Interview with Tom McArthur

A few years ago, DAVID GRADDOL interviewed Tom McArthur about his early background, and about a range of issues concerning the spread of English as a global language. This interview is reprinted below.

DG: Tom, can you tell us about your own linguistic background?

TM: I grew up in Glasgow, and my family background was from Perthshire, so I was aware that there were two kinds of Scots being used. Then when I was at school we could flip between a classroom language and a playground language easily through the day. As I got older I would flip languages throughout my life. In England, for example, as an army officer, I discovered I had to do new tricks – jump through a whole lot of linguistic hoops – in order to succeed. I became intensely aware of both a north-south difference and lower-higher difference: I came from a background where people spoke a language that was broad, low and close to the ground, but if I wanted to get on in life in the UK I had to elevate myself in some way.

So I grew up with a sense – although I couldn't have put a label on it – that there was a doubleness in everything I did linguistically. It's only much later that I became conscious of a tradition in Scotland which regards Scots as a separate language from English. Whether one regards it as completely separate or separate in part, it leaves me feeling that I learned Standard English as 'something else'. Not as a second or foreign language but half a second or foreign language.

DG: In most of Britain there is a kind of sociolinguistic pyramid, with RP regarded as the most prestigious accent. Is this true in Scotland?

TM: Essentially RP is regarded by Scots as an alien imposition; something which is true for the aristocracy, and therefore by definition, not true and appropriate for everybody else. There is a 'counter-gentry' feeling which accounts for a lot of the socialism in Scottish background. Alternatively, there have been attempts, in Edinburgh for example, and to some extent in Glasgow, to produce a Scottish form which resembles English but still retains a degree of separateness. Nowadays that manifests itself in younger, middle class people having retroflex 'r's, like the Irish, Americans and Canadians. They didn't want to go the whole way towards an r-less universe but they didn't want to speak with the trilled or tapped uvular r which dominated Scots in the past and is still largely standard for the mass of the population.

DG: How do you see the situation at a global level?

TM: I think one has to conceive of 'Standard English' as a complex, not as a monolith. We all use it in different ways; we all approximate to something which isn't there, but which we idealise about, negotiate and compromise. There are communities which do very little negotiating and compromising but they're usually communities of socially, culturally, financially secure people. One could talk, for example, about upper and upper-middle classes in the home counties of England, or the traditions in Boston USA.

These are issues about the enlargement of the middle classes in the last 150 years, and the various strategies people have employed in that time to make themselves verbally comfortable: it goes with better houses, opportunities, schools and so on. Oddly enough, with the role of English as a world language, this desire of the middle classes has been projected beyond the indigenous situation in the UK, and beyond the immigrant situation in the USA, to the whole world. East Asia especially is a good example, where the entire middle class seem to want English for their children as an international vehicle which they can then use with the

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rest of the world – it's not a British or American thing.

DG: When you say the middle classes want English, are you thinking within a particular country or across ethnic or linguistic groups?

TM: Across boundaries – Hong Kong people, for example, wanting to talk English to work with mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese and Australians. And, since we already have Singapore and Hong Kong as 'centres for commercial excellence' where English is important, these tigers are also able then to plug into the US and elsewhere.

In terms of 'plug in' I mean literally, the 'plugging in' into an electronic network, whether it's the radio, TV, cinema or the Internet and the World Wide Web. This is what I once called in a book, *Worlds of Reference*, a 'global nervous system' and although it is highly unlikely that such a nervous system will be in English alone, English will probably dominate it. It certainly dominates it at the moment, but other languages are moving into this electronic net and will continue to do so. There will be this enormous amount, there as elsewhere, of bilingualism and hybridising – Standard English, for example, is hybridising with other kinds of English and also with other languages and producing dynamic and systemic, stable hybrid forms. Hybridising seems to me to be a very important and vigorous process in the modern world.

DG: Do you think this makes English special – that it easily hybridises?

TM: It's significant that English itself is an enormously hybridised language, but I don't think that's a special nature of English as such. I think it points to the nature of language – the nature of world languages especially. When languages become dominant over large areas you get hybridisation. While hybridisation itself is infinitely varied, the idea of hybrids is stable: it's been with us for thousands of years as part of the processes we call civilisation. So I wouldn't like to suggest that English has some kind of 'magic component'. People have talked about a mongrel tongue and a hybrid heritage for decades; Latin and Greek, for example, are languages which are as vigorous indirectly today as they ever were directly in the past.

The process of one language flowing into another indeed continues today: English flows into Malay, for example, and Latin and Greek flow into Malay with English. To some extent, the high language, like Arabic, for example, flows downwards into the lower language like Persian or Turkish, which could be high on other occasions for other purposes. The situation may change but at the moment English is the high language and it tends to flow into everything else, downward, like water.

DG: Would you agree that English is changing the role it plays in people's lives, not just for public communication, but also within the family?

TM: Yes, I think you get good examples of this in places like Singapore with its four official languages – English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay. English is so dominant for all practical purposes in Singapore that middle class communities and families are shifting to speak Singaporean English in the home with the children, at least as much as they speak anything else, and probably more than they speak other languages. This is abetted by the fact that even though Tamil is an official language, you can't speak it with the Chinese Singaporeans or the Malay Singaporeans. Similarly, what many Tamil and Malay speakers want, as do the Chinese, is more English, and English which works beyond Singapore. I'm convinced that the long-term use of English will depend on what happens to 'big languages' like Mandarin, Malay, Indonesian.

In Malaysia, the ministry of education has its own lexicography unit to convert and standardise English words into Malaysian Malay. English terms, rather than Dutch terms, are entering Bahasa Indonesia on a large scale, so what we will see, in the same way as we saw the Latinisation of English, is this Anglicisation of Malay or Malayanisation of English material.

In China too, it seems to me inevitable they will need English. In the same way that India uses English as a window on the world, China too will require this window. And although English has been shaky in Hong Kong, the vigour of English learning in mainland China will probably have a side effect on Hong Kong and make it more significant there for the Cantonese population than it has been previously. We have to think then of how English will shape East Asia and become, in the process, an Asian language.

Of course we have to look too at English as a big language and how that is changing. We

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might look at the powerhouse of modern English across the Pacific, in North America. One of the crucial areas is California. There are four fundamentals about that state which are unique in the world. The first is Silicon Valley and the electronic revolution. The second is the new age philosophy and the therapy industry which has spread worldwide. The third is Hollywood, from where a California-based American English has been spread around the world, not only directly through movies and TV, but indirectly in the effect it has on dubbing. When you dub American English into other languages, those languages have to be amended to fit with mouth movements on screen. And fourth, the relationship between English and Spanish. This has many repercussions, both for so-called Spanglish, and for the way in which the Spanish of Mexico and Latin America relates to the Spanish of Spain, and to English at large.

DG: Can you see an English-Spanish bilingual culture emerging in parts of the world?

TM: Yes. When there are hybrids, there's a discussion that follows – whether for Spanglish or Ebonics, the African-American English usage – which focuses on whether these are English versions or whether they're separate languages. Whatever, it seems likely that Spanglish will spread beyond the US, if it hasn't already. Spanglish has been associated with poor, immigrants, or day labourers and so on, people who supposedly didn't know Spanish very well and couldn't know English very well, and therefore spoke a rather problematic mix. Yet this mix seems to animate all levels in and around us. Certainly middle-class Hispanic Americans have been saying they know both languages well, and like to mix them. Although people have expressed anxiety about what this might do for 'the language of Cervantes', at the same time a Spanglish surge seems inevitable over the next few decades.

It's possible that such mixing, of English and Spanish, will follow grooves or currents, or flow in certain directions and become semi-standardised. Although the mixing of languages can seem chaotic and unprincipled, it probably isn't so. Take India as an example: people educated in Hindi or Urdu and in English are growing up with these two language complexes side-by-side.

People mix those languages because they're reading, thinking and receiving both of them. Although we talk about English 'borrowing', I think it's more about 'coexistence'.

Incidentally, the idea that stable monolinguals are the model – the reality of language – that idea has come and gone. In the past, instability seemed to be the norm for languages. Today, as we move towards some kind of 'new world order' we can see that instability at work again. The monolingual who doesn't learn or want another language is a minority.

DG: Do you see the spread of English around the world as involving any kind of cultural imperialism?

TM: I can see the arguments for a resistance to English since it represents a form of cultural imperialism, and then I can see the fears of people who worry about English being spoiled by all this and wishing they could get back to a pristine state, where they can feel secure with the English of England. Neither of these positions worry me. I don't enjoy the idea of imperialism but I don't have any personal feeling for the defence of England. The idea that English belongs particularly to a nation state or group or social class is not one that I have a lot of sympathy for.

If we look at history it seems inevitable that English will move into the past. The interesting question to me is how separate are languages as they move on? Persian changed to become saturated with Arabic, for example. So in 50 years time, good fluent Malay is going to contain other things. It's already one of the most mixed on earth, with Sanskrit, Arabic, Dutch, Portuguese and English. I think English will change too, and we might call it English, but not as we know it now: the same way we call Anglo Saxon 'English', but it's not the English of today. In 200 years from now, we'll use forms of languages which may only resemble what we use now.

DG: What of Europe? English hasn't historically been the main language of Europe; that seems to be changing rapidly.

TM: Countries are entering the EU where English is the 'second first-language' or the 'first second-language'. This has altered the EU balance. People in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and to some degree Germany, have acquired English so successfully through school or media that they can slip into English with great ease. You could almost think of the Scandinavian-Dutch bloc as

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a kind of neutral Anglophone presence. Ireland is another English-speaking country in the EU – Gaelic is negligible. And meanwhile huge numbers of people in Spain and Italy are gobbling up the English language. So it seems likely that English will be the working language not only for European institutions, but also a lot of Europeans.

I don't want to be the hegemonist for English, but wherever you go you see this immense engine at work. For example, with the collapse of the Soviet Union there's a collapse of Russian, and in the ex-satellite countries, the vacuum left by Russian appears to be filling rapidly with English. We should be aware of a great diversity too, of course. For example an older person might strive for a flawless RP accent, but a younger person is influenced by American. An internationalised Americanised accent may dominate and blend with the phonologies of the original background languages and dialects. I say dialects deliberately because there are indications in Anglophone countries of a degree of Americanisation of accents as well. Where once upon a time there might have been a British colonial veneer, there will be an American veneer. This will happen to native and foreign users of English. And demographically in the future it will be a veneer over millions and millions of people. Institutions like the BBC World Service and the British Council will have to cope with that. ■

Note

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