Linguistic failures

NIU QIANG and MARTIN WOLFF

Heart-felt opposition to the status and spread of English in the world at large and most particularly in China today

IT CAN hardly be denied that England has given the world maritime law, contract law, and an international language. However, whether by accident or design, the effect of these 'gifts' over time has, we would argue, been the destruction of many ethnic customs, social structures, and other aspects of culture. There appears to be little or no dissent among linguists regarding the proposition that language and culture are inseparable: what affects one affects the other.

This paper discusses how the global spread of English has affected – deleteriously – many languages and cultures, and currently engages too much time and too many resources in China today. Maritime and contract law *may* have been less problematic.

Language functions as a symbolic marker of a community, and often indeed of a nation, because of its inseparable sociolinguistic relationship with culture. However, this relationship between language and culture needs to be traced back further, to the psycholinguistic interdependence of language and thought. Yet many linguists worldwide, even though they are armed with awareness of this kind, currently sit idly by and watch as their own culture is stealthily supplanted by English and the culture that rides piggyback on English – which is embraced, in effect (officially or unofficially), as the second language for speakers of all the other languages in the world.

From time to time, a scholar like Professor Kanavillil Rajagopalan may write a controversial piece, such as, in his case, 'National languages as flags of allegiance, or, the linguistics that failed us: A close look at emergent linguistic chauvinism in Brazil'. Such a paper (like many others) reminds us that, not only is the English language the greatest all-time export of Great Britain, but this 'gift' is like a Trojan Horse that brings with it a potentially destructive force. The situation in Brazil, as described by Rajagopalan, is not so far from that in China.

The teaching of English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL or ESL) in China has become a nationwide endeavour pursued at all academic levels, from kindergarten to university. In the past ten years there has been an explosion in the development of English programmes in both state schools and private language schools throughout China. As a result, EFL/ESL has become very big business there: cf., among many other sources, 'English Patients,' *China Daily*, Hong Kong Edition, 9 Oct 02. Reports show that ESL has become a 10-billion yuan business in China, and – of the 37 billion yuan annual book sales country-

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wide – ESL takes up as much as 25% of market share. In addition, a small number of 'elite' ESL teachers in the city of Shanghai command as high an hourly rate as 1,000 yuan, the equivalent of US$120. By comparison, a private student pays 10–20 yuan (US$1.20–2.40) for a single hour of ESL training.

In 1862, under the Qing Dynasty, the first English-language school was officially opened by the Chinese government to train ten men for the newly created diplomatic corps. Many years have passed since then, in the course of which the social momentum of English in China has steadily increased, until, in the past ten years, there has been an increase in emphasis on English as a Foreign or Second Language that one can only call alarming.

China annually recruits some 100,000 'Foreign Experts' to teach English as a Foreign or Second Language (cf. <www.Chinatefl.com>), with an accompanying ten billion yuan price tag, according to the *China Daily* (cf. 'English Patients', Hong Kong Edition, 9 Oct 02). According to the recruiting website <www.AbroadChina.org>, there are at the present time some 150,000 foreign ESL teachers working in China. The *People's Daily* reported that in 2001 the industry made a 700 million yuan (US$8,700,000) profit in Beijing alone ('English Language Training Profitable in China,' 23 Jan 02).

Public middle schools, high schools, and universities throughout the country have developed and implemented English-language programmes, while private EFL/ESL schools – kindergartens, primary, middle, and high schools – have proliferated to such an extent that (according to statistics from the Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee of the NPC) about 54,000 private schools had been set up in China by the end of 2000, with 6.93 million registered students. ('China To Draft Law on Private Schools?', *People's Daily*, 23 May 01).

At first blush, it may appear admirable that China has so wholeheartedly made such a concerted effort to adopt as its second language English, the international language of commerce and so forth. On 24 Oct 02, Zang Xinsheng, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Education, reportedly said: 'With China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the approaching Olympics in 2008 more than ever is it a priority for young Chinese to learn and improve their language skills' ('Government Encourages Public to learn English,' *China Daily*, 10 Feb 02). The same article states that Beijing is striving to reach the goal of teaching its residents to speak English in order to improve Beijing's image as an international metropolis.

Beijing wants its 13 million residents to speak English so as to enhance its image as a cosmopolitan metropolis (*China Daily*, 10 May 02). China's Ministry of Education wants all young people in China to learn English because of China's WTO membership and China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics (*China Daily*, 10 May 02). And certain municipal governments require *all* their civil servants to learn some English (*China Daily*, same date). These goals or objectives prompt a single simple question: *Why*?

Market studies, market analyses, and affirmative recommendations from experts in the fields of business, mathematics, and linguistics should support each of the foregoing propositions, but such studies, analyses, and recommendations do not appear to have been conducted or put forward.

What, one must ask, is the mathematical probability that each of Beijing's 13 million or so residents will need to be able to speak English for an accidental or even an intended encounter with at least one English-speaking foreigner during the 2008 Olympics? Hardly very high.

Does a market study support the proposition that Beijing's image will be enhanced in the eyes of foreigners if all the residents of Beijing can speak English? Further, would any such image enhancement translate into increased economic benefit for Beijing? If so, how much economic benefit will accrue to Beijing? And does any such benefit offset the social, cultural, and political costs that must be paid along the way by the people of Beijing? These questions do not appear to have been addressed by any formal study.

How many bilingual (Chinese/English) jobs will actually be created in China as a consequence of its membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and hosting the 2008 Olympics? Does the number of new jobs requiring English support the need for all of China's young people to learn English? Answers to these questions are not readily available. And about the bilingual jobs created by the 2008 Olympics: How long will they last – a few months? Why should someone spend

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three or four years studying English in college for a job in 2008 that will only last a few months? Post-Olympics, what becomes of all these Chinese speakers of English, whatever the level of their attainment?

Separately, what is the probability that all government civil servants, in any particular Chinese municipality, will need to use English in their daily work?

Very slim.

Is there any empirical study or evidence to support the current EFL/ESL revolution in China, a revolution that may in fact have significant adverse social, cultural, and political effects? (cf. Qiang & Wolff, 'China and Chinese or Chingland and Chinglish?', in *English Today* Oct 03). It does not appear that the Chinese Central Government has issued any formal resolution or position paper authorizing or supporting the current ESL revolution in China. Rather, it has been left – even encouraged – to just evolve. Other than standardized testing for College entrance, the Central Government seems to have no set educational policy or curriculum for EFL/ESL. Indeed, there is no single Ministry of Education document stating Government policy on EFL/ESL in China. (cf. He Qixin, 'English Language Education in China,' in *Foreign Language and Teaching Research* 8, 2001).

This rush to educate has spawned an industry gone berserk, without appreciable government control or regulation (cf. Qiang & Wolff, 'China ESL: An Industry Run Amuck,' *Progress in Education*, Vol. 129, 2003). There is no end of questions we may ask. Here are just fourteen of them:

1. Why the concerted effort to require all or any large segment of the 1.3 billion speakers of Mandarin – 25% of the world's population – to learn English as a foreign or second language?
2. Since Mandarin is one of the six working languages of the United Nations, does this mean that the world at large has a greater appreciation of the importance of Mandarin than China itself does?
3. Is the current EFL/ESL revolution in China a misguided self-inflicted form of English-language colonialization – brought about, tacitly if not officially, by adopting EFL/ESL teaching as a comprehensive national programme?
4. Will the West conquer China (linguistically at least) from within, without a single shot being fired?
5. Will English enculturation supplant traditional Chinese culture and values?
6. Will dim sum and Beijing duck be replaced with Big Macs and Kentucky Fried Chicken?
7. Why has China apparently begun to forsake Mandarin for English, when 25% of the world's population already speaks Mandarin, and Mandarin is one of the six working languages of the United Nations?
8. Why does China so meekly submit to the English-based new world order emanating out of Washington D.C., when a quarter of the world's population looks to Beijing for its leadership?
9. Does an emerging China not yet realize the reality that it has the immediate clout to demand that those desiring to do business *in* China or *with* China should learn Mandarin, rather than expect 1.3 billion Chinese to learn English?
10. Why should 1.3 billion Chinese learn English when most Chinese college graduates will never use oral English in their whole lifetime nor read any English materials? (cf. 'Is English Invading Chinese Culture?', *China Daily*, 11/03/03)
11. Could or should China learn something from the EU giving priority to the preservation and continued use of its various national-cum-native languages (cf. Qiang/Wolff 4/03)?
12. Is the risk posed by EFL/ESL to China's social, cultural and even political structures and systems outweighed by the potential economic benefits such that China's Chineseness is *for sale*? – EFL/ESL at any cost?
13. Should the love of money replace traditional Chinese wisdom as the most valuable asset in such a Chingland?
14. Should economic gain be at the expense of what makes China different from all other nations? – National identity is tied directly to the preservation of the native language.

It is safe to say that the language issue in China should not be treated merely as linguistic, but rather as a dynamic force which may operate on various social and political factors and lead to drastic social transformations. Language planning has to be taken into serious consideration by policy makers where independence has

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newly been declared or where sovereign cohesiveness is challenged, so that national unity and harmony can be maintained. A national language is more than just the language of government or of education; it is the symbol of a people's identity as citizens of that nation.

This issue should not be treated as merely linguistic; rather, it is a socio-psychological issue in nature and of great political significance, because of the intrinsic relationship among language, thought, and culture. A national language shared by all in-group members is the potential unifying force that brings people closer in time of social change, but it can also be a divisive power, which may break a nation into parts or groups.

Yes indeed, Professor Kanavillil Rajagopalan, linguists must engage the issue on all fronts, including active public discussion of political and ethical issues! If not linguists, then who? ■

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