English as a postcolonial tool

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Anti-hegemonic subversions in a hegemonic language

English as the global (if not the universal) language reflects a hegemony of the past as well as of the present: both a continuation of the British Empire (and thus demonized as a former colonial language) and, as the preferred language of international business and capitalist development throughout the world, resented as a powerful neo-colonial language. Yet, as this study seeks to show, English is capable of acting against its own imperialisms, to undermine its own hegemony.

EDWARD SAID, a Palestinian – Gayatri Spivak, an Indian born in Calcutta – Homi Bhabha, a Gujarati-speaking Parsi descended from Persian migrants to India, and raised in Bombay: All three bring their personal experiences to bear in their anti-colonial diatribes, but they composed their tracts in hegemonic English – not in Arabic, Bengali, or Gujarati. If, indeed, English is the world's language, and if the world is being increasingly subsumed in English (both of which statements may be effectively, if not totally true), then it is not a marginal matter to ask: How might that which is foreign to English be comprehensibly represented in English? How, in other words, can anti-hegemonies be articulated in a hegemonic discourse, when the discourse itself may occlude, if not obstruct, challenges to its own authority.

This is another form of a wider conundrum: how to depict the other to the self, without the other being merely an obverse of the self. What I wish to explore here is how certain ethnic writers, involved in contrasting cultures, by using different fictionally mimetic techniques, embody in a majority language the strangeness of a minority culture, and manage to make that strangeness accessible to the reader.

In his article "Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis" (1981), Meir Sternberg considered this intercultural problem: how to depict the foreign comprehensibly to the native. He identified three general strategies:

- *referential restriction*, which basically describes discourse that is purely monolingual, ignoring not only interlingual tensions but also interdialectal deviations. He cited Jane Austen, whose fictions are restrictedly English, in which few foreigners ever make an appearance, and everyone speaks the same dialect.
- *vehicular matching*, which he identified as a linguistic diversity, encountered frequently in scholarly studies, particularly those in comparative literature, but also in works of film and literature. Sternberg cited Jean Renoir's bilingual film, *La Grande Illusion*, as well as Shaw's *Pygmalion* – the first of these interlingual, the second interdialectal.
- *homogenizing convention*, in which foreigners or non-human species are assumed to be automatically fluent in a native language. La Fontaine's animals all speak French; Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra both speak English, despite their Roman and Egyptian

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heritage; *Hogan's Heroes*, the television series on life in a German concentration camps, is another example, where German captors and French prisoners all speak an American brand of English (albeit with a German and a French accent).

We may characterize Sternberg's three modes as follows: referential restriction excludes the foreign; vehicular matching represents it as 'other'; and homogenized convention renders it as transparent – "naturalized".

Ethnic, bicultural authors confront a particular challenge: how to elicit the sympathy of the reader for the "foreign" culture, at the same time preserving its "foreignness" so that xenophobic natives can be realistically depicted. I take as examples here three ethnic American novelists: Korean-American, Japanese-American, Chinese-American. My analysis will touch on important ancillary issues, such as the degree of "exotica" that each strategy promotes, as well as the degree to which a bicultural, if not a bilingual audience is entailed. Implicit in my analysis of the "fictional mimesis" of ethnicity is the challenge to a purist notion of American English. For, if the United States is indeed multicultural, then its language must also reflect that diversity. American English cannot remain "Anglo-English", but will increasingly subsume expressions and idioms that derive from non-English vernaculars.

If a country's language is whatever the citizens of that country speak, then the "mongrelization" of English must be a feature of the living language, just as diversity has been the character of the American people.

Korea in America

Chang-Rae Lee's 1995 novel, *Native Speaker*, addresses the issue of language as an emblem of identity. The story is a conflict not only of the first-generation Korean immigrants with their second-generation offspring, but also of the disjunction between Korean and English. As a novelist, Lee must capture both the thoughts articulated in Korean and, at the same time, reflect their awkwardness to the non-Korean American reader. He adopts several techniques, including "mimetic cliché", vehicular matching, and homogenized convention (and at times a combination of all three). "Mimetic cliché" involves words and phrases that reflect no very deep acquaintance with another culture, and involve standard greetings and familiar ethnic staples. The normal Korean greeting is presented as "vehicular matching" in the following passage:

> Every morning Eduardo tipped his head to me and said in a convincing accent, *Ahn-young-ha-sae yo*. I greeted him back in Spanish but his accent was much better than mine. (p. 132)

An example of "mimetic cliché" would be:

> The Korean restaurant had two floors…. When you order *kalbi* or *bulgogi*, a man brings a tin of red-hot coals to set inside the pit of the table. (p. 176).

But Lee goes further than superficial Korean locutions that might be familiar to non-Korean speakers. In some instances, he provides not only the transliterated Korean words, but also contextualizes them deftly with an explanation or a translation. Some examples:

> *"In-jeh,"* he yelled, *"Now!"* (p. 70)

> *"Oo-rhee-jip*, he'd say then, just before the eating and drinking, asking for our hands around the tables, speaking *oo-rhee-jip* for *Our house*. Our new life." (p. 136)

> "The truth… is that my father got his first infusion of capital from a geh, a Korean 'money club' in which members contributed to a pool that was given out on a rotating basis." (p. 46)

> "'If you are listening to me now and you are Korean, and you pridefully own your own store, your yah-cheh-ga geh that you have built up from nothing, know these facts'." (p. 142)

Sometimes, the dialogue is almost a lesson in Korean:

> He bows his head sharply and fumbles out, *"Me-yahn-ney-oh, ah-juh-shih." I'm very sorry, sir.*
> *Gaen-cha-nah*, I mutter, chuckling, telling him it's okay. I put out my hand, *"Yuh-gi ahn-juh". Come here and sit.* (p. 249)

Sometimes, Lee's characterization of discourse in Korean involves no phonetic transliterations, yet the Koreanness of what is said is nevertheless unmistakable. When one reads, *"Spouse, she would say, you must be hungry. You come home so late. I hope we made enough money today"* (p. 51), we know that we are not in the presence of a native speaker of English. Certain thoughts also betray a mindset that the native speaker of English is not likely to express (or, at least, in these politically correct times, not publicly). For example, the

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protagonist's father takes particular pride in his Caucasian daughter-in-law, Lelia:

> Whenever he could, he always tried to stand right next to her, and then marvel at how tall and straight she was, like a fine young horse, he'd say in Korean, admiringly. (p. 53)

These instances reflect both Sternberg's "vehicular matching" and "homogenized convention" – in combination, as in those instances where transliterations are accompanied by translation; and by implication, as in those examples where stiltedness of syntax or a particularly chauvinist bias betrays the speaker as Korean.

But, when Lee needs a dramatic effect, he cannot afford to obscure or impede his character's thoughts with either explanation or contextualization. He avails himself of all the transparency he has with "homogenized convention", using only italics to indicate that what was said, as opposed to what is printed, was originally in Korean. To reflect the cultural and racial prejudice of Koreans towards blacks, he has one character say, "You know how these blacks are, always expecting special treatment" (p. 171). When Ahjuhma, the protagonist's surrogate mother-maid, refuses to have anything to do with Lelia, the American wife of her employer's son, she responds resolutely in Korean:

> "Ahjuhma," I then called to the silence, "Ahjuhma!"
>
> Finally her voice shot back, *There's nothing for your American wife and me to talk about. Will you please leave the kitchen? It is very dirty and needs cleaning* (p. 65)

Intense emotions can only be expressed in one's native language, and the critical scenes in *Native Speaker* take place in Korean, but a Korean that is fully readable and comprehensible to the non-Korean reader.

For a first-generation mother's rebuke of her second-generation son for defying his father, only her native Korean will do: *"Who do you think you are?"* And, when a father wants to elicit stern but tender filial feelings from his children, even a bicultural character like the Korean-American politician John Kwang, resorts to his native language:

> He tells them in a low Korean as they stand like soldiers before him, *You two behave tonight while I'm out. Be good to your mother. She has perished many times for you. Honor her with your obedience.* (p. 252)

It is unlikely that an American father of Caucasian descent would ever attempt a message so patronizing and paternalistic.

When Henry, the narrator-protagonist, objects to his father bringing in a woman from Korea to substitute for his mother after her death, his father's adamant inflexibility has to take on the stern Confucian aspect expected of Korean fathers:

> *Byong-ho*, he said firmly. His voice was already changing. He was shifting into Korean, getting his throat ready. Then he spoke as he rose to leave. *Let's not hear one more thing about it. The woman will come with us to the new house and take care of you. This is what I have decided. Our talk is past usefulness. There will be no other way.* (59)

This rigidity reflects not just the father's stubbornness but the obduracy of the Confucian ethos, where the father's authority in the family is unquestioned. The Korean expression of these deeply cherished values brooks no argument and reflects the virtue of the character speaking these sentiments. In the idiom of English, the same sentiment would appear intolerably tyrannical and irrational, reflecting a father as yet unenlightened by rationalism and democratic principles to engage the son in more egalitarian discourse.

And, finally, when the two principal characters in *Native Speaker*, Henry Park and John Kwang – both bicultural Korean-Americans – engage in a climactic argument towards the end of the book, one chooses Korean as the field of verbal battle – even though both have equal access to either Korean or English:

> "Well, come on! You sound like you want trouble tonight. …"
>
> "I'm not afraid of you."
>
> John cries, "You sound so formal! Even with a little hate you are so respectful and Korean."
>
> "What do you want me to sound like?"
>
> He says, in a laughing Korean, *Ah, you, I want it just like that!*
>
> "Aayeh!" I yell.
>
> He yells, *"That's much better, you! Why not yell at me? I'll allow it. Don't think of me as elder; come, strike out at me with your words, or something else. This is America, we can do this. Say it in English if you have to. Get it out in the open. You want this. I am not your father. I am not your friend. Come on. I will survive."* (p. 280)

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It is a measure of the brilliance of the novel that the clash between the two cultures begins to affect even the language spoken. The Korean used here, conventionalized and homogenized though it might be into English, now begins to take on the defiant and pugnacious accents of American English. Even though the passage begins with a primal scream in Korean – *Aayeh!* – a twofold translation takes place: not only are the words in the original Korean translated for us into English, the original Korean thoughts seem transmuted into a distinctly American vernacular. The pressure is evinced in John Kwang's invitation: *"Say it in English if you have to"* – as if Korean, and its strictures of formality and politeness and deference, were too confining for this outburst of visceral hate and outrage.

Japan in America

John Okada's 1957 novel, *No-No Boy*, concerns two Japanese-American boys: one, Ichiro, who refuses to serve in the U. S. Army because he will be forced to fight against his parents' native country; the other, Kenji, who commits himself as an American, enlists in the army, fights honorably, and returns home, with one leg amputated, crippled in body and spirit. Part of the dynamic depicted between generations is the willingness of some first-generation parents and the reluctance of others to adapt to the United States. Ichiro's mother clings to her Japanese ways, whereas Kenji's parents are more Americanized. In depicting the conversation between Ichiro and his mother, Okada skillfully conveys a foreign tongue by careful use of stilted syntax:

> "Where have you been?" she repeated harshly.
>
> "With Kenji, Kanno-san's boy." He approached the counter and faced her. "You know him."
>
> "Ahh," she said shrilly and distastefully, "that one who lost a leg. How can you be friends with such a one? He is no good." (p. 103)

Kanno-san marks the discourse immediately as Japanese. Lest we forget that we are overhearing a conversation in Japanese that is rendered in English, the context makes it perfectly clear: the *us* in the following paragraph is a translation of a *we* in Japanese:

> His discomfort seemed strangely to please her. She raised her chin perceptibly and answered: "He is not Japanese. He fought against us. He brought shame to his father and grief to himself. It is unfortunate he was not killed." (p. 103)

By subtle strokes of defamiliarized but accessible English, Okada sensitizes the reader into "hearing" Japanese in the English of the narration. He uses what Sternberg has called "mimetic cliché" in such locutions as "Kanno-san", which indelibly marks a Japanese speaker with a familiar *keigo*, or polite term of reference. The stilted, somewhat formal grammar of "Ahh. That one who lost a leg. How can you be friends with such a one?" intimates someone speaking Japanese, whose meaning is being transposed, if not translated, for us. The unfluent English captures some of the formality of spoken Japanese. The deictic reference of the third-person in "He is not Japanese" is the more forceful if we remember or imagine that this is being said in Japanese; and the thrust of "He fought against us" clearly implies a betrayal of the ethnicity represented by the (Japanese) medium of conversation.

Deictic uses of *we* and *us* are particularly misleading when translated, and an example from Chinese may serve to illustrate this. The pronoun *wǒmen* in Chinese may be translated as 'we', and serve in turn to translate it, but the two are not strictly equivalent. Psycholinguistically, therefore, the English phrase "we Chinese" is not equivalent to "*wǒmen hanren*", nor is *wǒmen meiguo ren* exactly rendered by "we Americans".

It is precisely the patriotism of the protagonists that is at issue in *No-No Boy*, and it is the ambivalence of their identities that must be reflected in the language they use. Ichiro has rejected his identity as an American by refusing to enlist in the U.S. Army. Kenji has rejected *his* identity as a Japanese by sacrificing a limb in being willing to fight for the United States against the Japanese. That tension, that conflict, cannot be properly appreciated if the reader does not "hear" the Japanese language in the English. Since the crux of the novel is the contrast between Japanese-Americans who are more American than Japanese, and some of their parents, who are only Japanese (despite their long sojourn in the United States), Okada needs to establish different registers – of idiomaticity and formality – for conversations in English and in Japanese.

At the beginning of the novel, for example, Ichiro Yamada meets an army buddy whom he'd rather not meet: a totally Americanized

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Japanese-American named Eto Minato. "Itchy!" Eto Minato calls after Ichiro, using a nickname both phonetically apt and semantically annoying. "What the hell!" Eto Minato says, "It's been a long time, but not that long. How've you been been? What's doing?" The accent and the register are unmistakably American, even aggressively so. That this chauvinistic stance is crucial becomes even more manifest in the diatribe that follows, which is both touching and obnoxious:

> "Last time must have been before Pearl Harbor. God, it's been quite a while, hasn't it? Three, no, closer to four years, I guess. Lotsa Japs coming back to the Coast. Lotsa Japs in Seattle. You'll see 'em around. Japs are funny that way. Gotta have their rice and saké and other Japs. Stupid, I say. The smart ones went to Chicago and New York and lotsa places back east, but there's still plenty coming back out this way."

The racial slur, "Japs", can only be unidirectional and monolingual: there is no equivalent in Japanese. One cannot translate "Japs" from English to Japanese, for that would assume a stance external to Japanese. Clearly, Eto Minato's language is ironic because he willfully submerges his own Japanese heritage, and distances his birth culture by referring to it in terms not unlike an American bigot of non-Japanese descent. His allegiance to the United States exacts from him the obligation to share its prejudices, even if it is against people whose origins he shares. "Gotta have their rice and saké and other Japs," Eto says, which assumes that he has no shred of Japanese identity in him at all. By contrast, Okada presents – even in English – a more gentle, more refined style when transmitting discourse, presumably spoken in Japanese, to the reader in English:

> "Ichiro?" The short, round man who came through the curtains at the back of the store uttered the name preciously as might an old woman. "Ya, Ichiro, you have come home. How good that you have come home!" The gently spoken Japanese which he had not heard for so long sounded strange. He would hear a great deal of it now that he was home, for his parents, like most of the old Japanese, spoke virtually no English. (pp. 6-7)

There is, of course, a characterizational bias on Okada's part, because he wants to show the non-English-speaking first-generation Japanese with more sympathy than they would get from their second-generation, English-only offspring. The hermeticism of language is such that foreign languages if accurately represented or literally translated will always come across as alien in the language of publication. As such, any deviation from the language of presentation may well exemplify a socially inferior position – "If he's so smart, why doesn't he speak good English?" is the usual ramification of this logocentric attitude. The anti-hegemonic thrust of Okada's writing is embodied in the selectively refined "Japanese" discourse contrasted with the vulgar and idiomatic "American" discourse. The achievement is, ironically, that he makes spoken Japanese more sympathetic in English than spoken American English.

China in America

Some 35 years later, in his novel, *Donald Duk*, (1991) *Frank Chin*, a Chinese-American writer, adopts several approaches, and posits a partially bilingual audience, one that understands a certain amount of Cantonese as well as English. His first strategy is to offer transliteration alongside translation (or exposition), to give a sense of the sounds involved:

> Mr. Doong calls to Uncle Donald Duk splashing and sizzling at a wok all his own. The words lob out of his mouth like military commands. "Ah-Sifu!" (Maestro in Cantonese to Donald's Dad.) "Ah-King sook ahhh! Aha! Ah-Sook!" (Familiar but very respectful.) "*Ho see fot choy*. What an honor it is for me to see you working at your art!" (p. 64)

The use of the word *wok*, unitalicized, reflects the author's sense that the reader is already familiar with this typically Chinese all-purpose stir-fry pan. With the proper transliteration and uncanny parsing, Chin renders faithfully the cadence and rhythm of spoken Cantonese. He relies on the Cantonese known at least in urban America, and translates what may not be familiar.

Elsewhere, he adopts a different strategy, of not merely pointing out that languages are different, but of spotlighting the extra-semantic differences between languages: he depicts the enunciated overtones of each language:

> "Like in my restaurants," Dad says, "I don't say *sliced cross-section broccoli spear alternate with slices of Virginia ham and chicken breast*. Sounds too laboratory science. Who wants to eat some kind of autopsy? Ugh! So, I say *Jade Tree Golden Smoke Ham and Chicken*. In Chinese, oh, it sounds even more beautiful. *Yuke shur gum wah faw tur gai kow*. Jade tree. Sounds so

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pretty you don't feel bad about paying too much money to eat broccoli." (p. 125)

The bilingual reader invoked is presumed to be proficient in both English and Cantonese and the reader, whatever his limitations, sees provisionally from a Cantonese-American perspective. There may be some "exoticization" at work, where English-only readers will experience the ineffable (not to say inscrutable) Orient, but Chin's project is precisely to undercut this kind of Orientalism with his asides and his contextual triangulations, so that by inference and from the glosses supplied, we are equipped with enough information to divine the meaning, even if we don't understand Cantonese. The experience of reading is, in a sense, to become Cantonese-American, even if we are not.

Linguistic exoticism plays a larger role in Chin's portrayal of Cantonese-accented English, yet even here, the view of the character is intended to be interior rather than exterior:

> The old bald waiter at Uncle's pops out of the swinging door to the kitchen with plates of food in each hand and more plates stacked up his arms. He throws grabeyes onto people lined up to get in and breathlessly includes them in his constant patter as he lays out hot breakfasts and calls orders into the kitchen. "You hammaneck over ease, sticky potatoes. You by you'self! Sit right dere! Don't afraid! Sit! Yeah! Sit! Beckon anna scramboo, ricee no grave. Oh, Ah-King Sifu! Maestro! How many? Five! Wow! I kick somebody out for you, but bad for business to do things like that. But if you can't wait."
>
> "We can wait, Ah-Bok," Dad says, calling the baldhead Old Uncle. That's a lot of respect.
>
> "Pork chop, poachecks, Frenchie fries, you. Sausage patties, sunnyside ups. Okay. You a waffoo. I get the syrup, don't worry." (p. 147)

Any reader who has encountered, at one time or another, a "Chinatown" proprietor in an English-speaking country will be able to make out some of the accents involved. We recognize these phrases: "hammaneck over ease" is the Chinglish for "ham and eggs over easy"; "Beckon anna scramboo" is "bacon and scrambled [eggs]"; "poachecks" turns out to be "poached eggs"; and "waffoo" is "waffles".

Chin manages to counteract the general Chinese disdain for Chinatown Cantonese by exploring its literary roots. The following passage refers to the "doughnuts" or "fritters" known in other parts of China as *you tiao* (literally, "oil sticks" or "oil strips"):

Donald Duk then asks his father: "Why do you call them you jow gwai?", and his father replies:

> ... They cut and twist the dough for *yow jow gwai,* the doughnuts known as *demons boiled in oil*. (p.140)
>
> "Ngawk Fay is a soldier in old China. . . .some bad guys make Ngawk Fay look like he desert the army and is a traitor. Ngawk Fay's mother tells him to go to the Emperor and show him his back, and she tattoos words, a slogan on his back, something like *Forever loyal to the Emperor and the nation*. Doesn't work. The Emperor wants to cut off his head. Ngawk Fay hides out and is betrayed by a married couple. They gink on him for the reward. The people give them their own reward. They call the double doughnut *yow jow gwai* and deep fry that couple and cut them up and eat them in jook every day, they hate them so much. And that's the story of *yow jow gwai*." (p. 141).

This is not only an interlingual story, it's an interdialectal story. There is no such story behind the name for these breakfast crullers in Mandarin. Only in Cantonese does their name conjure up an entire literary allusion. That this story, familiar to the Chinese, is now rendered in the American colloquial gives it a special flavor, both a multilingual and a multicultural flavor that mere exegesis would miss. The story is told not as exotica, fascinating as it might be to those unfamiliar with it, but as a motif deeply embedded in the speaker's culture, even though he is recounting it in a language totally foreign to the original context. The differences in language are exploited for their rich complexity, and not as annoying deviations from the norm. Colloquial Cantonese and idiomatic English sit side by side at the language table, equal partners in the fiction. The reader enjoys both the easy access to the story, and the fascination of something new, or of something familiar presented in a new linguistic guise.

The brilliance of Chin's writing is that he manages to enact a Cantonese-accented English without demeaning the character who speaks it and with no narrative condescension. His ethnic locutions are not presented as solecisms, deviations from standard (correct) speech. They are as literary as the rural accents of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, the adolescent slang of J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, the Chicago street patois of Saul Bellow's Augie March, or the black vernacular of Mark Twain's Nigger Jim.

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Conclusion

These examples from Lee, Okada and Chin are illustrations of how ethnic fictions create bicultural, if not bilingual readers. Certainly, Lee as a Korean-American, Okada as a Japanese-American, and Chin as a Chinese-American have an axe to grind against WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) imperialism and prejudices in the United States. Their challenge as authors is to somehow provide a comprehensible anti-hegemonic discourse within the dominant discourse, which in this case is primarily English.

Multiethnic literature illustrates the difficulties of a facile distinction between colonial and anti-colonial, between a hegemonic and an anti-hegemonic language. In some ways bicultural works require authors either to create new techniques for conveying the linguistic features of a minority language, or to assume from the outset access to a bilingual audience. To do this without falling into caricature (as in pidgin English) or exoticism (as with the Charlie Chan movies) is all the more difficult when language prejudices (whether of grammar, accent, or pronunciation) prevail. Minority discourse in English must retain its vividness without condescension or else it becomes anthropological documents rather than works of the imagination, ethnography rather than literature, resulting in what would be, ironically, the cruelest hegemony – taking ethnic writers and marginalizing them.

Native Speaker, *No-No Boy* and *Donald Duk* describe cultures as indigenous as Joyce's Dublin and as authentic as Hardy's Wessex. They are no more quaint than *Ulysses* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. ■

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In Swiss governance, English is a must, says *Swiss Review*

The remarkable spread in the knowledge and use of English in all aspects of Swiss society over the last few years has now reached the government in Berne.

A working understanding of English is a must for members of the Federal Council – Switzerland's Seven Wise Men – according to one of their number, the head of the Department of Economic Affairs, Pascal Couchepin.

In an interview with *SonntagsBlick* he said: "I would advise any future federal councillor to take an intensive English course of at least two weeks between their election and taking office."

And his views are repeated in the latest issue of the official government publication, *The Swiss Confederation: A Brief Guide*.

The minister himself certainly practises what he preaches. His own knowledge of English is very good, even if he speaks it with a noticeable French accent.

He is an avid reader of English, taking complex books in his stride and going through his daily copy of the *Financial Times* from cover to cover.

One man who is in a good position to vouch for the economic minister's linguistic ability is the department's head of communications, who goes by the very English-sounding name of Robin Tickle.

"He gets lots of English-speaking visitors," he said, "and has no trouble in switching to English when necessary. Today there are very few people in the federal council who have little contact with the international scene."

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