



In the Footsteps of Apostles - The role of English teachers in the age of EIL ¹

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Abstract: The myth of “The Tower of Babel” (The Old Testament) represents multilingualism as a cursed state of affairs brought about by God’s wrath, whereas in Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles (The New Testament) multilingualism is depicted as God’s gift. At the threshold of the new millennium, we are living in a delicate equilibrium between two forces in motion: on the one hand, the world is observed to be heading back to the pre-Babelic state of unilingualism with English sounding everywhere you go, while on the other hand, English as an international language (EIL) is increasingly getting diversified into varieties. Does the world need a common medium of communication? Or does it prefer to speak in different tongues? It is as if the Old Testament depiction of multilingualism as a state of condemnation and the New Testament representation of it as a blissful state were currently juxtaposed in conflict. Living on such a borderline between two opposing influences, what can and should English teachers do as professionals? The kind of needs determines the kind of teaching. In this newly unfolded page in history we find ourselves in, all English teachers must be consciously aware of newly defined needs of teaching. Such is the realization on which the ensuing discussion is based.

Key terms: *Paulinism, learnability of language, langue, parole, varieties of English*

¹ This paper is based on an invited presentation made on the occasion of the International Symposium on the Inter-civilization Harmony and Creation, held on 16-19 April 2007 at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China.

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1. The Bible as a text

To any keen observer of language and society, the Bible comes as interesting and not infrequently inspiring sociolinguistic reading. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament abound in references to language in human society.

One of the most famous Biblical references to a relation between human community and language can be found in Chapter 11 of the genesis of the Old Testament. This genesis account known as the Tower of Babel describes multilingualism as coming into being as a result of human presumption, which presumably incurred God's wrath. Multilingualism is, therefore, depicted as a debilitating state of confusion inasmuch as it can safely be interpreted as an expression of God's condemnation of a human deed. A less known Biblical reference to multilingualism is the one found in Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. Here, it is told that in Jerusalem the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles on the day of Pentecost, whereupon they "began to speak in other tongues." (Acts 2:4) It is known that in the first century AD when the Acts were written, people throughout the Roman empire, including Jerusalem, spoke the same language, Greek. However, the instant that the Holy Spirit filled the apostles, many a believer in Jerusalem began to hear them speaking in his or her native language. Such is the gist of Chapter 2 of the Acts. It is interesting to note that in contradistinction to the myth of the Tower of Babel, the second chapter of the Acts represents multilingualism as a state of bliss for there is no doubt that the visit of the Holy Spirit is a happening of immense benefit to the apostles as well as their followers.

I have no intention to delve into Bible studies as such. When I refer to the Bible, my intention is merely to use the Biblical descriptions as a metaphor for the current situation of the human world as I believe that at the threshold of the twenty-first century we have the juxtaposition of the Old Testament and New Testament situations. On the one hand, the world is getting back to the pre-Babelic state of unilingualism with English sounding everywhere you go. Call it the OT situation since the globalization of English is being promoted precisely because multilingualism is negatively valued and viewed as a state of confusion. But on the other hand, we have a contrastive situation where English as an international language is getting more and more diversified. This can be likened to the NT representation of multilingualism as something positive and blissful, if the divergence of English can be regarded as a correlative of multilingualism.

This much debate can be summarized by stating that at the early twenty-first century stage we are living in a delicate equilibrium between two forces in operation: on the one hand, people in this planetary society are increasingly drawn to a common medium of communication; but on the other, the world is being driven back to different ways of speaking at the same time. We are living at a crossroads of two driving forces in conflict. Let's bear such a realization in mind as we proceed with our exploration.

2. Inspirations of Paulinism

It is commonplace to speak about the New Testament in terms of historical documentation of the Christian religion in its infancy. While the Old Testament, intended as it is for Jewish people alone, gives expression to exclusively Jewish values and beliefs, the New Testament enables us to trace how the exclusivistic religion now called Judaism became universalized as a religion going beyond a specific nation and how it spread from Jerusalem to Rome. Within such historicist

milieu, the role played by Saint Paul among others merits attention in that of the twelve apostles of Christ Paul proved to be the single most radical and influential in reforming the traditional religion.

St. Paul, who goes down in the history of the Christian Church as the “Apostle of the Gentiles,” opened the door of the Jewish religion to the Gentiles as his posthumous title suggests. He challenged the Jewish custom of circumcision³, the Mosaic Law⁴, idolatry⁵, the sacrosanctity of the temple⁶, and adapted many more centuries-old traditions of Judaism in such a way that the religion would be acceptable to a wider world. It was when Paul was engaged in missionary work in the Syrian capital Antioch that the apostles were first called “Christians.”(Acts 11:26) In short, what Paul and his fellow apostles did was to transform Judaism into Christianity, and they did so in the belief that God’s blessings were meant not just for “the chosen people” but more extensively for “all peoples, nations and men of every language.”(Daniel 7: 13-14) Put in such a context, the Acts 2 emergence of multilingualism can be reasonably interpreted as symbolic of the liberation of the religion to all the nations under Roman rule⁷.

If St. Paul is the founder of Christian theology as he is commonly held to be⁸, his theology builds on the conviction that as long as the core religious virtues, namely “faith, hope and love,”(1 Cor. 13:13) remain respected, any traditional values and practices associated with the Jewish religion could be reinterpreted and even done away with as need be. But then, the only way possible to de-nationalize Judaism as a world religion would be its adaptation to the ways of Gentile peoples. Such is the logic behind Paulinism.

At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, it will be an enterprise of no small value to draw a parallel between Christianity and English as an international language (EIL). Substitute EIL for Christianity in the foregoing discussion. Then, you will be inspired to take a fresh look at English and be motivated to redefine the role of EIL teachers in our time. In the words of Chinua Achebe (1966), “Adaptation is the cost any international language must pay to be enthroned as an international language.” That’s that. For English to be de-nationalized as a means of wider communication, it must be adapted to the way things are in each of its recipient cultures. Teachers’ role should be re-examined and re-identified in this new light.

3. The learnability of language

Any human language is learnable. That is already one wondrous thing about our language especially in the context of our increasingly interconnected world. Given that recourse to a language not one’s own, either productively or receptively, is a necessary first step for understanding beyond cultural boundaries, it is tremendously fortuitous that any language spoken on the globe is teachable and learnable.

The learnability of a language can be elucidated if you apply the duality theory advanced by the linguist Charles Hockett (1958) as one of the most powerful “design features” of language. Our language provides a finite number of meaningless units, yet possibilities of an infinite number of meaningful combinations at the same time. In brief, the infinite use of finite elements. That is what duality is all about. A, b, c, d, e, f, g... These letters typify a finite number of meaningless units. Since English has only twenty-six letters, you can remember them all in two days. Remember them, and you can generate based on your knowledge of that meaningless unit hundreds of thousands of meaningful combinations, such as abandon, abdomen, avocado, algebra, dog, god, odd, ode, and you go on and on. English grammar consists of a limited number of more or

³ See 1 Cor. 7:19, Romans 3:30, Gal. 5:2.

⁴ See 1 Cor. 9: 20-21, Romans 2:25-26, Gal. 2:16

⁵ See 1 Cor. 10:14, Gal. 5:20.

⁶ See Acts 24: 6, Acts 26:20-21.

⁷ This interpretation can be supported by the accounts in Acts 10:45-47 and Acts 19:6 where the apparition of the Holy Ghost coincides with the emergence of multilingualism in which the hypnotized believers begin to praise God (Acts 10:46) or prophesy (Acts 19:6) in their own languages.

⁸ See Cross and Livingstone (1983: 1048).

less meaningless rules, which you can master in two months. Master them, and you can create an infinite number of meaningful sentences on the basis of your knowledge of English grammar. Thus, the duality theory accounts both for the creative economy of language and for its learnability.

Here is a hypothetical language not endowed with the magnificent feature called duality.

- A) "Kavfikiorniarumagaluarpunga." (I'll make coffee.)
- B) "Niwhojeutmuaribefaluirpimga." (She'll make coffee.)
- C) "Mudgmitajonbqepcvurnlxqfb." (They'll make coffee.)

When you mean to say, "I'll make coffee," you have to say the long word coded A. To mean, "She'll make coffee," you have to say a totally different but equally long word coded B here. To mean, "They'll make coffee," you have to say yet another lengthy word, C. To represent every particular experience, there are individual words for us to remember and say. Such a language would exceed our capacity of learning. Fortunately, though, a human language has duality, and so any language is learnable.

4. Langue and parole

Having said that, we now have to lose no time in adding that no second language can be learned and acquired in the same way and degree as first language. Here is no small trick of the game, and it is here that the distinction between langue and parole pertains and matters because when we say any language is learnable, we have in mind language as a system or "langue." Admittedly, the act of speaking in actual situations or "parole" is a different experience. In this regard, many linguists are unanimous that if you are to be able to speak, say, American English as parole like a native speaker, you have to be exposed to an environment in which American English is constantly spoken and heard during your sensitive period ⁹.

Langue and parole is a celebrated, though a bit obsolescent, pair of terms that Ferdinand de Saussure introduced to contrast two views of language. Here is my attempt to redefine them largely within the framework of Saussure's own definition of the former as social convention and the latter as individual execution:

LANGUAGE		
view	parole	langue
definition	individual execution	social convention
linguistics	pragmatics, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, stylistics, etc.	phonology, syntax,morphology, semantics, etc.
representation	phonation, audition,expanded vocabulary, etc	grammar, pronunciation,dictionary vocabulary, etc.

From the chart, we can realize that the linguistics of langue predated the linguistics of parole ¹⁰ and that had it not been for the conceptual differentiation between langue and parole, criticisms of the undue emphasis on langue that characterized the earlier stages in the history of linguistic studies might not have blossomed in the shape of pragmatics, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, etc ¹¹. With respect to representations, grammar, pronunciation and dictionary vocabulary are the principal components of langue. It is one of teachers' main

⁹ The two seminal studies in language acquisition, Chomsky's and Lenneberg's, are succinctly captured in their essential outlines in the following Chomskyan statement: "Language acquisition is a matter of growth and maturation of relatively fixed capacities, under appropriate external conditions. ...The functioning of the language capacity is, furthermore, optimal at a certain 'critical period' of intellectual development."(Chomsky 1966: 64-65) The term "sensitive period" is used in the text of this paper in much the same sense as the Lennebergian term "critical period."

¹⁰ J. Courtés (1991) contrasts the linguistics of langue and the linguistics of parole in terms of *la linguistique traditionnelle* and *la linguistique discursive*. "Discours" (and "discursive") is conceived by E. Benveniste as much the same notion as parole (see J. Courtés 1991: 10-11).

¹¹ Paveau and Sarfati (2003:166) make a similar point in their chapter devoted to *les linguistiques énonciatives*.

jobs to pass these social conventions along to learners. Phonation and audition, on the other hand, are individually performative factors of language.

Teachers need to pause here to gaze into the distinction between pronunciation as an element of *langue* and phonation (Saussurean term for the act of pronouncing) as an element of *parole*. If the former is a matter of *science*, the latter is an *art*. Isn't it a matter of common knowledge that learners very well grounded on the science of their target language (*langue*) may be miserably poor in the art of applying that science (*parole*)? Just think that post-puberty learners of a second language generally can hardly articulate or comprehend spoken language in the same way as first-language speakers. Teachers should take heed of this and be understanding and tolerant of the way second-language learners perform aural-orally.

Also, it should be tolerated that members of host cultures of English invent new lexical items to meet their specific cultural needs provided the expanded vocabulary items conform to the morphological, phonological and semantic conventions. We are reminded of such instances of Chinese English as "red-guards," "gang of four," "capitalist-roaders," and other coinages carried on the pages of *People's Daily* and *Beijing Review* during the Cultural Revolution and after. Saussure wrote: "C'est la parole qui fait évoluer la langue. (It is parole that makes language evolve.)" (Saussure 1916/1995:37) If so, giving L2 speakers a measure of free rein on the level of *parole* is in the best interests of English since that way English is expected to be the more expressive and versatile language. It is here that English teachers can emulate the work done by the Apostle of the Gentiles.

Summarizing this much discussion, simply because any language is learnable it does not follow that learners can acquire a second language in its entirety to a mastery level. In countries where the majority of learners are post-puberty starters in particular, teachers should be equipped with a realization that the rigid imposition of native-speaker norms on the level of *parole* is likely to end up as a futile effort for the simple reason that by definition as well as in practice L1 and L2 are two different applied linguistic entities.

5. Binding force

To say all this does not mean that a native-speaker variety of English as *langue* could be freely bent and twisted to the ways of non-native speakers. On the level of *langue*, I believe we need to abide by the OT prescription and stick with either American English or British English because these two varieties remain the major binding forces at the present stage of the evolution of English. Here again, we can be inspired by St. Paul who made the exception of the core theological virtues when he deconstructed and adapted the traditional religion.

English syntax is to us what faith, hope and love are to Paul. From mid-twentieth century to early twenty-first century, non-native varieties of English have not just been gathering momentum but gaining ground as well within each local culture. Nowadays lots of non-native speakers say things like,

- Your secretary, is *she* married? (Pronoun copying)
- You're checking out, *is it*? (Invariant tag)
- Do you know *where does she live*? (Inverted indirect question)

It is said that prescriptism will eventually lose to the resilience of reality. You can be confirmed about the truth of that statement just by recalling that split infinitive, much averted before the second world war, is largely accepted today.

Nowadays native speakers say “I’ve decided to not go to Canada” as casually as “I’ve decided not to go to Canada.” We cannot keep language from changing. In a hundred years’ time from now, pronoun copying or invariant tag may have found its way into common English usage. But that is a different matter. Descriptive linguistics is one thing; education another. As long as we are teachers of English, we must side with the OT and teach the essentials of our target language for the ultimate purpose of attaining a univocal world, no matter how quixotic the endeavor might look.

The following are examples taken from my own archives. My point when I cite these examples is that in this age of EIL native speakers are obliged to make a lot of concessions when they communicate with non-native speakers because there is any number of English idioms and locutions whose knowledge is shared by native speakers but not by non-native speakers:

√ Love is a many-gendered thing.

√ I couldn’t agree more.

√ Break your leg!

Once when I was teaching Introduction to Sociolinguistics as an English-mediated lecture course, I quoted a famous line from Shakespeare’s sonnet: “Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?” Mind you, the majority of the class were supposed to be good at English. They were South Asians, Southeast Asians, Africans, some Europeans, and some East Asians, but native speakers were few and far between. As a background to this line, I offered information on the person mentioned in the line. I said, “The person mentioned as ‘thee’ in this line was actually an attractive young man. It’s reported that this young man was Shakespeare’s lover. In fact, this line is often cited as a piece of evidence that Shakespeare was homosexual. But that doesn’t matter. As you know, love is a many-gendered thing.” I said that much, expecting an immediate uproar of laughter. But no laughter was caused in any corner of the lecture hall. My best intention could not get through to my audience. “I couldn’t agree more” is a dangerous expression. If you said that to my students, five out of ten of them would misconstrue your point. They are likely to take it as an expression of disagreement rather than an expression of wholehearted agreement. My point again is that there are goodly numbers of idioms, similes, metaphors, and sayings native speakers better stay away from when communicating with non-native speakers for the reason that non-natives, due to their lack of knowledge, are in danger of misunderstanding them to native speakers’ disadvantage. That is my meaning when I say that in this age of the globalization of English native speakers have to make lots of concessions. They might like to stay away from saying, for another instance, “Break your leg!” in favor of “Good luck to you!”

Although idioms and locutions are not counted as part of syntax, the fact remains that they are part and parcel of native-speaker English as langue. As English teachers, we must teach them precisely because idioms are indispensables of English as a system. That brings us back to discussions on the role of teachers of English. Living in a reality in which non-native speakers of English far outnumber its native speakers, we are painfully aware that the gap between native-speaker varieties of English and non-native varieties of English is widening. In my view, that is exactly where education should step in. The last time I met the long-time editor of *World Englishes* Larry Smith, he made a revealing and reassuring remark to the effect that educated English is homogenous to a large degree regardless of nationalities of speakers ^[12]. Herein lies our mission. Together with the international

media, education should be another institution to act as a supervisor of world English with English teachers taking the lead.

6. Final remarks

The age of EIL is the age of teachers' dilemma. In the midst of the broadening gap between native Englishes and non-native Englishes, professionals are increasingly at a loss how to grapple with the issue that debuted academically in the 1980s notably with Platt et al. (1984). The issue's name is "Which English?" In an effort to contribute a stone to that argument, I have reinstated the Saussurean dichotomy, *langue* and *parole*. The prescription suggested above is the OT rigour with regard to English as *langue* and the NT flexibility as regards English as *parole*. In non-parabolic terms, the production of educated world citizens armed with adequate working knowledge of English as *langue* and the toleration of culture-specific idiosyncrasies of English as *parole* have been proposed as a twofold role of English teachers in our time.

Throughout the spread of this paper has been an undercurrent of interest in specific countries of the East Asia that continue to introduce English as a school subject at a post-sensitive period of individuals' personal development. Japan and China are notable examples. These are countries where in theory as well as in practice it is next to impossible for individual learners of English to imitate the process of first-language acquisition. They can't acquire a new word without its spelling being taught, nor can they speak English without being interfered by their first language, to cite but two instances of a collective handicap. The strategy suggested in this paper is especially applicable to such learning fronts. In Southeast Asian, South Asian and other ESL teaching fronts where learners are exposed to English at a pre-puberty stage, it might be less relevant and less exploitable. At the very least, however, the discussion developed here does give us a clearer idea where in the history and geography of English we stand at the right moment and how we should redefine our roles as teachers of English in a newly-emerged situation. Hopefully, my discussion topic has been a timely one to that degree.

7. References

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