CULTURE AS AN EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY FORMATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING [1]

A CULTURA COMO UMA EXPERIÊNCIA DE FORMAÇÃO DE IDENTIDADE NA APRENDIZAGEM DE LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA [1]

Kanavillil RAJAGOPALAN [2]

Resumo: que a linguagem e a cultura estão visceralmente ligadas uma à outra é irrefutável. Em geral, parecem trabalhar em conjunto. Pelo menos, esse costumava ser o caso. Mas, atualmente, muitos argumentam que o fenômeno da globalização foi um dos responsáveis por isso não acontecer. Entre outras coisas, tornou obscuras as próprias identidades das línguas individuais, bem como as das distintas culturas que deveriam corresponder a elas (APPADURAI, 1990; HIGGINS, 2011). À medida que as forças do transnacionalismo ganham fôlego em todo o mundo, essas identidades estão sendo lentamente corroídas. Parece que o hibridismo está rapidamente se tornando a ordem do dia. Em nenhum outro lugar, isso é mais visível do que no caso do "Inglês Mundial", uma reinvenção transnacional e transcultural da linguagem outrora confinada ao bom e velho Albion. Adquirir novas habilidades linguísticas como parte de um esforço para se tornar um cidadão do mundo implica, necessariamente, reinventar a si mesmo. Evidentemente, esta é uma tarefa incessante e contínua. Quem teria pensado que o poeta Tennyson realmente profetizou isso quando escreveu: "No entanto, toda a experiência é um arco onde brilha aquele

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mundo desvirado cuja margem se esvai para sempre e para sempre quando eu me movo!". Talvez, tenhamos aqui uma definição adequada de "linguajar".

Palavras-chave: cultura; formação de identidade; língua estrangeira.

Abstract: that language and culture are viscerally tied to one another is irrefutable. By and large, they seem to work in tandem. At least that used to be the case. But currently many argue that the phenomenon of globalization has thrown a spanner in the works. Among other things, it has rendered murky the very identities of individual languages as well as those of the distinct cultures that are supposed to correspond to them (APPADURAI, 1990; HIGGINS, 2011). As forces of transnationalism gather momentum across the world, these identities are slowly being eroded. Hybridity, it seems, is fast turning out to be the order of the day. Nowhere else is this more visible than the case of 'World English', a transnational, transcultural reinvention of the language once confined to good old Albion. Acquiring new language skills as part of an effort to become a citizen of the world necessarily implies reinventing oneself. Evidently this is an endless, ongoing task. Who would have thought that poet Tennyson actually prophesied it when he wrote "Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough gleams that untravel'd world whose margin fades forever and forever when I move"! Maybe we have here an apt definition of 'languaging'.

Wordkeys: culture; identity formation; foreign language.

1. Language and culture: a marriage made in heaven?

It has long been tacitly assumed that individual languages and their respective cultures work hand in glove. In fact many believe that the two are so closely tied to each other that their marriage could, so to speak, only have been made in heaven. It is one of the reasons—if not the principal reason—why it is often recommended that in order to learn a foreign language one must ideally go to the country where it is spoken as the mother-tongue by most people or at least a sizeable number of them. Implicit in that recommendation is the belief that one is simultaneously exposed to the language and the culture of the people who speak it. So one kills two birds with a single shot. What more could one possibly ask for?

Language, after all, so the reasoning seems to proceed, is best learned when it is learned in environments where it is spoken spontaneously, 'natively'.

1.1. Culture as the substrate of languages: where the idea sprang from

It may come as a surprise to many that the close ties between individual languages and their respective cultures are the result partly of a series of historical circumstances and partly of deliberate action by those who called the shots in the business of devising and implementing language policies in bygone days.

The historical circumstances that created close links between languages and cultures have to do with the simple fact that, in the not-so-distant past, the peoples of the world were cut off from one another and mostly confined to geographical spaces, distant and isolated from one another. Not having any possibility of contact with others, people formed small societies that over time evolved into nations of more respectable sizes. Besides, there is plenty of evidence to support the claim that both language and the specific culture generally associated with it were 'raised in the same cradle'.

There usually was plenty of inter-animation within the nations but hardly any across their frontiers. Thus it was that languages and cultures together began to assume a life of their own and develop in tandem with one another. Many felt—and rightly so—that language *reflected* the culture of its speakers and both bore the inalienable marks of the very identity of the people. Dr. Samuel Johnson is reported to have exclaimed: "There is no tracing the connection of ancient nations, but by language; and therefore I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations."

1.2. Globalization and its impact on languages and cultures

But things have changed dramatically since the days of Dr. Johnson. Johnson lived in 18th century England, when the country was no longer a tiny island, content to be a "precious gem set in the silver sea." It had already begun

spreading its colonial tentacles world-wide. However, people at large were mostly confined and wedded to their own culture. By the succeeding 19th century, the nation was to ride the crest of imperial glory and was to be the most powerful maritime nation in the world.

The idea that the English language is tied to the culture of the English people had already received a major setback after the language had spread to the rest of Great Britain, to wit Scotland, Wales and Ireland. At the very least, there was the need to recognize these other cultures as sharing the language. Culture, in other words, needed to be understood in a wider sense than was originally supposed to be the case.

But by the end of the 19th century, it became even more difficult to sustain such an argument in light of the fact that more and more nations across the world were beginning to use the language for a variety of reasons most of which had to do with regular colonial contact. The empire had spread beyond what anyone could have imagined say, in the 16th or 17th centuries. This added more complexity to what was already becoming chaotic in terms of postulating a one-to-one correspondence between the English language and the culture of the English nation.

2. The role of the native speaker

2.1. The genealogy of a myth

The colonial milieu also gave rise to the myth of the native speaker (cf. RAJAGOPALAN, 1997, 2007). The idea that individual languages had their contours well-defined and demarcated sat well with the notion of the *native* speakers of those languages. People had all along been quite comfortable with the idea that each language had its speakers. It seemed so obvious and irrefutable. After all, the idea seemed so unproblematic and in keeping with observed facts. But the notion of some speakers being *native* to particular languages was problematic from the very start. In societally multilingual settings, it was next to impossible to ascribe to anyone in particular the status of the native speaker of this or that language. At best, all that one could say was that he or she is the native of a whole repertoire of languages that form the curious language-mix within which they operate (RAJAGOPALAN, 2011). But such 'inconvenient' facts were simply overlooked or set aside for the sake of pursuing the wider and more peremptory project of nation-building. And 19th century saw the birth of the rallying cry 'One nation, one

state, one language'. The state itself was being defined on the basis of a common language—a trend that had actually started much earlier (cf. WRIGHT, 2004), which in turn centred on the notion of the speaker of that language. Naturally, it was felt that the integrity of the state depended on the vigour and purity of the language, which in turn, it was thought, derived its vitality from the presence of a native speaker of 24-carat purity (RAJAGOPALAN, 2001). The native speaker became, in other words, the very symbol of nations.

2.2. The spread of english worldwide and its consequences

But all that was destined to undergo significant changes with the advent of the 20th century. Independence movements were gathering momentum all over the world and a new national consciousness was building up in each of what then were colonies of Great Britain, an empire where, as it used to be trumpeted, the sun never set. As happens with all other languages that spread far and wide losing daily contact with the geographical space to which it was originally confined, English too had taken roots in different parts of the world, acquiring 'local colours' and becoming recognizably distinct varieties (RAJAGOPALAN, 2004, 2005, 2011).

What is even more important to our discussion here is the fact that, barring the cases of early settler colonies of Britain (Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and so forth) where the language survived more or less 'intact' and with only minor variations in pronunciation and vocabulary (e.g. Bieswanger, 2004), most other places where English started having a life of its own were characterized by societal multilingualism. To be sure, multilingualism is an ideal environment for major changes in the very make-up of languages.

No doubt, the situation alluded to in the foregoing paragraph is also conducive to tensions of all sorts—especially having to do with how to name the new 'linguistic phenomena' emerging in each of these environments: are they fully-fledged languages in their own right or simply variants of one and the same language, viz., English? As Peter Trudgill (2004: 45) has observed, "An increase in emphasis on local as opposed to national or international identities could be interpreted, as indeed it has been by some social scientists, as a simple, defensive, antagonistic *response or reaction against* globalization. Sociolinguistically, one could say that, in the face of the expansion of English as a global language,

the response is an attempt to fight back by increasing the status of local dialects by awarding them language status".

No matter how one opts to interpret the ongoing trends, what one cannot deny is that globalization has brought about important changes in the way we used to contemplate languages. And many of these changes are true game changers. Incidentally, in Rajagopalan (forthcoming), I argue that the issue of nomenclature is mostly political, but names do matter a great deal. I make a plea for 'World English' (in the singular), in preference to the widely popular 'World Englishes' (not to forget other candidates such as 'Globish' and so forth).

3. Languages as protean entities

it is true that the entity we are used to calling a language was always a construct in the true sense of that word. If one comes to think of it, there is no such thing as a language, to begin with. That is to say, there is no such thing as a language in the sense of a concrete object in the world 'out there', ready for philosophers and linguists to, as it were, 'pounce upon' and submit to their analytic scalpels. What there effectively are, are human beings in flesh and blood who communicate to one another using certain vocables.

In order to 'conjure up' languages, one had to undertake a series of carefully articulated steps. First, language had to be hypostasized (Harris, 1981). Once hypostasized, it had to undergo a process of essentialization (McIntosh, 2005: 1921). All this process of constructing individual languages, with their well-defined boundaries found a very favourable climate in the 19th century when languages, as saw earlier, were tied up with the project of nation-building. It is not for nothing that scholars like Hutton (1999) and Errington (2008) have argued that our modern science of language actually encapsulates the 19th century *Zeitgeist* at its best.

4. Globalization and its immediate consequences

the late 20th century witnessed a phenomenon unimaginable to most up until then: globalization. Whatever one's attitude to the new economic reality, globalization has brought in its wake something that one simply cannot afford to deny: it has brought about fundamental changes in the way we look at our nation-

ality, our national languages, and ultimately our own selves. With international borders becoming progressively porous and ever-increasing numbers of people shuttling across the world for work or leisure, intercultural contact is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Satellite communication and world wide television broadcasts have helped this ongoing phenomenon further. The result is that our identities as persons are becoming more and more unstable and protean. So too the identities of most of the world's 'heritage' languages.

4.1. Hybridity

hybridity is on the rise in the case of languages, as a result of close contact with one another. Some argue that this is by no means a new phenomenon. They claim that hybridity has always been with us, only that it was less noticeable before the advent of globalization. For Mufwene (2008, *passim*), hybridity is responsible for what makes American English what it is today, with all its divergences from British English. This is in itself an interesting idea. In the past, pidginization used to be looked askance at by both the laymen and some professional linguists. But if we take Mufwene's claims to their logical extreme, we are led to the surprising conclusion that there is no qualitative difference between language change and at least some (and probably *all*) cases of pidginization (paving the way for later creolization, that is to say, the formation of fully-fledged languages in their own right).

This was tacitly admitted to, in a way, by the editors of *The Handbook of World Englishes* (KACHRU et al. 2006) when they switched from the model of three concentric circles representing the three major varieties of English (namely, the inner, the outer and the expanding circles) to a new model represented by successive diasporas, resulting in new varieties of the language.

4.2. Rise of transnationalism

one immediate consequence of globalization has been the rise of truly transnational individuals in increasing numbers, alongside the much-decried emergence of transnational corporations. Some two decades or so ago, these were considered marginal phenomena. But, as universities across the world register ever-growing numbers of students from the overseas, transnationalism is no longer something one can afford

to sweep underneath the carpet. On the contrary, it is becoming a force to reckon with as one looks into problems related to language and education planning.

5. Identity formation in the era of globalization

Higgins (2011:1) says right at the outset of recent book that "Additional language (L2) learning in the current, globalizing era provides opportunities for people to develop and enact new identities that are no longer necessarily tied to traditionally defined ethnolinguistic, national, or cultural identities." She goes on to elect hybridity as the hall-mark of the new identities that are emerging all around the world. For Hinggins, key to a proper understanding of transnationalism, a characteristic feature of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, is the phenomenon of large-scale migration, coupled with the dislocation/relocation of refugees and asylum seekers. Notice that among these refugees and asylum seekers are the thousands of economic migrants, uprooted from their homelands in the wake of globalization.

In addition to the new 'ethnolinguistic' identities that Higgins refers to, Appaduari (1990) had envisaged four other factors influencing the shaping up of new identities. According to him, these new identities are possible thanks to an interconnected set of what he terms *scapes*: *technoscapes*, *finanascapes*, *mediascapes* and *ideoscapes*—characterized by the movement of technology, money, news and ideas, respectively. Working together, these five *scapes* help create a complex kaleidoscope of possibilities for identity formation.

6. A glimpse of things to come

'World English' seems to me to stand for *all* languages—with no exception—in our era of globalization, in that it symbolizes what awaits them down the road as they progressively become transnational and along that process become hybridized. There are those who see this as a sign of things going berserk. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." (cf. Rajagopalan, 2006). I think that there is a more intelligent way of going about these new challenges ahead: taking them in their stride. Change, after all, is of the natural order of things.

Languages reinvent themselves. And so do their speakers. For all we know, this may be the secret of their vitality and longevity. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, foresaw it when he wrote in his poem *Ulysses*: "Yet all experience is an arch where through gleams that untravel'd world whose margin fades forever and forever when I move".

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