

# POSTCOLONIAL WORLD AND POSTMODERN IDENTITY: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

(O Mundo Pós-Colonial e a Identidade Pós-Moderna: Algumas Implicações para o Ensino de Línguas)

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**RESUMO:** Neste trabalho, reflito sobre algumas das conseqüências das novas formas de pensar a questão de identidade. Argumento que a identidade, pensada de acordo com os preceitos pós-modernos, tem impacto direto sobre o ensino de línguas, uma vez que o próprio conceito de língua, assim como o conceito de falante-nativo (ambos tradicionalmente formulados em termos de 'tudo-ou-nada'), pede urgentemente para ser repensado.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pós-colonialismo; pós-modernidade; Ensino de Línguas; Construção de Identidades.

**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses some of the consequences of the new ways of thinking about identity. It is argued that identity, as conceived in terms of postmodernity, has a direct impact on language teaching, given that the very concept of language (just as much as that of the native speaker of a language) (both of which have traditionally been viewed in all-or-nothing terms) will need to be rethought.

**KEY-WORDS:** Postcolonialism; Postmodernity; Language Teaching; Construction of Identities.

## 0. Introduction

It may seem rather strange to foreground the issue of identity when one is discussing language teaching. After all, in the Western world at least, few would want to disagree with the English moral philosopher Joseph Butler (1692-1752) who dismissed the whole idea of there being anything problematic about the concept of identity with a casual shrug of his shoulders and the smug statement that “everything is what it is and not

another thing.” (Blackburn 1994: 185) So, in relation to language teaching, as indeed in relation to any other activity whether mental or physical, the question of identity should seem to be no cause for serious concern. We know – so the argument would run – what sort of objects natural languages are. And just as well, we also know who the persons who speak their first languages or those wishing to learn other languages are. The problem in teaching a language is to find the right methods and techniques with the help of which to get the learners to acquire the required skills. In order to do this, all we need to do is to get to know our learners better – to better *identify* them: i.e., collect as much information as possible as to who they are, where they come from, what their objectives in life are etc. It is all a matter of getting to know the principal players as well as the key elements in the game. They all have their discrete and stable identities guaranteed from the very start, so the issue of identity should not be seen as a stumbling block in the way of those concerned with such “mundane” matters as the teaching or learning of languages. Furthermore, once you have taken a peek into their identities, you have got to know them once and for all. A number of us who are routinely involved in the business of language teaching would be content to leave matters at that.

My objective in this paper is to muddy the waters of complacency in respect of both issues raised above. I wish to contend that the phenomenon of postmodern identity underscores the need for a thorough overhaul of the conceptual apparatus traditionally used in discussing problems of language teaching. I shall attempt to press home the claim that the concepts and categories with which we have customarily approached these issues are entirely out of date and ill-suited to dealing with the new exigencies created by what has come to be referred to as the postmodern condition. Furthermore, a genuine politics of language education can only become feasible if we rid ourselves of some of our time-honored but completely old-fashioned tools of the trade and indeed the very mindset that accompanied and underwrote them.

## **1. Familiar approaches to language teaching and the question of identity**

Most of the familiar approaches to language teaching – and this includes the classical grammar-translation and audio-visual approaches

through the more recent communicative method and reflective teaching – have typically tended to take the identity of the language(s) in question as a given, as something more or less unproblematic. And on this issue as well as on many other issues of key significance, applied linguists and language teachers have largely been content to follow the long tradition in their principal feeder discipline until recently, namely, mainstream, theoretical linguistics.

The underlying assumption may best be characterized along the following lines. Individual languages exist and are clearly identifiable as such and easily distinguishable from one another. Now, off the record, many theoretically oriented linguists do admit that, in actual practice, it is often difficult to tell where one language ends and another begins (especially when the two languages in question are spoken in geographically contiguous regions), but in theory, they hasten to add, such “irksome” details can be conveniently ignored in order that human linguistic faculty may be contemplated in its pristine purity. And it is precisely because languages are different from one another that there is the need to learn/teach second or foreign languages. Equally truly, it is because languages display internal differences, each with a plethora of dialects often mutually incomprehensible to one another, that there arises the need for *electing* one of the dialects as the standard dialect and then teaching it to the speakers of all those who do not speak it or, if that turns to present insuperable difficulties, *inventing* one out of the blue and teaching it to one and all.

Typically, the whole business of language teaching is premised on the supposition that whatever problem one may encounter in defining the contours of *a* language (as opposed to language in its abstract or generic senses) is practical rather than conceptual. In other words, although one may encounter difficulties when it comes to telling precisely where language *x* ceases to be and language *y* takes over, the fact that they all do so at some point or another is guaranteed *a priori* by theory. On this last question of vital importance as well as several others, language teachers as well as applied linguists who have traditionally claimed for themselves disciplinary prerogatives for being listened to on these matters have largely been content to take their cue from those on the theoretical side of divide, namely, theoretical linguists (who, in their turn, have, as we have seen, acknowledged the existence of unresolved issues of a ‘practical’ nature but have preferred to ignore them most of the time).

As with the identity of individual languages, so with the identity of their so-called “native” speakers. We all know (or so it is believed) who speaks what language – who is entitled to claim language  $x$  as opposed to language  $y$  as their native language, the one in which they can say what they please and “get away with it,” that is to say, go on without running the risk of their utterances being classified as “ungrammatical” or “outrageously alien”. One either is or is not a native speaker of this or that language, so we are told. Furthermore, one must – and this is but a corollary of the earlier claim – necessarily be a native speaker of *some* language. Once again, theoretical linguists have painstakingly kept “marginal” cases at bay, preventing them from challenging the integrity of the native speaker, by definition the consummate speaker of the language in question. For instance, children do not qualify as full-fledged speakers of language until they have reached a certain age of linguistic maturity. So too, people with mental or physical deficiencies affecting speech are denied full “native-speakerhood”.

The unity and integrity of individual languages is guaranteed by the fullness and integrity of their respective native speakers and vice versa. If there is a system of communication that somehow does not qualify as a full-blown human language, then it follows that its speakers cannot aspire to the title of its native speakers. The classic case of a system to which linguists have historically denied the label ‘language’ is the so-called pidgin. To the extent a pidgin does not qualify as a language in the fullness of its sense, no speaker of a pidgin can be vouchsafed the status of native speaker either. As Hymes (1971) put it, “Full competence in a pidgin grammar is still less than competence in one’s native grammar..... When pidgins acquire native speakers, they change”.

## **2. Language teaching approaches based on all-or-nothing attitude toward language**

In 1956, *English Language Teaching*, the precursor to the *ELT Journal*, published a paper entitled ‘Some problems of oral English in East Africa.’ (Perren 1956). The paper began with a brief description of the teaching of English in Kenya and other East African countries. The author drew the attention of the readers to the fact that “English has a special status and responsibility in African education” in that, under the then existing

language policy, it was seen as a “replacement” rather than as a “second” language by which was meant that the language was to be taught with a view to ultimately replacing the vernacular languages spoken across the region as the sole medium of instruction. The author went on to refer to the existence of a variety of regional languages, some of which had as few as a thousand or so speakers, as justifying the decision by the policy makers. He also noted the growing demand for English in East Africa.

But the author’s central purpose in writing the paper was not to celebrate the spread of English in the “dark continent”. His principal concern was to express his dismay at the fact that it looked as if English was beginning to take a life of its own. The author was particularly distressed by the fact that East African English was becoming more and more distant from its source variety spoken in England. Here is a somewhat lengthy quote that spells out his deep concerns:

So far little attempt has been made to deal with the phonetic origin of errors in spoken English in either training colleges or schools. There is a danger that an ‘East African English’ – characterized by its own pronunciation, intonation and sentence patterns – may become normal among educated Africans. This danger appears more acute when it is realized that more and more teaching of English will be done at all levels by African teachers who are themselves subject to these errors, and who have received little or no training in how to overcome them. (Perren 1956: 3)

The above passage is interesting for several reasons not the least important of which is that it reproduces some of the oldest myths about language alongside some more recent ones that have survived as truisms of the modern ‘science of language’, or linguistics. To begin with, let us note that the scare quotes around the words *East African English* represent exactly that: scare! It is the scary prospect evoked by the Biblical curse of the Tower of Babel: an originally uniform, monolithic language dissipating into mutually incomprehensible dialects and thence to different languages, sowing the seeds of dissention where unity once prevailed. From the author’s point of view, the very idea of English, having left the shores of “th[e] precious gem set in the silver seas,” becoming disfigured at the hands of incompetent foreign learners unmindful of the departures they make from authorized usage offers a glimpse of worse days ahead. Things are falling apart, he is lamenting and the center cannot hold any longer.

Perren's fears concerning the defilement of English in a foreign land is, I want to argue, entirely of a piece with the ideas about what languages are and how they function (or, if they don't in actual practice, ought to in an ideal world) that inform much of the work done in language teaching and related matters even today. The fact that, today almost half a century later, and thanks mainly Kachru's pioneering efforts to advance and consolidate the notion of World Englishes, we can afford to look back on someone worrying about the emergence of yet another local variety of English in East Africa does not automatically condemn Perren's words to the trash-can of ill-fated prognostications from the past. For the truth of the matter is that many of Perren's concerns are predicated upon concepts and categories that are very much in use in language teaching circles even today.

The figure of the 'native speaker' – the one who never errs and is the absolute guarantor of hundred percent authenticity – is very much present as Perren ponders: "Most of the faults of spoken English [used by East African learners of English] have their origin in the pupils' mother-tongue habits. There is of course a carry-over of these habits into English." In other words, what the author is suggesting is that the only way the East African learners can be transformed into fluent speakers of 'authentic' English, is by making them forget their own mothertongue. The two languages cannot inhabit the same space. It is either one or the other.

As noted already, such all-or-nothing attitudes to foreign language teaching are much more widespread than one might be tempted to think at first blush.

### **3. Winds of change**

All this has changed, and radically so, since the winds of postmodern thought started sweeping across the humanities. Identity is no longer viewed as something that can be taken for granted. Rather, it is widely recognized today to be a construct. Identities are constructed and constantly being reconstructed in tune with the multiple influences they are subjected to. Identities are in a permanent state of flux. Persons assume and discard identities as they pass through different stages of their lives, partly in response to changes in their immediate circumstances. The more complex

the attendant circumstances, the more radical and unpredictable the transformations they undergo. Indeed, in extreme cases it may turn out to be no more than a mere question of force of habit to look for the person behind the persona. Besides, people end up assuming identities often unbeknownst to themselves.

But what has all this to do with language teaching, be it the first or a second language? The simple answer is: a lot. In point of fact, much more than what might seem to be the case at first glimpse. To begin with, the whole idea of a *first* as opposed to a *second* language, or one's *native* as opposed to *foreign* language, begins to look urgently in need of a radical rethinking. As more and more people acquire proficiency in languages other than the ones they were initially exposed to as children, as ever more segments of entire populations go through the process of mass migration on an unprecedented scale in the history of mankind, as uprootedness and the consequent loss of language competencies (so-called language attrition) become increasingly common in several parts of the globe, concepts and categories of linguistic analysis based on entirely different realities come increasingly under strain. And among these concepts and categories that have by now outlived their usefulness are those of the "native speaker" and the dichotomy of "native/foreign languages" (Rajagopalan, forthcoming 1,2,3). If anything, they only stand in the way of our being able to get to grips with the new linguistic reality as it is currently being experienced by growing number of peoples in the world. To insist on employing them while trying to make sense of the emerging world order is either to pretend that such things are not happening right underneath our very noses or to force reality into preconceived moulds that reflect more faithfully how a researcher might wish the world were like rather than the way it actually is.

#### **4. Wrapping up: prospects for the future**

My central purpose in writing this paper is to plead for a more realistic approach to the lived linguistic reality of large numbers of people around the globe as a first step toward rethinking issues related to language teaching. It is my firm conviction that a disposition to go back to the drawing board to get our initial bearings straight will pave the way for more meaningful programmes and feasible goals insofar as the enterprise

of language teaching is concerned. The situation is ripe for a sea-change in the way we have been looking at some of these issues; all that is needed now is readiness to act.

As for postcoloniality, perhaps even fewer amongst us would today want to raise their unbelieving eyebrows, especially in view of the fact that issues relating to unequal power relations between the parties involved are no longer considered external or marginal to discussions about language teaching. This is especially the case in countries that belong to what Kachru (1988) has called the expanding circle (Rajagopalan, in preparation). Indeed, starting with the trail-blazing forays into the topic by Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994, 1998), there has been a growing body of literature whose most perceptible effect, specifically in the context of ELT, was best summed up by Holborough when she wrote: "Teaching English can no longer be taken as simply teaching language." (Holborow 1996: 172). Language, it is widely admitted today, is fraught with power relations. And the activity of teaching only brings to light the unequal distribution of power between the parties involved. Furthermore, as part of our colonial heritage (And, may it be noted that we are, all of us, implicated in it; for, neither the colonizers nor the colonized are entirely free from its lasting consequences), some languages such as English and French – perhaps all languages, *tout court*, given that every community has some embarrassing skeletons in its cupboard – still carry with them vestigial traces of colonial past, whether recent or remote. Indeed, as some scholars like Phillipson would have us believe, a language such as English is still mired in its colonial history and its expansion across the globe as the world's leading lingua franca is a visible reminder of the fact that the days of European colonialism are over only in the physical sense of forcible occupation of alien lands. The English language today is the repository of the colonial spirit which is kept alive by all the agencies currently engaged in spreading it. In his own words: "To put things more metaphorically, whereas once Britannia rules the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British empire has given way to the empire of English." (Phillipson 1992: 1). Similar alarm bells have also been sounded by Pennycook (1994, 1998).

As I have argued elsewhere (Rajagopalan 1999a & b, 2002), as important as they no doubt are, such warnings can also produce scare-mongering of undesirable proportions. Besides, they may, when all is said



and done, turn out to be based on premises that are themselves reminiscent of the kind of mindset that made colonial attitudes possible to begin with. This is because the spirit of colonialism derives its intellectual sustenance from the logic of all-or-nothing and in turn nurtures it. So, if the aim is break loose from the clutches of that mindset, it is imperative that we interrogate that very mindset with a view to identifying its blind spots. This means, among other things, to take postmodern identities as what we have to begin with and think of ways to theorize the new reality that is shaping up.

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