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English across the Fracture Lines: the Contribution and Relevance of English to Security, Safety and Stability in the World

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English as the international language of campaigning

The nature of English as an international language means that it can be used by individuals and communities during times of difficulty in order to promote worldwide awareness of their causes. In those countries that Kachru (1989: 16) has called ‘outer circle’ and ‘expanding circle’ countries, that is, outside “the traditional cultural and linguistic bases of English” such as the USA, UK, Australia, and so on, participants in protests, demonstrations and other mass participation campaign events may use English or English-and-other-language bilingual and multilingual signs as part of their repertoire of tactics. In this chapter I argue that such signs serve a dual purpose: first, for the referring purpose (Thornbury, 2005) of giving information about their campaigns, and second, for the purpose of interacting (Thornbury, 2005) with global audiences via the news media to attempt to create a ‘community of practice’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992) of like-minded individuals that, locally and abroad, share the campaigners’ goals. Using examples drawn from the Egyptian anti-government uprising of 2011, I argue that the campaigners used their English-language signs to present themselves as humorous, technologically-inclined modernists in a bid to appeal to international audiences who were watching and reading about the events via the media. By using tools from discourse analytic research and critical discourse analytic research, particularly van Dijk’s (2003: 352) argument that “social power abuse, dominance and inequality... [is] resisted by text and talk in the social and political context”, it is argued here that the use of English can contribute to empathy, intercultural understanding, and peace around the world. Government-level institutions, language teachers, and English users may focus on English as an economic tool, neglecting its powerful international function as a potential linguistic resource to promote unity amongst people from different linguacultures.

Much of the scholarship on the role of English as an international language has focused on the detrimental effects the increasing worldwide use the language might have on different language users across the globe: the linguistic marginalisation of speakers of some languages; the disappearance of languages displaced by dominant language, primarily English; hiring prejudices against non-users or poor speakers of English; the shift in language teaching around the world to focus exclusively on English; and the increasing monolingualism of English native speakers who might not feel the need to learn other languages. Phillipson’s (1992) seminal *Linguistic Imperialism* and Pennycook’s (1994) influential *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language* both make convincing cases for a re-evaluation of the triumphalist attitude some display with regards to the pre-eminence of English as the world’s most frequent international language of choice. Phillipson criticises those who argue that English is inherently better than other languages, that English is so well-established as to be irresistible as an international language, and that English is functionally the most useful language with which to interact with the world at large. Pennycook argues

that the dominance of English enables the media-facilitated flow of information from socially and economically powerful 'centre' countries to weaker 'periphery' countries, imposing centre values on the periphery and consequently wearing away distinctive cultural and national identities.

Less has been written about the beneficial nature of English as a global means of international and intercultural communication, and some of those writings are not as critically reflective as they could be. Some claims in favour of English are too proud; Hook (2002: 35-36) argues that English is the world's most useful language, asking readers to "Imagine what life is like for those knowing only Lithuanian, Czech, Pushtu or Turkish!" Readers of his English-language work cannot, of course, imagine being a monolingual speaker of Lithuanian, but they can empathise and surmise that monolingual speakers of any language might not feel as limited as Hook suggests. Honey (1997: 5), who defines standard English as "specially important and valuable" compared to others varieties of English, focuses the argument not on the superiority of English, but specifically on the superiority of one a limited type of English. Pennycook (2002: 108) calls arguments of this type 'colonial celebration', which he defines as "a traditional view that sees the spread of English as inherently good for the world". More balanced discussions of the benefits of English could still be criticised for celebratory descriptions of the spread of the language. Crystal's (1997) description of the spread of English explains its role in various spheres: politics, technology, media and entertainment, travel, education and international safety standards. Even without direct positive evaluation of this state of affairs, it is difficult not to see such descriptions as laudatory. A user of English might naturally feel pride, as Crystal notes, in the success of one's language, but might also worry about its detrimental effects.

Individual users of the language may show concern about or even resent the power of English, but empirical evidence suggests that even non-native speakers of English (NNES), those who might have the most to lose by accepting English as a means of communication, continue to see value in its use. Descriptive statistics explaining the use of English around the world, both in terms of the number of speakers and in terms of the number of English-language interactions that occur, suggest that English is a valuable linguistic resource. Although English users may not assign any affective value to the language, the fact that it is used so often by so many indicates that it has a communicative value for them at least.

Dewey (2007) explains that the number of NNESs is greater than the number of native English speakers (NES), Kuo (2006: 214) says English is in fact 'used more' by NNES, while Seidlhofer (2005: 339) argues that "the vast majority of verbal exchanges in English do not involve any native speakers of the language at all". (See Graddol (2006) for an explanation of the method used to make such measurements.) There is legitimate criticism of the term 'native speaker', as explained by Rampton (1990) and Leung (2005), but I use the term here because, as Medgyes (1999) indicates, it is convenient in that there are many people whom we can unproblematically describe as native speakers, although the term is not always entirely accurate, in that some speakers with specific linguistic histories may be highly-fluent although identifiably non-native. Furthermore, as Gil (2010) explains, it may be that some estimates regarding the use of English internationally may not clearly describe the numbers if they conflate the number of people who study the language with the number of people who are proficient in it.

However, if we accept the claims that NNESs outnumber NESs both as individual users of English and in terms of the frequency of the number of English medium interactions that each

group produces, we are left to conclude that the benefits of the language are seen to outweigh the detriments by the majority of its users. The social situation of English as an international language is thus one in which it is both justifiably criticised for its dominance in multiple international institutions and simultaneously valued by its users as the most practical language for international communication. NNEs may find that English is both “a problem and a solution (Sergeant 2012: 9) regarding their communicative needs.

English for campaigning

One communicative need that NNEs have found to be well-served by English is in campaigns in which participants use monolingual English and English-and-other-language bilingual campaign signs to advertise their goals to a wider audience. Campaigners may use English as a shared language to draw media attention, and thus international audience attention, to their own situations to promote the idea that the whole world is “one’s neighbourhood or village” (Meyrowitz, 2001: 96). Pennycook (1994: 3), after describing English-language signs used in situations as varied as Chinese political campaigns, Estonian independence campaigns and Iraqi anti-American campaigns, asks “what is the power and the effect of the English-speaking world and its media that placards are often most effective in English?”

Although the terms ‘campaign’ and ‘campaigner’ may bring to mind those who are active in championing a particular political party, I use the term more broadly to refer to those who are working together in an organised an active way for any goal, whether the primary purpose is to support or reject that goal. Related terms like ‘supporter’, ‘dissenter’, ‘striker’, ‘protestor’, and ‘demonstrator’ are either semantically limited in common use to denote members of only one side of any disagreement (‘supporter’ vs. ‘dissenter’), too limited in terms of the area of activity (‘striker’ as related most specifically to labour movements), or too often may have negative connotations (‘protestor’ and ‘demonstrator’), which can be used to demonise (Kress, 1990) the participants. In this research I aim to provide a theoretical description of the use of English by such participants, without making too overt evaluations of their behaviour, so ‘campaigner’, ‘campaign’ and ‘campaign events’ are the most neutral words in terms of both their neutral connotations and their wide applicability. As the number of campaigners who use English for international communication is only likely to grow, it seems particularly useful to describe the ways that they use English.

Kachru (1989) points out that anti-Western governments are aware of the advantages of using English in their intranational and international communications, and that even anti-English-language campaigners use English to oppose the use of English in their home countries. It is thus evident that campaigners, be they NESs or NNEs of various proficiency levels from the level of the individual to national-level actors, are aware of the value of using English in their campaign communications. To come to an understanding about why they do so, and thus to provide more answers to Pennycook’s question about the power and the effect of English, it is productive to look at some examples from which conclusions can be drawn. The examples below, all of which come from media reports, have not been selected based on a quantitative analysis, but rather are intended to show some of the variant uses of English that campaigners employ to achieve their goals.

English campaign signs in Egypt in 2011

In 2011, Egyptian campaigners protested against the government of then-president Hosni Mubarak in what was variously described by the international media as a ‘revolution’, ‘uprising’ or ‘protest’. Eltanaway and Wiest (2011) attribute the campaign to the participants’ anger at the social, political and economic conditions in Egypt at the time. Tahrir (‘Liberation’) Square, a large public space that was the focal point of anti-Mubarak campaigning at the time, saw masses of over one million people gather, according to contemporary estimates from the Al-Jazeera news agency.

The campaigners in Tahrir Square used the English phrase ‘game over’ as part of their movement with some regularity. International audiences could thus see a multilingual sign reading ‘Mubarak: GAME OVER’ (‘Mubarak’ here was in Arabic) being held during a campaign event in downtown Cairo. (Examples of campaign signs are produced as faithfully as possible, but with the acknowledgement that written mode representations here may sometimes be poor substitutes for the original versions.) Other reports say the same phrase was written on the ground in Tahrir Square. ‘GAME OVER’, a jocular expression to see during what was a dangerous situation, was likely eye-catching to international audiences not only because it was in English, but because of its appearance in field of discourse outside its normal one in electronic gaming.

The semantic content of ‘game over’ is clear, in that it signals the campaigners’ desire to see the end of Mubarak. However, the presentation of this idea by using the ‘game’ metaphor makes this particularly effective at communicating with international audiences. Metaphor, as is known, involves reference to one thing by mention of another. There is no literal sense in which Mubarak’s actions and those of his government can be referred to as games. However, as Richardson (2006: 67) argues, complex political situations can be rendered ‘understandable’ through metaphor, and metaphors involving games and sports are common for describing conflict. Richardson puts ‘understandable’ in scare quotes in his original, signalling that while the metaphor may not lead to complete understanding, it is certainly more understandable, at least in the brief form, than a full explanation of the complexities that would be involved in providing a literal explanation. The sign is in English, and the metaphor ‘game’ reduces a complex situation involving accusations of fraud, corruption and state-initiated violence, to a manageable level of information for international audiences.

It may be tempting to see the words ‘GAME OVER’ as ‘text’, that is, as having only the semantic meaning presented within those words, but should be treated as ‘discourse’, defined by Georgakopoulou and Goutsos’ (1997: 4) as “a more embracing term that calls attention to the situated uses of text: it comprises both text and context.” The meaning of texts are only fully interpretable if we consider the context in which those texts were produced, so that, for example, a child’s spoken text “I’m hungry” is understood by a parent to mean “Give me food” if we interpret it as discourse. Below I consider the implications of considering the signs as discourse in order to understand their functions.

The Egyptian campaigners were participants in a dangerous situation, one which may not be easily understood by international watchers, so referring to that situation as a ‘game’ might seem dismissive of the seriousness of the events. However, using lexical chunks such as ‘GAME OVER’, and other examples to be seen below, helps to discursively align the campaigners with their international audiences. These campaigners, who might seem to be distant, culturally-dissimilar people to much of the world, become immediately relatable as video gamers based on the use of a term from a common hobby. Gaming and computing terminology, ‘high score’, ‘level up’, ‘hack’, and so on, is accessible to many English

language users, whether NESs, highly-proficient NNEs, or NNEs with minimal language ability. Campbell (2013) points out that most video games played by Egyptians and other Arabic-speaking populaces are played in English. For some campaigners words like ‘game over’ may thus be among the only English words in their linguistic repertoire, while other more proficient or fluent users may use such language as they know it is comprehensible to their compatriots and to NNEs and NESs around the world.

It is notable that other signage seen during the Egyptian campaigns made similar reference to computing and technology, creating a discourse that positioned the campaigners as similar to their international audiences, marking all of them as people who share similar modern interests. Another sign, ‘Mubarak is OFFLINE’ features the subject complement ‘OFFLINE’, which has the meaning of ‘not connected to the internet’, and so should be seen as negative in the sense that, while ‘online’ is modern, connected, and fully-functional, ‘OFFLINE’ is outdated, isolated and irrelevant. The campaigners who use this terminology could use similar wording, perhaps ‘broken’, ‘a failure’, and so on, but ‘OFFLINE’ has the double benefit of being communicative in that it is in English, and also a term that indexes (Ochs, 1992) the campaigners as technologically-savvy people who share modern interests with media audiences abroad.

Linguistic indexicality is the property of language that allows linguistic features to clearly, if not always directly, show a relation to a social or cultural variable characteristic of the users of that feature. Slang may index youth culture, swearing may index masculinity, specific lexis may index the user’s professional role, and so on. Reyes (2005) has argued that indexicality allows language users to create alliances with those whom their language indexes. In her study she suggested that Asian Americans used some linguistic features associated with African Americans to index a shared identity as people who had suffered discrimination, and thus to present themselves as allies to African Americans.

Similarly, I argue that the Egyptian campaigners’ signs index them as potential allies of international audiences based on their shared techno-culture. ‘Delete Mubarak’ (with an arrow pointing from ‘Mubarak’ {sic} to a stylised rubbish bin), another sign used during the 2011 campaigns, is self-explanatory, but it is salient to note that ‘Delete’ is more clearly field-specific to computing and technology than roughly synonymous imperatives such as ‘remove’ or ‘erase’. If the purpose were simply to show the campaigners’ negative evaluation of Mubarak, ‘erase’ would be sufficient. The selection of ‘Delete’, especially when seen as indicative of a general trend to word choice from the semantic field of computing and technology, clearly indexes the campaigners as technologically fluent, while the picture of the rubbish bin, the icon that commonly appears on computer monitors to show where deleted files are stored, adds some humour.

Martin (2007: 170) argues that the use of English in outer and expanding circle countries often has associations of modernity and international appeal, among other things. English restaurant names, English phrases in advertising that is predominantly in a different language, and fragments of English in international pop music all rely on this link between English and international modernity. A clear example of this in the Egyptian campaign signs is the use of the Twitter hashtag in signs such as ‘Mubarak #FAIL’. ‘FAIL’ itself has cachet as an internet meme, used to provide a quick negative, but humorous, evaluation of any situation, with the usual interpretation being something like ‘the person being evaluated has failed to achieve whatever goal he / she set out to achieve’. A Google search for ‘fail’ shows it being used in areas as diverse as fashion, sports and film. (One example shows a gameshow contestant on a

television programme incorrectly claiming that an elephant is bigger than the moon, with the word 'fail' prominently added above the screenshot.) The use of 'fail', with its expected humorous evaluation, as related to Mubarak, is somewhat unexpected for its jocularity, as with 'GAME OVER' above.

In addition, the hashtag ('#') in 'Mubarak #FAIL' is another clear indication that the campaigners are discursively indexing themselves as technologically-literate people of the type that their audiences abroad are likely familiar with. (The hashtag symbol is, of course, not English, but its appearance as part of an otherwise English text suggests that it can be interpreted as part of the sign's discourse function.) The hashtag is used on social media sites to indicate that a post is relevant to a specific topic, so the hashtag does have a referential linking function on this sign in that it directs readers to the 'FAIL' topic on relevant social media platforms. However, if we consider the hashtag in light of the other signs that have been discussed thus far, we should also accept that the hashtag has the additional function of indexing the sign user's status as a social media user, whether or not there is any expectation that readers actually follow the 'FAIL' topic or not.

These campaign signs and others ('Mubarak-ectomy', a humorous and sophisticated bit of wordplay that relies on readers' knowledge of 'ectomy' meaning 'surgical removal') do not just use English as a sign of modernity, as described by Martin (2007). The words themselves ('GAME OVER', 'OFFLINE', 'Delete', '#FAIL') *index* modernity in such a consistent way that the Egyptian campaigners cannot have been coincidentally choosing such words independent of each other. The deliberate English word choice of such terms that clearly reference modern life are a form of dual indexicality (Reyes, 2005), simultaneously presenting the campaigners as English-proficient, a valuable communicative strategy for interacting with world audiences, and technologically proficient, a signal to those same audiences that the campaigners are, despite any surface-level differences, perhaps not so different.

Interestingly, pro-government campaigners seem to have corroborated the idea that English use was a sign of international alliance building by anti-government campaigners. Bassiouney (2012: 113) shows evidence that the use of English by campaigners in Tahrir Square was used to attack their legitimacy by some other Egyptians, the argument being that the use of English was not characteristic of 'real Egyptians'. If there is a public discourse in Egypt that suggests that English is somehow not characteristic of Egyptians, then those Egyptians who do use English in their campaign signs may have had additional reasons to see their English as being indicative of internationalism. (This is not to suggest that use of English is in fact characteristic of Egyptians or not; only that if some popular discourse suggests that English is somehow not Egyptian then there may be Egyptians who are drawn to using English as a sign that they see themselves as world citizens in addition to being Egyptian ones.)

Campaigners may want to build alliances, but without media attention the reach of their signs, English or otherwise, will be limited. It is obvious to say that campaigners must draw attention to their goals if their campaigns are to have an effect, and that English magnifies this at the transnational level. Campaigns, especially newly-emerging ones, must aim to reach a certain critical mass of awareness in order to spread to members of the public in within their own borders and abroad if they are to succeed. To reach this critical mass, it is necessary to attract the attention of the media, both local and international.

Use of English signs to increase newsworthiness

Galtung and Ruge (1973) argue that there are twelve elements of newsworthiness, of which two are particularly important to this research. First, an event is more newsworthy if it is unambiguous. Newspaper readers and television viewers cannot be expected to always delve particularly deeply into the innumerable topics that are presented in the media. This is not a slight on news consumers, but rather an acknowledgement of the limited time and attention span that we have available. The English signs that campaigners use help remove ambiguity, partly by presenting cause-related information in a language news consumers understand, and partly by reducing complex situations to the more easily-accessible metaphorical descriptions of games.

Second, an event is more newsworthy if it features reference to people, whether they are figures of public note or not. Events do not, as Bignell (2002) argues, naturally exist as news. Media space is limited, so media producers are selective in terms of what they choose to frame as newsworthy. Having a person or people to focus on helps producers see and present an event as having news value. As Cottle (2011: 294) explains, media coverage gave Egyptian campaigners “a human face”, making them relatable to distant audiences. A campaigner who holds an English sign can function as a discourse metaphor for the entire event, meaning that particular person with that specific sign can be positioned as representing the multitude of campaigners, which reduces the ambiguity or at least the apparent ambiguity that may be present.

Importantly, any particular campaigner does not have to be fluent in English in order to be newsworthy and to aid with the reduction of ambiguity. Unlike in spontaneous spoken mode news interviews, in which it is clear that an interviewee must be at least somewhat English fluent in order to be seen as newsworthy and in order to participate meaningfully, campaigners carrying signs can take more time to plan their written mode messages, or can simply carry signs written by others. Campaigners can show their support, present themselves as newsworthy to international audiences, and thus attempt to build alliances amongst themselves and with international audiences, without actually knowing English as individuals.

Della Porta (2012) explains that one of the main functions of campaigns (‘protests’ in her words) is to create communities, an echo of Reyes’ argument about alliance building through language use. Theorists have defined communities with a linguistic focus in various ways. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of ‘community of practice’, defined by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464) as “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor”, better encapsulates the idea that the participants in a campaign are using English to support their community-building process. Seals (2011) argues that an immigration policy campaign event held in the United States can be seen as an attempt by participants to build or maintain a community of practice. In the same manner, we can see the Egyptian campaigns described earlier, and similar campaigns, as manifestations of communities of practice at the local level and as attempts to extend the community to watchers abroad. The concept of ‘joint enterprise’, one of the characteristics of a community of practice, is most obviously present in the campaigners themselves, but the use of English signage can be seen as a direct effort to extend the joint enterprise of the campaign to others outside of the campaigners’ locale.

Conclusion

Widdowson (1994: 386) has argued that we can no longer see English as ‘owned’, in his words, by native speakers of English. He rejects prejudices that see the use of English by native speakers as the only valid uses of the language. As Wee (2002: 282) explains “English is either owned by all who use the language, or what amounts to essentially the same thing, its ownership is not restricted to any particular group of speakers”. Campaigners using English in their signage are claiming ownership of English and using it for their own purposes, despite any potential negative effects that growth of English may have had on them or their communities. The use of English on campaign signs allows members of periphery countries (Phillipson, 1992) to communicate with members of centre countries. Although the communication is mediated by journalists, the visibility of the signs and the shared language allows for some direct communication.

Hakam (2009: 36), describing the value of critical discourse analysis, explains that “the mass media play a pivotal role in the establishment and perpetuation of power relationships, as it is through the discursive practices of the media that the dominant ideology is disseminated and reinforced”. Wodak and Matouschek (1993) argue that the goals of critical discourse analysis should be to examine natural language situations of social relevance, particularly those that involve the media and other institutions. Following this guidance, we can see that it is thus useful to examine the practices of NNES campaigners who carry English signs to see how such people, often from periphery countries, are able to use English to challenge dominant ideologies, whether those of the leadership of their own countries or regions, or of centre countries. The use of English in this manner gives voice to those who might not otherwise be heard internationally, creates and maintains relationships with those abroad in an attempt to build a community of practice of like-minded individuals, and thus contributes to empathy, intercultural understanding and peace worldwide.

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