

Why English? Confronting the Hydra (a review)

Original work by Pauline Bunce, Robert Phillipson, Vaughan Rapatahana and Ruanni Tupas (Eds.)

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Reviewed by Robert Williams

Robert Williams University of Westminster r.williams04@westminster.ac.uk

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The position of English as the language of globalisation, as the language of choice for international business and as the enabling tool for those who seek better employment and higher wages is considered common knowledge. At a time when the merits of globalisation are being questioned, this volume presents a wide-ranging and thought-provoking set of articles questioning the received wisdom of such widespread acceptance of the merits of English and reasons for choosing to embrace English in the first place.

Describing the English language as a Hydra¹, the book continues the metaphor and explores various areas where the incursion of English is considered to be at best problematic and at worst harmful. The editors set out the position of the book from the

outset and those familiar with the writings of Phillipson et al will not be surprised to see that the book presents a view of the use to which English is put as being, if no longer colonial or imperialist, then at least neo-colonial.

Divided into four sections, the book first considers more general concepts of linguistic imperialism and colonialism, then moves to explode mythologies surrounding the benefits of learning English before looking at ways in which the dominance of English has been challenged and finally considering the challenges of living with English and another language. These themes are used to link a series of reports and anecdotes from all over the globe and perhaps what is most

¹ The Hydra is a creature from Greek mythology with many heads (the number varies according to which account you read). If you cut off one head two grow back in its place. The presence and use of English is therefore portrayed as unassailable and all devouring – if it is ‘vanquished’ in one area it will find ways to re-emerge in many others.

pleasing about the work is its accessibility, blending more traditionally academic articles with personalised accounts, letters and even poetry to provide a collage of styles and genres.

In essence the book deals with themes of language and power, language and identity and language pedagogy. The colonial legacy of English is seen as a vehicle for social stratification in many parts of the world. According to one contributor, in Pakistan lack of English language competence is shown to exclude large numbers of citizens from higher education and areas of employment – even where English is unnecessary for the particular job. In the case of India, Rao writes on page 206, *‘English has become a source of social division and exclusion, thereby undermining the social justice agenda of education in a democracy.’*

Stratification is also portrayed as the result of ‘emerging’ economies embracing western ideologies and English and the language policy decisions that are made as a result. Examples are provided from Bulgaria, Indonesia and China among others. Language and identity is portrayed at individual and societal levels.

At the individual level there is the saddening account of a Chicana (Mexican American) with both ‘sub-standard’ English and Spanish and the consequences that has for her sense of identity. It shows how language and sense of self are

inextricably linked and the challenges that a person whose language does not conform to the wider norms faces. At the societal level, we are warned of the possible demise of the Icelandic language through the increased use of English in Iceland and the lack of possible investment in technology to support a ‘minority language’, Icelandic, that is only spoken by a population of 650,000. Social identity being constructed through language features in accounts of Singapore forgetting its past or Indonesia losing some of its local languages as a result of the advance of English.

Discussions of pedagogy include not only what happens in the classroom itself, but also how English language teaching is represented. The expectation of what an English language teacher should look like is considered under the provocative title *‘Must the Western Hydra be Blond(e)?’*, where student visions have been coloured in part by media images and eye-catching publicity. It is no longer a case of what English to teach, but also who teaches it. The notion of unreal expectations is picked up discussing the impacts of education aid and how young inexperienced English native speakers sometimes pay to travel and ‘help’ by ‘teaching’ with no prior experience or training.

In the classroom, what it means to be literate in different vocabularies and the influence this

should have on the teaching of reading is discussed, as well as the availability and quality of language training programmes and teacher training initiatives as well as the attitude of those carrying out the training. In my own work as a teacher and teacher trainer, I have met those who can best be described as embracing the communicative approach with missionary zeal. However, this teaching methodology very much reflects a popular 'western' teaching approach. Is this the best way to learn or teach a language anywhere in the world? After all, the authors argue, why should teaching methodologies that work in one context be the panacea for all classroom interaction?

The authors and editors are at pains to point out that they have no issue with English, as such, rather the uses to which it has been put. If there are villains of the piece, they are those that created the hydra: the colonial legacy, the social elites, the dominant narratives that create unequal status between social groups, that relegate the standing of languages, that imbue people with unrealistic hopes and dreams based on the mere ability to use this continent bridging code. The purveyors of the 'English language dream', including state organisations such as the British Council – although it now positions itself as an international relations organisation – volunteer organisations including VolunTourism, a form of tourism where volunteers travel abroad to do charity work, are portrayed as complicit either by manipulative

design or through arrogant ignorance.

The hydra metaphor, whilst perhaps seeming rather an artificial construct and a catchy shorthand for all that is bad, is nonetheless a useful leitmotif, as the work interweaves the various strands that have created and sustained the perceived hegemony of English and supported the self-interest of those involved.

This collection is interdisciplinary, but in some respects could have gone further. In stating that the hydra needs to be combated on many fronts, more of these fronts could have been explored. Links to writings on language and power to public diplomacy and soft power would have widened the theoretical context and add to the practical examples presented in the book. In addition, the image of English and English language teachers could be seen through the wider context of media representation, Hollywoodisation, TV formats, and myth making.

So, in some senses this work could be seen as a missed opportunity.

Conversely, at times there appears to be little attempt to balance views and to consider counter arguments. One example is the question of whether the teaching of other subjects through the medium of English (CLIL) may be a barrier to cognitive development. This is explored in detail in

a number of scenarios. Criticism of monolingual language policy is an underpinning thread of many of the articles and builds on a wide literature. However, the problems faced in formulating a language policy that is inclusive, where hundreds of languages exist across a national territory, are hardly touched on. In such circumstances, the question arises of how is it possible to formulate a language policy that does not exclude certain groups, that does not perpetuate a segregated society? At that point comes the choice of who is exploited by whom? This book seems to eschew such discussion in favour of a critique of the way English is used. There seems to be little attempt to countenance that learning English may indeed be positive and

necessary in the information age we find ourselves in. Nor is much time spent on the appropriation of English. There are those who firmly believe in the power of English as a force for good. It is important that such beliefs are continually questioned and that equal voice is given to alternative narratives. The 'bottom up' resistance approach advocated in some of the articles mirrors this, although sometimes there is also the feeling that the resistance to English language hegemony is in search of a utopian vision when what is really at issue is power and who wields it. Nonetheless, this book offers a range of perspectives that should be taken into account if language policy-making and language education (not just English language education) are to progress.