is the intrusion of an alien language'. He thus characterizes LI as motivated by 'romantic imagination' and 'religious credos'. He goes on to indirectly accuse them of holding the naive belief that power relationships can be eradicated altogether, forgetting that violence and conflict are 'always already there as a latent possibility in any concrete context of linguistic communication'. We don't know which LI theorists Rajagopalan has encountered holding such a position, but the scholars he alludes to in the paper—Phillipson, Skutnab-Kangas, Calvert, and Pennycook—certainly don't operate from the above premises. Not only do they assume a multilingual communicative context, they attack English precisely because its hegemony can damage the vitality of local multilingualism. Similarly, they argue against English not because they believe in a new world where there will be no power inequalities, but because the exercise of unquestioned power is harmful. While conceding that English will remain a global language, it is still meaningful to take steps to protect endangered languages and ensure the integrity of minority communities. One may also imagine alternate equations between English and local languages at diverse inter- and intra-national levels, with checks and balances against the unbridled power of any single language.

Nor am I convinced with the historical scenario Rajagopalan constructs to develop his argument. First, he downplays the importance of colonization by invoking the abstract notion that a colonizing relationship is 'always already there' between languages. Then he goes on to describe the situation of transplanted languages and hybrid identities as a post-World War II phenomenon. He terms this hybridity 'the hallmark of the fin-de-siècle global scenario'. In this scenario, English gets credit for serving to pluralize the linguistic and cultural map of the world, hand in hand with technology and mass media. But it is possible to argue that linguistic and cultural hybridity have always been there in non-Western communities. A typical villager here spoke language A at home, B with the neighbouring villagers, C for the market where many villages met, and D as a regional lingua franca. Colonial powers divided these communities arbitrarily into nation-states for their convenience, and imposed on this seemingly chaotic diversity the efficiency and

convenience of a uniform language. Armed with technological, economic, and political clout, English still draws communities towards greater globalization and homogeneity. We cannot assume that linguistic diversity only came into being yesterday because the LH rhetoric has been made fashionable by contemporary movements such as post-structuralism and postmodernism.² My intention here is to complicate a linear view of history that moves from greater diversity to less, or vice versa. We have to acknowledge with Ben Barber (1995) that there is a struggle between forces of globalization (represented by English) and separatism (based on communal autonomy), with one exacerbating the other. That this healthy tension has not been stifled is partly due to the activism of the LI proponents who have alerted us to the totalitarian tendencies in English.

***The Gospel
according to LH***

Rajagopalan invokes the condition of cultural mixing, linguistic hybridity, and unstable identities only to prove that the monolingual communities and historical contexts that motivated the LI rhetoric don't exist any more. But he doesn't explore the ways in which the LH condition can be exaggerated to ignore certain realities of power in the contemporary world, just as LH has the potential to resist the types of imperialism articulated by the LI model.

Consider some of the implications of LH. That identities are unstable may mean that we can never be dominated by a single discourse to think and behave in preconstructed ways. That cultures are unstable means that powerful cultures cannot dominate minority community practices, since they themselves would lose their identity, and shade into the cultures they come into conflict with. That languages are unstable means that the linguistic system is always deconstructing itself, opening up for multiple meanings and ideologies, never having the stability to dominate other languages or communities. Taken to an extreme, such premises can inspire one to adopt a cavalier attitude towards domination. They can create a debilitating apathy, relativism, and insularity among scholars—as is evident in certain circles of academia today.

Before we get carried away into joining the LH bandwagon, then, we have to make some sober observations on power relations. That identities are fluid doesn't mean that society and schools don't fix certain negative identities on minority students and discriminate against them accordingly. That cultures are mixed doesn't mean that certain values and practices aren't defined as the cultural capital required for success in dominant institutions, including schools. That languages are hybrid doesn't mean that certain codes don't function as the linguistic capital (with a clear hierarchy of the registers, dialects, and discourses valued) to obtain social and educational rewards. In this sense, the premises of LH don't automatically invalidate the conditions of imperialism highlighted by LI. Our task, then, is to examine how the types of power identified by LI at the macro-structural and global level find expression in the micro-structural domains of identity, everyday culture, and interpersonal communication.

The clash of LI and LH models does not eliminate power, but illuminate its complexity. We realize how power can get localized or personalized at the level of identities; how power is pervasive and subtle to the extent that it can find expression through the splintered pieces of language and culture; how power is decentered and diversified as it is manifested in the different domains and levels of social and personal life; how power is always negotiated, since it has to work through gaps, instability, and contestation to carry out its agenda.

***Power as an
unseen,
transcendental
God***

Rajagopalan has the good sense not to take the romantic position adopted by many LH proponents these days. He does understand the reality of power. But I find his definition somewhat abstract, and eventually, disabling for teachers. Rajagopalan emphasizes that whatever conditions of violence and power we may discern in any language, they are 'always already there'. English is absolved from blame since the thrust for dominance exists as a latent possibility in all languages. This also leads to the relativistic position that, since power is always going to be there, whoever happens to hold power at a specific time or context is immaterial. While Rajagopalan concedes that it is '[not] pointless to worry about the disappearance of scores of [minority] languages', those who should attend to these are 'the authorities'. Here he also displays a macro-structural orientation to power. The exercise and management of linguistic power are seen as belonging to those entrusted with the affairs of state, presumably bureaucrats and politicians. Apparently, little can be done to change power relationships in everyday life by common people or, for that matter, teachers. What is disappointing is that after a superb job of questioning the monolithic definitions of language, culture, and identity, the writer goes on to construct an orientation to power that is no less monolithic. When instability, mixing, and fluidity are evoked to understand the complexity of social life at the micro-structural level, we are then asked to adopt a macro-structural orientation to power that smacks of the very streaks of determinism belonging to the LI rhetoric.

This perspective has damaging implications for teachers. Since power is so absolute, abstract, and unmitigated, teachers can do very little about it. Because any activity to negotiate power will only result in reproducing the dominance of one language or the other, teachers should stop worrying about imperialism. So what is Rajagopalan's answer to the maddening politics of linguistic violence? Business as usual. Teachers are asked to concern themselves with the immediate tasks at hand within the narrow walls of the classroom or the pages of the textbook. Similarly, we are freed from guilt because ethicalities of domination are irrelevant to our work. We are urged to bury our eyes ostrich-like to the political evils and ideological temptations outside. Divorcing our moral sensibility and social consciousness from our profession, Rajagopalan makes us adopt a narrowly pragmatic attitude. After a detour through the minefield of culture wars and language politics, he brings us full circle back to a functional orientation to teaching, and a conception of instructors as skilled technicians rather

than informed intellectuals. Though the purpose of the article may have been to liberate us from the paralysing guilt complexes that hamper our work, Rajagopalan ends up making us even more powerless.

In the final analysis, the absolution Rajagopalan offers is cheap. Providing a reading of history and power that is 'less painful to the conscience', he preaches to teachers that 'they have no reason to feel guilty'. Salvation comes by suppressing our conscience as we go about our work so that there is no need for penitence. Rather than merely escaping personal guilt, I would have preferred a more constructive absolution that left me with a renewed commitment to work for the common good, and a rechannelling of my professional energies in challenging new directions.

***From cheap grace
to earned
salvation***

The conception of power I have developed in the preceding sections—power as localized, decentered, diversified, and always contested—leads to a different understanding of the place of the classroom in power relations. The classroom doesn't have to be at the mercy of power dictated unilaterally from above—by the larger social institutions. It has the relative autonomy not only to negotiate these sources of power, but also to develop alternative discourses and power equations within its own walls. We have to consider power as not necessarily exercised top to bottom; institutions like the school may serve to reconstitute power relations bottom up. At the micro-social level of the classroom, then, teachers and students enjoy some agency to question, negotiate, and resist power.

I must stress that I am not talking here about creating a condition that is free of power relations and conflict. I am not even going to the extent of saying that the status of English as a global language will necessarily be altered by the activities of teachers. But Rajagopalan's argument that there is no point in doing anything about power, since power is always going to be there (as an abstract force), is depressing. A lot of things can in fact be done to negotiate, modify, and even check power—at least in certain limited domains—creating in the process relatively more democratic relations. I am also troubled by the argument that since power differences will always be there, it doesn't matter who wields power where. We must distinguish between different sources and uses of power. It is fair that vernaculars enjoy some measure of power at certain domains in local communities. It is perfectly ethical for teachers to empower minority students and their cultural resources for greater self-determination. I am satisfied with the possibility that the power of English is thus contested, modified, and reconstituted in relation to the local languages and cultures, even if this doesn't involve immediate changes in English's overall global standing. The ability to question linguistic hegemony is an important educational achievement in its own right which, furthermore, affirms the very humanity of teachers and students.

I conclude by citing some strategies adopted by teachers to help students negotiate linguistic power in classrooms. Consider how vernaculars have

been actively used as a means for acquiring English (in EFL/ESL contexts) and knowledge content (in bilingual educational contexts). Teachers have encouraged students to use their home language in small group discussions, paired work, the writing of journals, the use of aids such as dictionaries, peer help/translation, and supplementary reading/writing, sometimes in supposedly 'English-only' classes.³ In doing this, many have observed the paradox that the acquisition of English was enhanced, not hampered (Auerbach *et al.* 1996; Lucas and Katz 1994; Pease-Alvarez and Winsler 1994). The reasons are easy to understand: students were relaxed about their inhibitions against English, because they saw that their home languages were valued in the school; they actively transferred the skills and knowledge from their vernacular to the learning of English; they negotiated better the disparity between the cultures of home and school, the community, and the mainstream. This teaching practice has had larger social consequences for empowering minority communities: students retained their vernacular to a greater extent as they proceeded through schooling and acquired the dominant discourses; the educational domain served to develop and expand the resources of minority languages; and the social and educational currency of the local languages was expanded (Auerbach 1993, Faltis and Hudelson 1994). While it may be argued that these steps are puny to contest the global hegemony of English, it is inspiring to me that communities enjoy a measure of self-determination to practise the types of multilingualism that suit their own needs and aspirations—and that teachers can help in the process.

My second set of examples shows teachers adopting creative strategies to modify the very grammatical and discourse system of English. To focus here on the development of literacy in English, many instructors have recently demonstrated the importance of mixing languages in reading and writing. For example, in using vernaculars to discuss western literary classics, students were motivated to perceive the texts from the stand point of home culture, demystify the ideologies in these texts, and thus reinterpret them in ways relevant to them (De Souza 1994, Rajan 1993, Spivak 1993). Some Indian teachers draw a precedent for this in the ancient *manipravalava* exegetical writing, where the then-dominant Sanskrit was mixed with local Dravidian languages (Viswanathan 1993). Similarly, compositionists have begun encouraging students to bring into their English writing the discourse conventions and communicative strategies from their own communities (Belcher 1997, Zamel 1996). This is a highly creative and rigorous process of negotiating the extent to which local discourses can be fused with the established modes of English communication, without transgressing the integrity of either.⁴ The grammar of English itself goes through some changes in the process of constructing these hybrid texts. There are important oppositional implications in this rhetorical experimentation: students develop a critical language awareness of the ideologies represented in English discourses; they pluralize the form and content of English discourses by fusing their own values; and they vernacularize

English to use it in a manner that is congenial to their own interests. These micro-discursive activities are simple ways of taking the sting off English, and making it one's own.

Note that such oppositional implications are present also in the indigenization of English at the level of dialects that Rajagopalan discusses, different from the discursive negotiation I am discussing here. But Rajagopalan's rigid orientation to power prevents him from exploring these possibilities of linguistic resistance.

Conclusion Once again, I support Rajagopalan's mission to free EFL teachers from unfair ideological impositions. While his critique is well motivated, his corrective makes teachers only more narrow in vision and passive in practice. The value of the debate between LI and LH schools is that it expands our awareness of the complexities in the negotiation of power, developing the possibilities for teachers to exert their agency for simple but significant changes. Paradoxically, if power is 'always already there' in communication, avenues for resistance are also there, since power can never be exercised without contestation. Teachers have to develop a critical awareness of these possibilities to become agents of change in their classrooms and communities.

Received December 1998

Notes

- 1 For examples of such processes during colonial times, see Viswanathan 1989, Canagarajah (forthcoming) Chapter 3.
- 2 Similarly, for Rajagopalan to consider that until recently Great Britain was a 'monolingual country' is only possible if he ignores the troubled history of the Irish, the Welsh, and the Scots.
- 3 Many classroom ethnographies have found that even when educational institutions adopted an explicit policy of English-only, minority teachers and students found 'safe spaces' (i.e. non-official or off-institutional sites such as canteens, playgrounds, student centres, or even informal interactions inside the classroom) to use the vernacular (see Martin-Jones and Heller 1996, Canagarajah 1997). Such uses of the very domain of dominant institutions to maintain the vernacular are a testament to the relative autonomy of classrooms.
- 4 Examples of this seemingly mysterious rhetorical process abound. For postcolonial professional writers who practise this style, see hooks 1989, Okara 1964, Rao 1938. For examples of student level writing, see Belcher 1997.

References

- Auerbach, E. R. 1993. 'Re-examining English only in the ESL classroom'. *TESOL Quarterly* 27/1: 9-32.
- Auerbach, E. R. with B. Barahona, J. Midy, F. Vaquerano, A. Zambrano, and J. Arnaud. 1996. *Adult ESL Literacy from the Community to the Community: A Guidebook for Participatory Literacy Training*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Barber, B. 1995. *Jihad vs McWorld: How the Planet is Both Falling Apart and Coming Together—and What This Means for Democracy*. New York: Times Books.
- Belcher, D. D. 1997. 'An argument for non-adversarial argumentation: On the relevance of the Feminist critique of academic discourse to L2 writing pedagogy'. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 6/1: 1-21.
- Canagarajah, A. S. 1993. 'Critical ethnography of a Sri Lankan classroom: Ambiguities in opposition to reproduction through ESOL'. *TESOL Quarterly* 27/4: 601-26.
- Canagarajah, A. S. 1997. 'Safe houses in the Contact Zone: Coping Strategies of African American Students in the Academy'. *College Composition and Communication* 48/2:173-96.
- Canagarajah, A. S. 1999. *Resistance in ELT*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Souza, L. M. 1994. 'Post-colonial literature and a pedagogy of re-visioning: the contribution of Wilson Harris'. *Claritas* 1/1: 55-61.
- Faltis, C. and S. Hudelson. 1994. 'Learning English as an additional language in K-12 schools'. *TESOL Quarterly* 28/3: 457-68.
- hooks, b. 1989. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press.
- Lucas, T. and A. Katz. 1994. 'Reframing the debate: The roles of native languages in English-only programs for language minority students'. *TESOL Quarterly* 28/4: 537-62.
- Martin-Jones, M. and M. Heller. 1996. 'Introduction to the special issues on education in multilingual settings: Discourse, identities, and power: Part 1: Constructing legitimacy'. *Linguistics and Education* 8: 3-16.
- Okara, G. 1964. *The Voice*. London: Heinemann.
- Pease-Alvarez, L. and A. Winsler. 1994. 'Cuando el maestro no habla español: Children's bilingual language practices in the classroom'. *TESOL Quarterly* 28/4: 507-36.
- Rajan, R. S. 1993. 'Fixing English: Nation, language, subject' in R. S. Rajan (ed.). *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, R. 1938. *Kanthapura*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Spivak, G. 1993. 'The burden of English studies' in R. S. Rajan (ed.). *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (275-99). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Viswanathan, G. 1989. *Masks of Conquest*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Viswanathan, G. 1993. 'English in a literate society' in R. S. Rajan (ed.). *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (29-41). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zamel, V. 1996. 'Transcending boundaries: Complicating the scene of teaching language'. *College English* 6/2: 1-11.

The author

A. Suresh Canagarajah taught English language and literature in the war-torn region of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, for about ten years before joining the City University of New York (Baruch College) as an Assistant Professor in English. Until he obtained his doctorate in Applied Linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin, he had all his early education in the vernacular in Sri Lanka. Most of his papers in *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language in Society*, *Written Communication*, *World Englishes*, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, and *Multilingua* were written from Jaffna. His research involves codeswitching, bilingual communicative strategies, and academic literacy. E-mail: <canax@aol.com>