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Repairing a Spider's Web by Hand: Thirteen Propositions about Subalternity and Language

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Abstract:

The argument I make in this study is as follows: Language is both a site of struggle and its covering over, where standardization naturalises (epistemic) violence. This violation is especially so in relation to the subalterns' (sub) "dialects"/"languages", and is compounded by diglossia, so much so their "own" voices are systemically denied them. Subalternity is a space where persistent "mistakes" and "nonsense" mark everyday resistance, which, if taken seriously, will undo the very normative basis of language as relatively neutral arbiter of the spectrum of (extra-linguistic) value. Of the 13 propositions presented, the first four relate to subalternity and subaltern studies, while the next nine discuss language norms which seek to address issues that surfaced in the first four.

It is now a truism that language in its broader sense is the only access we have to everything outside of ourselves, not to mention our access to ourselves (or to use Wittgenstein's beautiful but now trivialized phrase "my language is my world") in the philosophical sense. This language in the narrow sense is also the vehicle, witting or unwitting, of values and ideology that, historically and today, have taken sides. Or, in a less theoretical formulation, the fact that 'villain' originally meant 'peasant' and 'blackguard' derived from 'kitchen worker' only goes to show just who is winning the war of words – power is ultimately the ability to make meaning stick and to do this one has to be heard. Thus, standardization adds another more insidious dimension to this struggle, since it controls and regulates structure, pronunciation, register, style, and so on, which serves to exclude many (non-elite) voices.

The hardest part for us, within these dominant paradigms, is, of course, the unlearning of our privilege in/through language. In the twenty or so years that I have been discussing these ideas with academics, teachers, intellectuals and anyone interested, the most persistent anxiety has centred around this issue of the (the loss of) authority/control, through it is invariably couched in worries about 'What will be taught in the classroom, then?' or 'Who will decide what is right and wrong?' I have argued that in this broader standard, linguistic insecurity will diminish, and with it many of the blatantly classist elements of language in society. If it comes to the stage where (almost) anything goes, and where meaning is the arbiter of acceptance, and where it is extremely difficult to reject one kind of usage in favour of another, then language would have become as level as it would get, which is not much.

*Here we come full cycle, then, to the point at which our aim – as teachers of the standard, bearers of the torch etc. – is to destabilize, broaden this standard towards the creation of a situation where the onus is on us to learn (or rather unlearn) to read our students' persistent errors as resistance with or without demonstrable intention, and to respect its radical difference. Ours was the privilege, as linguists, teachers, codifiers, standard bearers and so on to confer the privilege of language on these other Calibans so that their profit on't was to curse us in it. Let the roles be reversed: Let us learn their (version of) language to earn the right to the privilege of ours. Otherwise, we're simply acting out the words of Wittgenstein: a crack is showing in the [system's] foundation, and we're trying to stuff it with straw, but to quieten our conscience we're using only the **best** straw.*

Keywords: Standardization, Subaltern, Wittgenstein, Gramsci, Sri Lankan English, First Language.

"My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that it patent nonsense." Wittgenstein, PI #464
This study is on the margins, because it cannot claim to have an insider's perspective. It is asymmetrically inside-out and outside-in, as only marginality can be. Academically I'm a sociolinguist, doing "development work" as conflict and human rights specialist, but not-fitting-in is what I do best. It is also on the margins of my own work today, as I juggle academe with international civil service and so-called community empowerment work. This, then, the downside of marginality as theoretical construct, as it is forced to appear as dilettante and dabbler, even when it is at its most rigorous and theoretically original, not that I'm making these claims for my work! This, then, is also its strength because it is less caught in the re-narrowing confines of contemporary disciplinarization, as I suggest subalternity is in a much more serious and fundamental way.

The argument I make in this study is as follows: Language¹ is both a site of struggle and its covering over, where standardization naturalises (epistemic) violence. This violation is especially so in relation to the subalterns' (sub) "dialects"/ "languages", and is compounded by diglossia, so their "own" voices are systemically denied them. Subalternity is a space where persistent "mistakes" and "nonsense" mark everyday resistance, which, if taken seriously, will undo the very normative basis of language as relatively neutral arbiter of the spectrum of (extra-linguistic) value.

The first four "propositions" relate to subalternity and subaltern studies, while the next nine discuss language norms which seek to address issues that surfaced in the first four. Since these are generalizations, deliberately risked, nothing would make me happier than the pointing out of exceptions and counter-examples which go against the grain of these claims and the dominant trends they seek to describe. For my part, I use examples from Sri Lanka and English, but this is only a measure of my own parochiality.

1. While a great deal of work has been done on different aspects of subalternity in the 30 years since "Subaltern Studies" emerged as a self-conscious "collective", there appears to be a relative silence on the relationship between subalternity and language *per se*. In my view, this is because neither the subalternists nor Gramsci were able to theorise, to any depth or nuance, how subalternity affected language use, especially in relation to standardization and meaning-making in and out of colonialism.[See 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 below]

However, this lack of interest by Subaltern Studies in language is surprising, given the fact that Gramsci, from whom the concept itself is borrowed, himself made extensive connections between language and subaltern common sense. This "omission" has long been seen as a grievance by Gramsci scholars: "there is a fascinating silence concerning Antonio Gramsci's writings on language and translation despite his wide ranging and profound influence, particularly in fields and debates in which language features prominently such as post structuralism and cultural studies."² Green and Ives specifically bemoan that "postcolonial scholars, and especially the subaltern studies group" have never "connected substantially to Gramsci's own writings on language politics" and "Gramsci's own concentration on this very question of subaltern speech." [p. 7].

A number of reasons can account for this: (a) the fact that much of this work is in English and basically only uses Gramsci in readily-available English translation, which contains little of his linguistic study; and (b) Gramsci's conception of the "subaltern" served only as a launching pad for the early subalternists, who gradually moved away from his monolithic category of all those who are non-elite ("the people") to "persons or groups cut off from upward – and in a sense 'outward' – social mobility."

As I don't have access here to Gramsci's individual Notebooks and do not read Italian, I regret that I rely on others to summarise and translate Gramsci's writing on language. The following account is taken mainly from Green and Ives' influential 2009 article, and will be revised in future versions of this paper.

While Gramsci has respect for 'peasant culture' and 'subaltern common sense', according to Kate Crehan, "he was never sentimental about it, seeing it both as narrow and parochial, and needing to be transcended" [Crehan 2002, p. 98]. Gramsci's distinction between the "explicit" and "implicit" conceptions of the world, described "as the contrast between thought and action; between a conception of the world 'borrowed from another group' that is affirmed verbally; and that of action, though it may only manifest itself 'occasionally and in flashes' and it perhaps only 'embryonic'" [Green and Ives, 2009, p. 5, citing Gramsci 1971, pp. 326-7, Q11 #12].

The transformation of the condition of subalternity requires not the elimination of common sense but the critique and transformation of it [7]. Thus, the critique of common sense functions as an elementary phase in the struggle for hegemony. In Liguori's words: 'Revolutionary theory is born *against* existing common sense [7]. Thus, in Gramsci's view, common sense is one of the factors that hinders the ability of subaltern groups to assert political autonomy and to overcome their subordination. Gramsci suggests that common sense needs to become critical. He has both positive and negative assessments of 'common sense' which he relates to the fragmented conditions of subalternity and subaltern languages and sees the movement from there to non-fragmented consciousness and truly popular common language through greater awareness that is facilitated by organic intellectual leadership [9].

In other words, the Gramscian notion of 'common sense' can be understood as popular social thought or as the common beliefs and opinions held by ordinary people. In some ways, common sense can be understood as the mentality or psychology of the masses [Colucci 1999, cited in Green and Ives 2009, p. 10]. Gramsci also sees language as an important element of common sense. He goes as far as stating that "language also means culture and philosophy (if only at the level of common sense)." [Gramsci 1971 p. 349, Q10 II #44, cited in Green and Ives, p. 10]

There is, thus, an ambiguity in Gramsci's writing about the nature of subaltern language and common sense. The dominant thrust is that subaltern common sense is fragmented and imprecise and hence that it needs to be improved and systematized (with the help of organic intellectuals).³ So too with subaltern language. Yet, at the same time Gramsci opposes Manzini's move to impose a standard Italian language based on privileging the Florentine Dialect.⁴

However, he is a strong supporter of the need for a single language to unite all Italy and especially all Italy's subalterns. Yet, he has an idealistic hope that this shared common language will naturally appear or develop, and be accepted consensually. For this to happen, he has to believe that the unifying standard is patently superior to other varieties of Italian. This is a common ideologically-produced understanding of the standard which is without sociolinguistic merit.

¹The concept metaphor of repairing a torn spider's web using one's fingers comes from Wittgenstein (PI # 106).

²Gramsci, Language & Translation, eds. Peter Ives & Rocco Lacorte, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010, p. 1

³The point is that subaltern "fragmentation" for Gramsci is not a product of the imposition of elite discourse or the methodological inadequacies of non-subaltern appropriation, but it related directly to ideological problems and other deficiencies of the subalterns themselves.

⁴In a letter to his sister Gramsci argues that her children are best off speaking their home Sardinian dialect.

Gramsci shares many key insights into the nature and function of language. For instance, he is able to clearly identify the fundamental sociality of language and comes close to Wittgenstein's revolutionary thesis which I will here oversimplify as "meaning as use".⁵ It is, therefore, most disappointing that he uncritically maintains and reinforces the received wisdom on the hierarchy between language and standard in the following celebrated passage, quoted no less than three times in Ives and Lacorte:

Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the other major currents of thought which dominate world history. His interests will be limited, more or less corporate or economic, not universal. While it is not always possible to learn a number of foreign languages in order to put oneself in contact with other cultural lives, it is at the least necessary to learn the national language properly. A great culture can be translated into the language of another great culture, that is to say a great national language with historical richness and complexity, and it can translate any other great culture and can be a world-wide means of expression. But a dialect cannot do this [Q11 #12, SPN 325]

A charitable explanation would be that Gramsci the linguist is here subordinated to Gramsci the revolutionary who requires the instrumental unity that a common language and nationalist agenda will provide. He seems to want the public to organise themselves around a language, and in this instance adherence to dialects is seen as divisive. But this is realpolitik, not principle. Otherwise, the claims made are untenable. Translatability is not a function of language or dialect, all the more since these very distinctions are political, not substantive. It is not helpful, as noted by Luigi Rosiello, to suggest that this avoids the romanticizing of the masses' dialect as "expression of uncontaminated popular genuineness that is typical of romantic and populist ideology." Surely, all languages/dialects are equally (in)adequate to represent the life experiences of their members? Gramsci's prefiguring of EFL/ESL's terminology ("fossilised" for instance) is clear evidence of a shared colonialist prejudice [See 8 and 9 below].

The concern here is that the political and ideological hierarchy among dialects and languages is taken on board as an inherent superiority in terms of the quality and fit of the standard (or national) language over its less-than-equals.

- Gramsci's ambiguity towards the subaltern (non-elite public) use of language, as a necessary stage and yet defective and inadequate by itself, requiring the imposition of normative standards by a benevolent intellectual/scholar is symptomatic of much expert thinking on the subject even today. This is clearly an evolutionary model of language in which the subaltern is lower on the cline than the educated elites, and where "great" [more evolved, no doubt] cultures should be imitated by "lesser" ones. [See 7, 8, 9, 10 below]

For Wittgenstein, this notion of "common sense" has resonances, and certainly the relationship between common sense and "philosophy," the conclusions Gramsci and Wittgenstein draw are very different. For Gramsci, by and large, the subaltern was defective because his common sense fell short of philosophy. For Wittgenstein, it was ordinary language that was necessary to salvage philosophy from problems created by "philosophizing." The task of philosophy was to "let the fly out of the bottle" it was trapped in. It was to recognise when "language goes on holiday." This explicit valuing of the ordinary everyday use of language as the real home of words, and not the artificial space of philosophic theory that marks Wittgenstein's (second) revolution. Using the currency and sense-in-use of language, Wittgenstein sets out to clear the detritus that has been created by the confusions and worse engendered by philosophizing. To be sure, language is extremely complex since false analogies and pitfalls abound. In this sense, language use⁶, when carefully understood, is the corrective against all sorts of flights of fancy.

Rosiello explains Gramsci's position very clearly: "Perhaps in Gramsci, there is no full theoretical awareness of how to use the two terms: 'language' [lingua] and 'speech' [linguaggio] (Saussure's definitions were not operating). However, I believe that we can still interpret Gramsci's thought by saying that if on the one hand, language [lingua] can express one culture in its whole entirety and concrete realizations, on the other hand, single 'languages' [linguaggio] can be analysed only in relation to concrete and differentiated communicative situations on the ground of the real sociocultural conditions." This hierarchy between national language and dialects mirrors his hierarchy between dominant and folkloric culture. This also begs the question of the unquestioned merit of "the national" as a valid and egalitarian entity.

Wittgenstein does not appear to have anything specific to say about standardization or the politics of language, no doubt because he did not think of these issues as important to understanding the nature of language *per se*. His explanation of how children learn to speak is clear, however, and here his emphasis is on training as distinct from explanation.⁷ The point is that the stage-setting for even the simplest of language use is extensive. In PI # 198, he asserts that even in reading a sign post, "I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it." Unfortunately for us, Wittgenstein is not interested in *how* this training is carried out, which would be the beginning point of our study of the work of hegemony in language. Instead, he asserts, "Well, I assume that he acts as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere" [#1]. Yes, indeed, but it is where explanations end that hegemony hangs out.

What he does say more generally about language games (which share no more than family resemblances with each other) in terms of how an excessive zeal for (simplistic) clarity can be counter-productive and misplaced is very important, however, for understanding

⁵Amartya Sen has pointed to the connections between Wittgenstein and Gramsci, but much more work needs to be done in this regard. See Amartya Sen, "Sraffa, Wittgenstein and Gramsci", *Journal of Economic Literature* 41 (Dec 2003): 1240 – 55.

⁶It is important to distinguish Wittgenstein's analysis from Austin's. Wittgenstein does not exclude any form of usage – in fact he is at pains to understand counter-examples and unique instances – whereas Austin only deals with literal examples as somehow more important and primary, a position that Derrida so powerfully critiques.

⁷See Hunter, p. 194.

the vexed space of “subalternity”. In PI #71 he has a startling (because it appears counter-intuitive) insight, which, if we pay careful attention to our everyday language practice, is common-sensical:

One can say that the concept of a game is a concept with blurred edges. – “But is a blurred concept a *concept* at all?” – Is a photograph that is not sharp a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace a picture that is not sharp by one that is? Isn’t one that isn’t sharp often just what we need?

His understanding of ordinary language is very different from Gramsci’s. For Wittgenstein the best arbiter of correct use is ordinary language, not special registers or learned refinements.

We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order for a particular purpose, one out of many possible orders, not *the* order. For this purpose, we shall again and again *emphasize* distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook. This may make it appear as if we saw it as our task to reform language.

Such a reform for particular practical purposes, an improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, may well be possible. But these are not the cases we are dealing with. The confusions which occupy us arise when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work. [PI #132]

We don’t want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of the words in unheard-of ways.

For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. [PI 3133]

This sums up his agenda, which is to render philosophy redundant, since “philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language.” [109]

3. Extrapolating from Marx, the “defective” form of language (the not-yet-standardized) is the least deceptive, the most sensitive index of what language does. This insight runs counter to both Wittgenstein and Gramsci, who in different ways value the standard.[See 5, 6, 9, 11 below]

And, yet, what I am suggesting in my Theory of Marginality is precisely that the insider’s perspective is limited by the rules of the game, the panoply of rituals, the observance of which obfuscates or takes so much for granted. The insider critique cannot be as far-reaching or as fundamental as the critique that is thrown up from the margin. I have written elsewhere and have spoken at length about what I presumptuously call “A Theory of Dysfunction / Breakdown / Crisis” where the Non-Standard contaminates the Norm, preventing the operation of business as usual. I formulated this position in relation to an examination of Standard Language, Dominant Discourse, Hegemony, which led, willy nilly, to a theory of (subaltern) resistance.

This opposition, sometimes as persistent error, is the process of ‘De-Hegemonisation’ a jaw-breaking term for which, alas, I take all the blame as unorganised even unwitting resistance, as opposed to the structured and wilful counter-hegemony theorized by Gramsci. In my view, the rules of the game are broken most fundamentally by those who do not really know or understand them, those who are outside the realm of its inner logic. Those of us who have learnt the rules and the rationalizations cannot perform this trick which is neither wilful mis-understanding nor accidental forgetfulness.

What I am suggesting is that the very standards and norms, the system of assigning value, and hence the very structure of the system can only be questioned from the outside, or more precisely the inside/outside location of the margin. Thus, the smooth well-oiled running of the standard language in the case of my original study, or, more generally, of dominant discourse within the disciplinary enclave to which rites of passage are crucial, is predicated on certain bedrock premises that must be accepted by all those within its ambit, so to speak. In this sense, critique-as-negotiation is only possible within the rules of the game.

My contention is that it is precisely the rules of the game as accepted, as transparent, as undeniable, as self-evident that hide our complicity, that cover-up, dissimulate the question of crisis or struggle, hegemony, hierarchy, self-interest. Just as standard language dissimulates and camouflages the self-interest of the elite as somehow being naturally better, superior or clearer, more easily understood, more universal than the non-standard (called deviant, unnatural, ugly, fossilized), so too within the disciplines themselves, the dominant discourse smoothes over the possibility of radical, overarching protest.

Paradoxically, ironically, it is only when the system breaks down that we can see how it really works. I tend to use homologies from the mundane everyday to explain what must appear counter-intuitive to some. I will rehearse them more briefly because I do not have time for the extended critique of the standard here.⁸ If one were to suggest to a US child that the secret of electricity resides in a light switch, this may not seem too far-fetched. The uncomplicated, easy process of putting a switch on or off invariably produces or ceases to produce light. And I must say that I have tried this on some young US children. There is no problem. They accept the simple magic of the switch before they are taught that it is not so.

But I think a Sri Lankan child, who lives in an environment where there is electricity, knows better, precisely because the system breaks down only too often. There are innumerable occasions when the switch is put on and there are no lights, and so on. There are power cuts, surges, spikes, bursts, bombs, and a whole panoply of problems which negate the possibility of a simple (mis)understanding of electricity that ‘there is some magic residing in the switch’. It is precisely the propensity of the system to break down that leaves even the most complacent learner to contemplate the fact that the smooth operation of a switch hides a large network or web of technology, the harnessing of hydro, thermal or nuclear power and so much human labour.

Similarly, consider the example of the motor car. And here I think I am on slippery ground as I know nothing about cars. My sense is, however, that for many people, as long as a car works one will be able to imagine, to be comfortable, to believe the notion that a car naturally only needs petrol (or diesel as the case may) be to function. It’s only when it breaks down that one realises what a

⁸See Parakrama, Arjuna De-Hegemonising Language Standards: Learning from (Post)Colonial Englishes about “English” London: Macmillan, 1995.

complicated thing it is, in fact, and that one should have done this or that or the other and looked at this and that and the other earlier. Again, the issue of human labour. These are non-academic examples, but nonetheless, I think they show one, deceptively easily perhaps, that when the system works it does not require any deeper knowledge. The functioning of the system is a disincentive to a thorough-going understanding of its inner workings. It may be appropriate here to provide one more example, this time legitimately academic, but yet taken from the margins of a magisterial text, and used, unashamedly, outside the proper space of its origin:⁹

There is a way of reading Marx's description of the forms of value as a justification for the study of non-standard discourse where the 'system' does not work smoothly. The non-standard discourse, or in this sense the *entire* system of discourse, including both standard and non-standard forms, is homologous with Marx's Total or Expanded Form of Value (*Capital*, vol. I, pp. 154ff) where 'the value of a commodity, the linen for example, is now expressed in terms of innumerable other members of the world of commodities' (p. 155). This process is cumbersome and always incomplete, hence an equivalent form is derived, which in turn becomes the universal equivalent or money form. Now, the money form is the most efficient and smooth-running, yet this very efficacy tends to hide the real comparison of human labour expended:

- It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities – the money form – which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly. If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots bring these commodities into a relation with linen, or with gold or silver (and this makes no difference here), as the universal equivalent, the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society appears to them in exactly this absurd form. (pp. 168-69)
- It may, therefore, be useful to study this 'defective' form of value – the total expanded form of value – in order to see precisely what gets covered over if the system is to work smoothly. By analogy, the non-standard forms of language are clumsy and defective in the sense that there is no single uniform equivalence: the parameters keep shifting and context is all-important. It is here, moreover, that the struggles for control become evident because there is no 'neutral' form to dissimulate or displace this. Marx was interested in studying general exploitation and thus had to analyse the general system, whereas in the specific case of language it may be therapeutic to examine, selectively, the specific links of the cumbersome chain that comprises the total expanded form of discourse in a given society [82 – 83].

So much for my homespun theory of crisis. By implication, it would follow that in order to better understand identity, one should examine its articulation in situations of crisis, as opposed to situations where there is no problem. Language as such, identity as such, marginality as such, the privileged origin as such, all these can be better viewed from the vantage point of their most bitter contestations.

If it is clear that the margin is a more useful place to be in order to examine the dominant paradigms, one should also strike a cautionary note here. The margin is not a space one can inhabit at will, nor is it dispensable at a whim. The alibi of marginality does not provide *carte blanche* for now-nothingism or cavalier trashing of the centre. In fact, the critique that flaunts its marginality must be doubly careful that it observes all the old rules. After all, disciplinary marginality is not the radical marginality of the subaltern.¹⁰ Again, in a double-irony, the critique from within is more difficult because it draws blood, while the performance from the margin has less at stake, and can be steadfastly ignored.

Regrettably, mainstream "Marxist" work on language has not been either influential or original, except for Volosinov (and Gramsci). Stalin did much to pre-empt and stultify language study through his simplistic "common sense" dogmas.¹¹ Aside from the unhelpful platitude about the materiality of language and agreement on linguistic class struggle and linguistic imperialism, this is perhaps the most important contribution: "linguistic interpellation: the main function of language ... is not communication but subjectification/subjectation, the interpellation of individuals into subject, and the counter-interpellation by the interpellation by the interpellated subjects. We have come a long way from Stalin's common sense" [485]. Not enough and too far at the same time. Lecercle states, "there is a science of linguistics that should be left alone by Marxists" [474].

4. Subalterns are characterised as not having access to lines of social mobility [Spivak 2012], and while this systemic exclusion and/or marginalization is discursive and epistemic as well as political and economic, it is also predicated on language discrimination. While subaltern analysis has invariably pointed to the need for using non-dominant languages and for going beyond *lingua francas*, there seems to be little understanding of issues such as diglossia that create hierarchies within a language, which further discriminates against the subaltern.[See 11, 12, 13 below]

⁹Parakrama, *ibid.* pp. 82-3.

¹⁰See Spivak, "Supplementing Marxism" in Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg eds. *Whither Marxism? Global Crisis in International Perspective* New York: Routledge, 1995 p. 115: "(Subalternity is the name I borrow for the space out of any serious touch with the logic of capitalism or socialism, the differential logic I have touched on earlier. Please do not confuse it with unorganised labour, women as such, the proletariat, the colonized, the object of ethnography, migrant labour, political refugees etc. Nothing useful comes of this confusion. The word becomes useless then, not that a useless word is necessarily a bad thing when we pause to ponder.)"

¹¹See Lecercle's analysis on Stalin's pamphlet, *On Marxism in Linguistics* [which was originally a series of article in *Pravda in Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*. William's chapter on language in *Marxism and Literature* is, of course, important, and *Keywords* is a Marxist project in the best sense. Habermas not so.

I believe Professor Gayatri Spivak goes furthest in demonstrating that the subaltern's disconnect with the nationalist project is inextricably tied, but not limited, to their exclusion from national language(s). She asks "Why is the first learned language so important? Because it activates the public-private in every human infant, allows the negotiation of the public and the private outside of the public-private divide as we have inherited it from the legacy of European history. (Indeed, the "private" here is not even underived animal comfort, but metapsychological – inaccessible, catachrestic.) Language has a history; it is public before our births and will continue so after our deaths. Yet every infant invents it and makes it the most private thing, touching the very interiority of the heart. On a more superficial level it is this underived private that nationalism appropriates."¹² She points out that there are 850 first languages in India, and yet there are many thousands more dialects and varieties homogenized and devalued within this number. "First language", then, as Spivak infers, is a complex and even misleading shorthand, which smuggles in hegemony (the first among unequals within "a language" which is itself an arbitrary but innocent classification) and thereby denies the subaltern access even to her own "language" because it is itself subsumed, captured, erased under another "first language".

One is reminded of Massimo d'Azeleglio's dictum, "Italy is a fact, now we need to make Italians" because the "making" of subjects is much easier, even natural, if they are from non-subaltern groups whose languages and histories already share in the unveiling of the nation-state. For those linguistically, historically, socio-economically outside this process, nationalism is often an exorbitant space, invariably mistaken as the other. It is exemplified by the Nepali dalit from the terai or tribal from the mountains asking whether the benevolent visitor bearing gifts has come from Nepal.

Yet, while the child's relationship to her first language is *prior* to language-as-a-site of struggle, and in this sense pre-political, it is also the basis on which the politicality of language – all language – is overdetermined. Paradoxically, then, this prior (first)and individually unique (yet inevitable) relationship that each child originates with her first language (not accidentally mistheorized as "mother tongue" spoken "natively") is pre-figured and marks the classed, gendered, regioned nature of that language/variety/dialect she is learning to use.

More work needs to be done to understand the relationship between the child's internalizing of her first language and the location of this variety/dialect/language within national linguistic hierarchies (deliberately de-politicized by an interested discipline as "prestige"). What is clear, preliminarily at least, is that when the child's first/original language is off the national radar (or ghettoized within it), and affords little interaction with the spectrum of national and regional languages, the ground for subalternization is set. Importantly, there are groups who claim more than one "first language" and those whom others claim have no real legitimacy as "native speakers" of any language, and these marginal instances may provide key insights into the linguistic sacred cow of first/native language userhood (Parakrama, *ibid.*).

Yet, I'm unclear at present how a child's initial epistemological access to language (which is different from simplistic psychological identification, which I believe Spivak is not taking about here) situates and influences broader (adult) language use. In the book chapter which fleshes out this section, I will examine the problematic through the *Adivasi* language of Sri Lanka's *Vedda* community, which after Spivak, I suggest derives from prakrit, but has been described, ideologically, as a Sinhala creole within dominant Lankan linguistics.

5. Standards always discriminate against the many and favour the few. Hence, the broader and more inclusive the standard, the less it oppresses. There is no theoretical basis or linguistic evidence to support the premise that a narrower standard is better than a broader one, nor for the thesis that there is a definable outer limit beyond which the standard ceases to be effective. Yet, this discussion is not even on the table yet. This is, therefore, evidence that standardization is a political process fundamental to ensuring elite hegemony. Standards are arbitrary but not innocent, and since all standards discriminate (against women, minorities, multiply marginal groups, and subalterns always) the broadest local standard is the least iniquitous.

The predominant, if not often explicitly expressed, position in mainstream language studies, and indeed the common sense view is that *the* standard is (a) the best and most developed dialect, (b) universally accepted by all users [dissimulated as the consensually prestige dialect], and (c) a product of natural evolution, none of which is more than dangerously partially true. Gramsci would probably hold that this is what the standard *should be*, what it aims at. But once put in place (by both dominance and hegemony) it is policed and gate-kept in nuanced ways.

Language in its standardized form, nuanced through a panoply of rite-of-passage styles and registers, artificially creates "the natural" in several ways. For those of you who abhor this technical vocabulary on the misconception that it is unnecessary jargon, let me rephrase this position. What I am here suggesting is that the natural goodness of the standard is no more self-evident and universally approved than the "natural goodness" of infant milk foods advertised in the market! What has happened is that the continuous exposure and valuing of the standard vis-à-vis other variants has taken on the familiarity-cum-acceptance which has become second nature to us. However, this second nature is neither innocent (in the sense of being independent of class and gender bias, egalitarian), nor universal (in the sense of being trans-historical, acultural *a priori*).

The basic claim for the classed, 'raced', gendered, regioned nature of the standard language is hardly contested now. Yet, little is done to work against this, except in the insistence of linguistic 'table manners' in order to subvert the most blatant sexism in, say, standard (or, for that matter, not-so-standard) English. Examples of scholarly work in 'dialect' exist both in the US and Britain, but as isolated experiments that seek, quite rightly, to legitimize certain group-interests, rather than as part of a project to explicitly contest/broaden the standard itself. Across the spectrum of disciplinary and ideological views, therefore, there exists a shared and 'self-evident' premise that the standard is

¹²Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty "Nationalism and the Imagination" in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, 2012. p. 285.

clearer, more amenable and, to put it in a nutshell, better than the other variants/dialects/forms. If, in fact, the standard is all these things, and, in a sense, it is **now**, given the history of its evolution, this has as little to do with the inherent superiority of the standard, as has the fact that more men are good chess-players than women today to do with superior intelligence or inherent ability. In any case, none of these arguments can be used against a systematic effort towards broadening the acceptable range of this standard.

Taking the discriminatory nature of the standard seriously and also accepting the necessity of standards, however attenuated, this thesis argues for the active broadening of the standard to include the greatest variety possible; it also holds that the ‘acceptable’ bounds of general linguistic tolerance will expand with the systematic and sanctioned exposure to such variety.

If I was to risk a generalization, I’d say Sri Lankan scholars in the field are hardly different. The more progressive ones use phrases like “interference” and “interlanguage” within quotes, creating a false space between themselves and the concepts they use to understand and rationalize their reality. The term “prestige” invariably describes the elite standard, carrying three unexamined consequences: consensus (everyone agrees that it is the norm), inevitability (this is naturally so and has come about through a long and leveling process which should not be tampered with), and innocence (no one is to blame, certainly not the linguist). The misleading notion of the standard as the variety *par excellence* is pervasive.

The linguist’s responsibility is ultimately the same as the citizens, but she has a special role in exposing the complicity between language/discourse and power, and actively working towards a more informed and egalitarian socius. For instance, Lankan scholar-activists need to fight two battles – one within the country and the other outside.

6. Language is a site of struggle which standards cover over. The non-standard is a better indicator of how language works, and the only arena where subaltern traces can even be deduced.

That language is a site of struggle is, after Voloshinov, a platitude in post-structuralist circles, but this insight has not been linked to the processes of standardization. The focus has been on the struggle for meaning and not for structure. I have argued till the cows come home that standardization obliterates struggle in and through language by re-presenting this as a natural process in no one group’s special interest. Borrowing from Marx’s description of the universal equivalent, I suggest that just as the defective form of exchange better represents reality and the very success of the money form actually serves to hide the fact that what is being compared is human labour, so too the “defective” form of language reveals the struggles that are swept under the carpet of the standard.¹³

Standards hide their self-interest and privileged users. Linguists claim merely to be recording the *status quo* without taking sides, as if recording did not confer value and reinforce hegemony, *pace* Daniel Jones. Champions of the so-called Other [or (post)colonial Englishes have operated on the basis of the special status of these varieties, thereby justifying the formulation of different criteria for their analysis. A careful examination of the processes of standardization as they affect these ‘Others’ strips the camouflage from standardization which can be seen as the hegemony of the ‘educated’ elites, hence the unquestioned paradigm of the ‘educated standard’. These standards are kept in place in ‘first world’ contexts by a technology of reproduction which dissimulates this hegemony through the self-represented neutrality of prestige and precedent whose selectivity is a function of the politics of publication. In these ‘other’ situations, the openly conflictual nature of the language context makes such strategies impossible. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the users cannot agree on a standard, hence it is blatantly imposed, and its discrimination and exclusions are clearly manifest for all to see.

7. Present models of mono-, bi- and multi-linguality are based on the interaction of separate individual languages that have no explanatory power (today).

“We only ever speak one language – or rather one idiom only.

We never speak only one language – or rather there is no pure idiom”

Jaques Derrida *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* [1998: trans. Patrick Mensah]

The following diagram describes the interrelationship among Sri Lanka’s three main languages. It is not the case that the three distinct languages borrow/steal from one another and still remain distinct languages. The interaction transforms each of the languages in a complex process that cannot be equated to simple addition/enrichment of words and phrases. The enrichment goes far deeper. Derrida, referring to his own linguistic legacy as Algerian Jew speaking French, captures this always-already heterogeneous nature of every single language in multilingual (read, “all”) contexts rather well, I think.

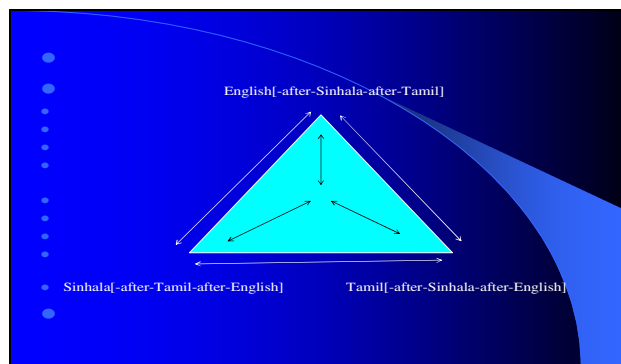


Figure 1

¹³See Parakrama, 1995 for a more detailed treatment of this homology, and Rossi-Landi for an extended discussion of the parallels between language and political economy].

A fuller explanation is required of this phenomenon. I shall merely outline some of the ways in which the conventional explanation of code-mixing and code-switching cannot account for what's going on here. Both "mixing" and "switching" do not leave either language inviolate because this process transforms the meaning that obtains in the original language(s) – languages are not discrete entities *to cut and paste* from but in dialogic relationship with each other. Moreover, the "same" borrowing/switch has different meaning(s) depending on interlocutors, sequence, context etc., and the complete utterance (involving multiple languages in old sense) has composite meaning, not reducible to its component parts. In addition, phonetic, syntactic and semantic changes in the original may result from multilingual use, and even the language borrowed from is transformed in this exchange. Further confounding simplistic conventional explanations, it is often impossible to distinguish which is L1, L2 or L3 in situations of language exchange, especially in non-elite everyday discourse in Sri Lanka.

Thus, though upward mobility in general is tightly controlled by economic, political and ideological forces, a few exceptions are permitted to enter the inner portals of (linguistic) power, so that it can be said that the (English) language is neutral and rewards dedicated learners which is the linguistic version of the "rags to riches" storyline. Currently, war and post-war politico-economic enterprise has created a new power-language nexus. The new leaders may not be well versed in the niceties of English but they employ front men and propaganda machines that are.

There is no linguistic reason or justification for the limiting of acceptable variation language standards. No theoretical principle nor empirical evidence has been offered by linguists of all stripes who discuss standardization and "describe" standards at work. These are political decisions masquerading as linguistic ones, especially when linguists claim merely to describe what exists.

8. However, it is not accidental that mainstream Linguistics is unable to explore these issues in serious and nuanced ways. The historical trajectory of Linguistics mirrored the rise of colonialism, and it is the single most obvious area where Eurocentric values and paradigms have been uncritically hegemonized. Even here, ESL/EFL studies are mind-bogglingly racist and just plain wrong: fossilization, language interference etc. The historical complicities of Linguistics with colonialist knowledge production and the fetishism of objective science continue today in the hierarchizing of languages, the Indo-European theocracy, mainstream ELT, and in concepts such as native userhood.

This process of policing the (new, yet archaic) standard is not always obvious and is often misread by those who aspire to achieve the gifts bestowed upon "fluent" English users. They are taught that it is necessary for achievement of international intelligibility criteria, which is a requirement imposed by the global North. Thus, in this manner non-elite learners of English in Sri Lanka have to contend with poorly-understood and even outmoded norms, especially in pronunciation, no longer applicable on the *mother ship*, if they are to break into the rarefied inner circle. While progressive voices argue for the global proliferation of national of Englishes, (acid) tests such as TOEFL and IELTS still ensure that there is a hierarchy of such varieties. Intelligibility criteria and "native" status are the most commonly invoked sophisms to justify the hegemony of (the) WEST (White English Standard Testing) in norming transnational usage.

The relationship between language and identity requires careful re-examination, including cherished notions of mother tongue and native userhood. Ethnicity/identity is discursive, not based on any essence.

"The decline of the native speaker in numerical terms is likely to be associated with changing ideas about the centrality of the native speaker to norms of usage. [...] Large numbers of people will learn English as a foreign language in the 21st century and they will need teachers, dictionaries and grammar books. But will they continue to look towards the native speaker for authoritative norms of usage?" —David Graddol, pp. 67-68

This is not very different from Wikipedia, which to its credit is more direct and clear.

- Native speakers of English are people whose first language is English. They learned English when they were children. They think in English. They use it naturally. Usually native speakers of English are people from English-speaking countries like the USA, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, Ireland, etc.

Graddol, like Quirk¹⁴, conjures an image reminiscent of Caliban (as colonial subject) who, according to Shakespeare was taught "language" not "your language" (Cesaire). Shakespeare as a product of his time has an excuse for being racist, but it seems, in linguistics at least, the more things change the more they remain the same. The point, of course, is that now English/Spanish/Portuguese/ French/German/Dutch is Caliban's language too.

That there are "native speakers" of Malaysian English, Lankan English, Singapore English etc. is well known. To refer to "native speakers" of "English" as only (white) Australians, British, Americans etc. goes beyond a linguistic assessment to an ideological one. The concept of the "native speaker" as a homogeneous category is itself problematic, because some "native speakers" have greater competence than others, and this reflects power, class, education. In Ceylon in 1954 this was documented, though many linguists still have difficulty accepting it today.

"I think most of us would grant, except perhaps the incorrigible purist, that the English spoken by the English-educated class either in their homes or in the more complex contexts of specialized activity is satisfactory enough, and has become native to the class which speaks it today. In that sense it has become a natural medium for their thinking." Gunatilleke 1954.

9. Rather than being special-emergent cases, the so-called (post)colonial Englishes are no different from the (post)imperialist Englishes in terms of range, elaboration, nuance, and may, in fact, be better gauges of ways languages work.

¹⁴"The existence of standards (in moral and sexual behaviour, in dress, in taste generally) is an endemic feature of our mortal condition and ... people feel alienated and disoriented if a standard seems to be missing in any one of these areas... Certainly, ordinary folk with their ordinary common sense have gone on knowing that there are standards in language and they have gone on crying out to be taught them" [pp. 5 – 6].

Treating these Englishes as equivalent in every way to their 'parent' forms leads to the re-evaluation of cherished linguistic paradigms such as 'native speaker-authority', since hitherto self-evident categories such as this are fraught in the (post)colonial contexts. For instance, among the thousands of studies spawned by Selinker et al on "interlanguage" and "interference", especially in relation to fossilization and such delightfully prejudicial concepts, I have yet to come across one in which L1 is a so-called first world language. Hence, it would appear that, for instance, fossilization is a phenomenon peculiar to, and peculiarly symptomatic of, contexts where an L1 user of a "non-western" language is learning a "western" one. Hence, L1 users of American English learning Tamil do not suffer from this debilitating pathology, because, as we all know, English has alchemic powers unlike the others, correct? In the Lankan context, if we had eyes to see and ears to hear, we would know that what takes place when languages meet in an individual or group is not interference but **enrichment**. Here then is a simple example of how a theoretically weak premise such as "interference" comes undone if we critically engage with the lived reality of our multilingual postcolonial contexts instead of imposing a linguistic apparatus that has little explanatory power, except as a stubborn guardian of the (neo)colonialist hierarchy of languages.

Three ways of classifying "Other" Englishes have gained currency in the past. These can be described through Standard Lankan English (SLE) as follows:

1. (SLE as) Pathology, aberration, sub-standard.
2. (SLE as) Special case requiring concessions, emerging norms which need time and encouragement to develop.
3. (SLE as) More or less equal to the other, "older", "native" Englishes, but "newer", hence less mature. This is the version espoused by most "progressives", and its adherents still retain the binary distinctions of older/newer, native/non-native [or nativised], inner/outer [circle], which smuggles in a clear hierarchy of Englishes, some of which are more equal than others.

I have long proposed a fourth alternative:

4. (SLE as) Equal in every way, and also a better indicator of the ways languages works, since the site of struggle is more visibly contested in a shorter timeframe [rapid language change and fierce contestation, as if the transformation is "fast-forward in slow-motion"] What we can only conjecture based on fragmentary evidence about past developments in English, for instance, we see taking place before our eyes.

And yet, SLE will also exclude (through gatekeeping, "codification" etc.) non-elite usage for as long as possible.

Add to this the serious concern that SLE, such as it is, mainly reflects dominant urban elite usage, and does not adequately engage with users whose first language is Tamil. SLE, then, manifests yet another tier of linguistic hegemony, as, one must belabour the point, all standards inevitably do. Here it is more liminal, contested, up for grabs, and, therefore, impossible to see as consensual, happy-go-lucky, apolitical.

10. Due to skewed globalization extra-linguistic value is being conferred on English by an opportunist peripheral market and a complicit centre, thereby reintroducing colonialist paradigms. The discourse of English as benevolent and neutral access to upward mobility needs unpacking. Access is invariably privileged (gendered/ethnicized /classed), teaching and materials ideological. Demand is deliberately mismatched by supply.

In dominant versions today, English is presented as conferring magical powers, echoing Kachru's analogy crediting the language with the transformative potential of alchemy. This claim and self-fulfilling prophesy, which I theorize as a key form of extra-linguistic value, posits that through English competence *good* learners acquire a range of qualities, including "intelligence", "politeness", "sensitivity" and even "decency", in addition to the well-established appendages of English such as wealth, erudition and social credibility. By implication, the English-speaking elites already possess these desirable extra-linguistic qualities and are generous enough to share their superiority with the best of the best learners who need to earn the right to this rare privilege by denouncing others from their original socioeconomic class. Instrumental reasons for learning English have, therefore, been supplemented by value-laden bonuses, and this ideology is being successfully exploited by both international and national business enterprises such as the British Council and private schools.

The general fraught context of English language learning and teaching signals that there is more at stake than the mere learning of a language. It is in partial recognition of this situation that students themselves express some confusion and anxiety about what they are in fact learning. In the (translated) words of one of our respondents, "Something is making learning English difficult for me, for us. I don't know exactly what it is – it is our text book, our teacher, it is the fact that we don't use English outside our classroom, but it is also something else:"

It is presumed both naively and disingenuously that English is not a weapon of oppression, a *Kaduwa*, ['sword'] that hangs over their heads, but rather a neutral and transparent medium which is equally accessible and benevolent to all. Diametrically opposed to this view are many who see English only as an oppressive class sword, utterly oblivious to the opportunities for upward mobility and a slice of the pie that the language provides, although selectively, to later-learners in Sri Lanka. These stone-throwers rage against the hegemony of English, but reinscribe Sinhala dominance over Tamil, and often educate their children abroad. This dual and paradoxical role of empowerer-for-a-few and oppressor-for-the-many that English so clearly fulfils vis-à-vis the Sri Lankan underclasses carries with it crucial psychological baggage for the learner (and teacher) which must be accounted for in any language planning programme or teaching material/methodology formulation that aims at a positive national impact.

The stories about English in Sri Lanka are many and varied. In 200 years of exposure, of which 60 years were post-independence, Sri Lanka has gone through the spectrum of attitudes towards English, from hatred to colonialist adulation and imitation to legislated rejection and ridicule. While it is simplistic to claim that at the end of the first decade of the twenty first century the response to English has come full cycle, it is nonetheless true that the premium on English language competence is such that it is the single most important index of legally-sanctioned economic and social upward mobility in the country.

However, as described above, unknown to many underclass aspirants for a slice of the pie, pronunciation has become entrenched as the class-marker and passport of those who learnt English at their mother's knee, so to speak, as distinguished from those who learnt English later in life. This policing of the standard ensures that only a few are allowed entrance at the gate to one-of-us-dom, with Lankanisms generally being ghettoized in creative writing and/or as objects of insider humour, as is commonly seen in other similar post-colonial contexts.

While the English-speaking elite claims that it is steering a benign meritocracy of equal opportunity within which the English Language is the handmaiden of globalization outcomes and opportunities in Sri Lanka today (as it was of colonialism for 150 years), this narrative of language-opportunity is only one side of the commercial coin since new and subtler systems of exclusion and marginalization have been set in place. These operate indirectly in the form of class-based assessments of language competence which stipulate impossible standards for first generation learners to achieve.

“Extra-linguistic value” is a concept I have developed through an analogy with Economics, where the notion of extra-economic coercion is well-known as the defining element of feudalism that capitalism broke with in creating the space for the worker to sell his (alas, it remained a male prerogative for a long time) labour (although not at any real measure of what this labour was worth). Extra-linguistic value can be defined as that value placed on aspects of language and language use which go beyond the legitimate purview of linguistics. For instance, language competence can be measured and fluency mapped in terms of benchmarks, whatever we may think of these benchmarks. These are linguistic values since they are judgements that are within the legitimate disciplinary space of language use. We needn't agree with the judgments, but if so the disagreement takes place within the logical space for such judgements. If, however, judgments about a person's intelligence or honesty are made on the basis of his/her competence in English (as measured by pronunciation or adherence to grammatical rules), then this is an example of extra-linguistic value being afforded to English use. If, as I shall establish below, there is a significant increase in extra-linguistic value placed on English in Sri Lanka, it is both a cause and effect of inequality operating in and through English in the country. Since English competence (as a proxy for class and privilege) confers power, it is seen to possess qualities and characteristics that transcend language, moving in to the realm of ethics and personality.

In a survey undertaken by the Sri Lanka English Language Teachers' Association (SLELTA) in 2010, covering nearly 500 influential users of the language across the country, a clear pattern emerged regarding the extra-linguistic value conferred on English. Most respondents suggest that the “appearance of the speaker” is a key element in identifying the variety spoken is an indication that English still comes with strong colonial baggage and much extra-linguistic value added to it. The physical appearance of the speaker should have very little to do with the correctness (or variety) of English spoken. This attitude, however, is consistent with data obtained from other sources.

Evidence for my thesis regarding the extra-linguistic value placed in English as an index of intelligence, personality, general knowledge, and suitability for employment, derived from interviews and questionnaire responses, is starkly, shockingly self-explanatory.

→ Private Sector Management Perspectives (30 Interviews)

- i. Good Knowledge of English = Intelligence = Good Family Background = Good Personality = High Aptitude = Demonstrates Team Spirit
- ii. Good Knowledge of English = A Sense of Responsibility = Sound Business Sense
- iii. Good Knowledge of English = Proper Pronunciation = Confidence at Interviews = Fluency

→ Student / Teacher Perspectives (Trends from 200 Interviews)

- i. Good Knowledge of English = Social Mobility = Better Social Status
- ii. Good Knowledge of English = All Round Ability = Decency
- iii. Good Knowledge of English = Personality = Goodness = Intelligence
- iv. Good Knowledge of English = Proper Pronunciation = Confidence at Interviews = Grammaticality
- v. The English (men and women) = Good Knowledge of English

This means that learners of English are hoping to become better human beings through English, and as a corollary, people whose English is manifestly impeccable in their eyes are “decent”, “punctual”, team players etc. Note also that the neo-colonial value system which re-invests English in its colonial garb as the purview and prerogative of (white) English men and women is also thriving here. Many of those interviewed were students of British Council English classes, which have become more popular since the nineties. The values espoused by students are reminiscent of a by-gone era. We were told that the variety of English that Lankans speak was not “real” English, and none of the students (aged 15 - 25) cited any Lankan role models who could match their teachers. *No any*¹⁵ of the parents interviewed were English-speaking, though most said that they would not allow their children to watch anything but English television.

¹⁵This “error” is one that makes elite Lankan English speakers wince or smirk, depending on their politics. It is pervasively used in both writing and speech by the majority of Lankans who are not “mother's knee” English acquirers. This, then, is a key example of both the arbitrariness of the rules of usage, as well as the ways these rules are used to exclude and demean the “other”. The (mis)use of “there” for “their” and vice versa is another no-no I've smuggled in to this text, as is the (incorrect) use of “the” especially in relation to “society”, “nature” etc. A fourth example is the (over)use of the present continuous tense. I want readers to disagree about what is a grammatical/discourse rule and what following such rules involve (not, of course, in Wittgenstein's philosophical sense). Why can't the same word convey multiple meanings here, as elsewhere in English, for instance? Once this discussion moves beyond quasi-arguments such as you must follow the rule “because the sky is so high”, we're already chipping away at language hegemony.

It took us 40-odd years to uncouple the English language from England and the old colonial bandwagon, but the jolly old umbilical cord is still in place, it seems. We've not been able to get an assurance from the British Council in Sri Lanka that they are committed to valuing all varieties of English equally and that the most appropriate form of English to be used/taught in Sri Lanka is Lankan English. To publicly admit this would be to kiss huge profits goodbye. The resurgence of the British Council as a high class tuition *kadey* marks the neo-imperialism of western culture under globalization.

11. Intra-language discrimination even at times can be greater than inter-language discrimination. Diglossia and dialectal variation often create greater inequalities than the use of different languages, but language nationalism and purism dissimulates this.

“National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.” Frantz Fanon, p.247 Through the fraught relationships played out among Sinhala, Tamil and English speakers, Sri Lanka provides a nuanced case study of the alignment of language and power in multilingual contexts, and demonstrates the key role diglossia plays in maintaining elite hegemony. Just as global English Language standards dissimulate their elitist nature through entrenching value judgments that have naturalized special interests and re-present them as inherently better than other varieties/lects, so too with Sinhala and especially Tamil there is a hierarchy of dialects. Tamil spoken by the Jaffna elites takes pride of place at the expense of Muslim speakers and those living in the tea plantation areas. Adding another layer to this disempowerment of underclass (hence “uneducated” since they have to begin working for wages at school-going age) users of Sinhala and Tamil is spoken/written-formal/informal diglossia which denies them access to their own language outside the familial/community sphere. For Sinhala and Tamil as well as for English, dominant linguistic paradigms serve narrow political interests, since even in the case of first language users (“native speakers”) of each of these languages, socio-economic class, education and proximity to urban centres determine the extent of inclusion/exclusion and access to language normativity.

Linguistic nationalists claim that removal of the oppressive language and culture will guarantee equality. This is not even true within a single language, and in a context of multiple linguistic domination there can be no such simple solution. By analogy from Sinhala and Tamil, a diglossic model for English is predicated in Sri Lanka, and the overwhelming demand is for “Spoken English”, as if it involved widely different grammatical rules and structures, whereas pronunciation, the current index of proficiency policed by the opinion-makers and influence-peddlers, demands conformity that later learners cannot recognize, much less reproduce due to key sounds not being found in their mother tongues. The confusion is further confounded by lack of clarity on what is at stake in the discussion on varieties and standards of English, where even teachers do not seem to know how to distinguish or identify varieties clearly. There is, however, the wide perception that external (western) norms are necessary to validate English -- most want to use SBE or IE. Students, teachers, policy-makers, influence-peddlers, wanted “Standard British English” (and in some cases “Standard American English”) to be taught to their children (and themselves, of course), but many felt that for rural under-privileged students who had no English-speaking background, other kinds of English (“Sri Lankan English”, often seen as a euphemism for “Broken English”) was ok.

12. Even at the academic and intellectual level, linguistic/discursive standards and norms naturalize and legitimise prejudice resulting in a double discrimination, which is another (indirect) form of extra-linguistic value hanging out as objective judgements of substance and clarity.

A Lankan student wrote an essay containing the following sentence, which I shared with colleagues who bemoaned the declining standards of English and also the lack of coherent thinking among students that made our task as teachers so much harder. It was not a big deal, just a casual conversation that they soon forgot.

- “In this Kandiyani whether I not ashamed of my difficulties on learning English and I know that my continuing to write is like abusing the Department with a bomb in my hands.”

A few weeks later, I showed some of them the following version after correcting the obvious sentence-level errors, and their response was an appreciation of the literary allusions.¹⁶ This clearly was a student with the right background and sensitivity, rare commodities for us.

- “In *this Kandyan weather* I'm not *ashamed* of my difficulty in learning English, and I know that my continuing to write in the language is like *ambushing* the Department with *a bomb* in my hand.”

What is telling is that, once the mistakes are fixed, and only once they are fixed, are we ready to recognize that the student is capable of higher order thinking. If he can't get his grammar and spelling right, then he cannot be intelligent or sensitive enough to be ironic, thoughtful, scholarly. The double discrimination is that language errors pre-empt serious engagement with substance, so that while mistakes are penalized the ideas expressed by the student are devalued too. Preliminary work that Christine Abbott and I did in Pittsburgh in 1990 led to similar conclusions about assessment of undergraduate student writing, where we found that some African-American students were penalized for using dialectal variations in composition courses, and that they were institutionally coerced into writing “safe” non-ethnically marked texts in order to pass, often doing violence to their creativity and identity.

An analysis of school texts has demonstrated that in addition to having to learn a language which is not used in their daily lives, Lankan students have to grapple with situations that are both unfamiliar and daunting. The fictional context for the study of English in Sri Lanka is a bonhomous, opportunity-laden world that is ideology-free and equitable, where all children are equally privileged and have access to a luxurious life-style as depicted in the textbook lessons. The sad reality is that students who don't fit this model are marginalised and

¹⁶Lakdasa Wikramasinha, a radical Lankan poet, wrote “In this Kandyan weather there is/ no shame in having in your bed / a servant maid –” To My Friend Aldred, and “The poet is the one who is always preparing / The ambush” and “He is the one that, tossing a bomb into / The crowd, takes notes” The Poet.

alienated, even demeaned, by this approach. The most obnoxious and alienating of material takes centre-stage, while the students' own experiences and lifestyles are, in effect, devalued through under-emphasis and trivialization. Hence, the sense of linguistic and cultural insecurity that the average student faces when confronted with English is reinforced. Language teaching, in this form, becomes identical with a classed, "nationed" (British in this case, but in others, US, though aggrandized as "American") and regioned acculturation. This may be less legitimate in a context where the language concerned has no roots/history/currency in this country – in teaching a **foreign** language, for instance – but English is very much a Lankan language, though not necessarily in the specific form taught in schools today. The point is that the "foreignness" of English is being emphasized through such texts and methodologies, not its "nativeness".

Students are invited, encouraged, even enticed into becoming everything but themselves! The ordinary rural students, sons and daughters of farmers or plantation workers who comprise the overwhelming majority of those in the classrooms around the country, are required to imagine themselves in another time, in another place, in another socio-economic class, and in another geographical location. In short, any place but where they are. The difficulty of learning an oppressive language is made twice as difficult through this alien and alienating material.

Not only are the school texts unsuitable for rural students, Tamil-speaking and non Buddhist students have an additional tier of exclusion to grapple with. This texts follow the current dominant paradigm that Lankan history is the triumphal march of Buddhism as it overcomes Indian/Tamil/Hindu opposition. Here as elsewhere in the teaching of English in Sri Lanka, another category of extra-linguistic values has been smuggled in as purely linguistic norms. Learning English is not here learning a language that is legitimately Sri Lankan – in the technical vocabulary, an institutionalized variety – but learning a way of life that is at once *classist* and (neo)colonial in character, as well as discriminatory and alienating to those who do not have the "right background". This means that to a student who already finds the language difficult there are more debilitating factors that hinder and psychologically affect his/her progress. So too rural English teachers who are not from the anglicized middle-class milieu of teachers to be found in privileged national and private schools in the major cities. Most of these English teachers have little access to the lifestyle and worldview of this material, and are therefore uncomfortable with teaching from these texts, resulting in their students being doubly disempowered.

This is a privileging of English as the language par excellence for its ubiquity and resilience, yet maintaining hidden inter-variety inequalities (despite tokenist counter-claims about the validity of "newer" forms). It reflects the globalised racism of dominant TEFL/TESL "theory" which is mindlessly applied in the Sri Lankan context too, relegating millions of users to the dustbin of linguistic and, in this new twist, moral failure.

13. Persistent mistakes should be read as critique. Some of these take a distance from "reason" as narrowly understood. Yet, dialectal variations too are seen as "mistakes" in multi-lingual contexts (all!). Some of these, especially those that are class-marked and ethnically-characterized, become the unexamined alibi for penalizing users for language deficiency. This "persistent mistaking" of norms is, I propose, another operative characteristic of subalternity, as it is both a cause and consequence of not having access to lines of social mobility as seen through the denial of agency-slots. Elite gate keeping of "standards" and humiliation of non-elite learners lead to "pathologies" which need to be read as resistance, not collective imbecility.

The danger of insistence on "arbitrary" external language standards, include the fact that it pathologizes learners (driving them to schizoglossia and hypercorrection in conventional linguistic analysis), debilitates non-elite teachers, reinforces hegemony and other hierarchies, straitjackets user creativity into "safe" structures, and fetishizes native speaker gobbledygook, and is based on theoretically unsound model of discrete language use. The implicit argument is that other varieties, especially from former colonies, are inferior to THE Standard (Standard British/US English). However, in the case of the post-colonial varieties, these norms are contested, not beyond question, and hence have to justified or, if not, there relationship to power is exposed.

Another kind of argument related to international intelligibility, where we are advised to learn SBE in order to facilitate global communication, have access to information flows and compete for lucrative jobs. The intelligibility hoax does not stand up to scrutiny. If it is "international" intelligibility that is the objective, surely all users are equally important? Not so for the intelligibility-wallahs, who are only interested in peddling ease of understanding for the old hierarchy (native, northern, white, elite). Why is the intelligibility argument not brought up in relation to southern US drawlers or Scottish accents? If it's about numbers, shouldn't we all measure whether the Chinese or Indians understand us? "International" meanings privilege English/American meanings, which are falsely represented as being universal (beyond the self-interest of an individual variety), whereas other meanings (and vocabulary) are deemed as restricted and specialized.

Kandiah who has done pioneering work in the area of Lankan English has identified some of these "errors" as schizoglossia which he relates to hypercorrection. Kandiah's argument that the phenomenon of hypercorrection is inadequate to explain errors in the speech and writing of Lankan users low on the cline of bilingualism is well taken. In fact, all I have tried to do here is to push the argument a little further and deeper, clearly acknowledging his influence [Parakrama 1997]. In pronunciation alone the P/F substitution he observes can be supplemented in each of the following cases as well; S/Z substitution, A/E substitution, consonantal cluster substitution so on, many of these even demonstrated by users high on the Cline. It is important to note here that pronunciation is now the class-marker among Lankan speakers of English, with later-learners still being ridiculed and imitated. Too much, therefore, rides on pronunciation and other indices of inter-generational familiarity, which the non-elite learner cannot even recognize.

This linguistic insecurity which has been brought about by extra-linguistic pressure is also visible in the learner's ability to grasps in key instances the role and function of English within a given context on the one hand, and, on the other, to indulge in excessive formalism and gaucheness, not to mention inappropriate usage. The end result is the same from opposite poles, as it were, and

malapropism rules the day! The preferred written language is stilted, archaic, pretentious, even servile, and most conspicuously verbose to the point of (unwitting) self-caricature, as can be seen from this example.

Post of Stenographer or Steno-Secretary

I am a Sinhala Buddhist religionist; a Steno Secretary and a Stenographer by profession.

I have pulled through: 1. Diploma-in-Journalism – English 2. Teachers’ Diploma - “

Being a speed-writing calibre, I am able to stylograph your flawless diction in phonographical strokes at a speed of 110-120 w.p.m. I also can manipulate a SINHALA key-board typographical contraption at a moderate speed.

- I have gleaned a wealth of work experience in various aspects of secretarial functions and able to draft Inward and outward routine correspondence independently.
- At present I am serving under an eminent legal luminary at his residential office in the capacity of Steno-secretary on a temporary basis and that too by fits and starts due to work availability.
- Should your good self-acquiesce in defraying me a substantial payment of emolument to commensurate my labour, work experience, etc., I wish to state that I am desirous of taking up assignment with immediate effect.

In marked contrast, “Good” Learners imitate external norms and standards, often archaic and inappropriate. “Good” learners tend to show off what they know and are quite comfortable with the ideology of English vis-à-vis Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka. Good Learners think “Englishly” à la West and Macaulay (Minute on Indian Education, 1835). Good learners are upwardly mobile and *vice versa*.

We now have an ethico-political dilemma, which we can choose to dissimulate as an apolitical professional concern for “Good English” and for not patronizing our students by offering them an inferior variety. Yet, pushing discriminatory standard as if it were self-evidently the best, performs epistemic and cultural violence and straitjackets learners into unproductive and sterile forms of expression. The following example dramatizes precisely this predicament:

Conclusion of an undergraduate essay on “The Importance of English”

“The spread of the English Language widely in the world does not imply that learning English is easy. The learning of English has several barriers and the worst of it is spelling! As English spelling is not a direct reflection of pronunciation, non-native learners face problems. This can be avoided by proper guidance given to the learner to learn proper English. English spelling has been described as ‘notoriously confusing’ by one scholar. Another problem a learner will face is unpredictability in spelling.....

Despite these defects English should be celebrated as remarkable, and we have to agree with Edward Thomas who described the Language as

You English words, I know you:
You are light as dreams, tough as oak,
Precious as gold on poppies and corn
Or an old cloak

- Considering these qualities of the English Language, it should be said that English is important at all levels of education, for professionals and all the other people in the world.”

This was written by a university student considered to be excellent by her lecturers. Yet, the sentiments are all borrowed and contrived, like the poetic metaphors she claims to share common ground with. One is starkly reminded of Godfrey Gunatilleke’s epochal essay, “A Language without Metaphor”, because it is precisely this cultural wasteland that our stellar student inhabits, that we, in a sense, invite her to call home. She dreams in English (which may be fair enough because some of us, in fact do), but the added identification of the texture of English with oak wood (perhaps she has lived in the West?), its cloak-like comfort/protection and its value in the glitter of poppies and corn (all of which are alien and disturbingly outside the social and linguistic experience of even the most elite of Lankan English speakers), pushes us towards the conclusion that this is vicarious and learned, not lived, experience. The values here are unabashedly elite, as seen in the throwaway tokenism of the last line, where English is identified as important for professionals (us) and “all other people in the world” (them).

The non-standard is one of the most accessible means of ‘natural’ resistance, and, therefore, one of the most sensitive indices of de-hegemonization. Fortunately, non-elite language users do not read Linguistic analyses! In fact, their entire linguistic practice is an implicit critique of such theories. This intervention will end with a close examination of the nature of non-standard (English) language use as resistance against hegemonic standards and norms. What has been devalued and pathologized in ELS will be read against the grain as a complex process of dehegemonization, which needs to be taken seriously as an antidote to the *malchemy* (negative alchemy) of English in this phase of post/neo-coloniality and as a response to the absurd yet pernicious extra-linguistic discourse around World English or English as Lingua Franca.¹⁷

Resistance and protest are also normed by dominant perceptions of what forms and contexts opposition should take. Of these essential attributes of resistance as we recognize it within the dominant discourse, **rationality and intention** surely take pride

¹⁷Here, as elsewhere in this piece, my debt to Pennycook and Phillipson is gratefully acknowledged, though the mess I’ve made remains my sole responsibility.

of place. We are unused to conceiving of so-called unthinking, unmotivated, even irrational acts as resistance. Yet, I suggest that ours is a model based on the tyranny of those who share and participate in the dominant discourse. There is no room in this model for the radical alterity of those who are not caught within the nexus of power/access to power/the possibility of access to power in the future. For the subaltern who is outside the pale, as it were, the logic of resistance and protest as we understand it does not clinch.

Thus, it is for the "weak" in this sense, that there appears a need to use other weapons than we do, and it is important for any sensitive analysis of language or the society to see the possibility and potential of *persistent mistakes and errors* as being the reflection of something other than collective failure. Otherwise we are doomed to making absurd claims such as: "There are no bright students in the villages. They have all come to the city by now." Our TESL/TEFL/World Englishes echo of this thematic would have to generalize about the idiocy and incompetence of at least 19.5 million people (out of 20.5) in Sri Lanka.

The refusal to recognise what is actually happening in through and around English in Sri Lanka is to reduce oneself to non-intervention and apathy in the face of systematic discrimination and structurally nurtured insecurity which leads to the kinds of "pathology" or "aberration" that I shall spell out here. Let me reiterate that *the pathology* in this view is not with the learner, but within the system. It is a condition that forces learners to resort to the kinds of self-blame and debilitation we have described. Yet, we must also be aware of the impossibility of translation, the unattainability of all origins, the self-interest of all normative systems, and the vigilance against counter-hegemonies, which in turn reinscribe other hierarchies.

Conclusion

It is now a truism that language in its broader sense is the only access we have to everything outside of ourselves, not to mention our access to ourselves (or to use Wittgenstein's beautiful but now trivialized phrase "my language is my world") in the philosophical sense. This language in the narrow sense is also the vehicle, witting or unwitting, of values and ideology that, historically and today, have taken sides. Or, in a less theoretical formulation, the fact that 'villain' originally meant 'peasant' and 'blackguard' derived from 'kitchen worker' only goes to show just who is winning the war of words – power is ultimately the ability to make meaning stick and to do this one has to be heard. Or, to use an example from Sinhala, how the word for interpreter in early colonial times ("dubash") became the word to describe debased culture ("thuppahi"). Thus, standardization adds another more insidious dimension to this struggle, since it controls and regulates structure, pronunciation, register, style, and so on, which serves to exclude many voices.

The hardest part for us, within these dominant paradigms, is, of course, the unlearning of our privilege in/through language. In the twenty or so years that I have been discussing these ideas with academics, teachers, intellectuals and anyone interested, the most persistent anxiety has centred around this issue of the (the loss of) authority/control, through it is invariably couched in worries about 'What will be taught in the classroom, then?' or 'Who will decide what is right and wrong?' In this broader standard, linguistic insecurity will diminish, and with it many of the blatantly classist elements of language in society. If it comes to the stage where (almost) anything goes, and where meaning is the arbiter of acceptance, and where it is extremely difficult to reject one kind of usage in favour of another, then language would have become as level as it would get, which is not much.

Here we come full cycle, then, to the point at which our aim – as teachers of the standard, bearers of the torch etc. – is to destabilize, broaden this standard towards the creation of a situation where the onus is on us to learn (or rather unlearn) to read our students' persistent errors as resistance with or without demonstrable intention, and to respect its radical difference. Ours **was** the privilege, as linguists, teachers, codifiers, standard bearers and so on to confer the privilege of language on these other Calibans so that their profit on't was to curse us in it. Let the roles be reversed: Let us learn their (version of) language to earn the right to the privilege of ours. Otherwise, we're simply acting out the words of Wittgenstein: a crack is showing in the [system's] foundation, and we're trying to stuff it with straw, but to quieten our conscience we're using only the **best** straw.

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