A Review of “English Language as Hydra: Its Impacts on Non-English Language Cultures”

by Wong Jock Onn
National University of Singapore (Singapore)


English Language as Hydra, a compilation authored by scholars of various native tongues, serves as ‘a wake-up call to those responsible for the global promotion of English’ (p.xx). Herein lies its value. Although mastery of the English language is arguably a key to economic success, this book reminds language planners and teachers not to let it rob English language learners of their first languages and cultural identities. The learning of English should contribute to linguistic and cultural diversity, not reduce it. The commonly held belief is in ‘additive bilingualism’ as the solution (p.31), which means that English plays an ‘additional’ role (p.33) to that of the vernacular languages, without dominating. This book is thus an important one, which all language planners, ministers of education, English educators and other related authorities should be encouraged to read. On a rating scale of 1 to 4, I would give it a 3.5.

For the longest time, knowing the English language has not been seen as something extraordinary to the millions of non-native English speakers in many parts of the world. In fact, for people living in developed countries or at least modern cities, especially the younger ones, not being able to communicate in English is remarkable. Presumably, this is because not knowing English is considered by many to be a social and economic handicap and, furthermore, the English language is reasonably accessible in many places – public schools and ESL/EFL institutions. That English is an important language globally is not a point of contention for the editors and contributors of the book. In fact, the two editors, Rapatahana and Bunce, are English teachers with experience in equipping hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of students, immigrants and refugees with skills to communicate in the English language.
For the authors of this book, it is the impact of the English language on other languages and cultures that warrants attention. They liken the English language to the mythical Greek monster Hydra, which is powerful, destructive and almost impossible to defeat. In its ‘long history,’ contributor Salleh points out, the English language has ‘plundered and destroyed many languages’ (p.275). Yet, the editors are careful to clarify that the metaphorical multi-headed monster is not the English language per se. Rather, it is the way it is ‘used, promoted and declared to be essential’ (p.2) that they find repugnant. In response, the editors and contributors of this book, which include both native and non-native speakers of English, band together to speak against the people and agencies that ‘promote and demand its necessity’ (p.2), to document, in fourteen main chapters, the negative impact of the pursuit of English ‘at all costs’ (p.56, 216) in a number of countries throughout Asia Pacific, Africa and Latin America. Thus, in Pennycook’s words, ‘this book helpfully undermines most of those rosy myths about English as a language of opportunity, a language the world has chosen, a language needed for international communication, a language whose wondrous spread we should celebrate’ (p.257).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, whose native tongue is Gĩkũyũ, informs readers how, as a child, he was punished for speaking his mother tongue in school while students were rewarded for good performance in English language. He sees this as a case of ‘linguistic feudalism’ (p.12), which can lead to ‘linguistic Darwinism’ (p.14). As a result of this ‘linguistic Darwinism’, a number of African languages are now facing extinction. To fight language inequality, Ngũgĩ encourages writers to write in their home languages and proposes translation as ‘a way of making languages and cultures give and take from each other equally’ (p.xi).

Xiaver Barker, a Nauruan, tells the story of English as a ‘bully’ (p.18) in the Pacific region. Although ‘some 1400’ languages (p.19) are spoken in the region, English is singularly elevated as the most important language. It is the official language of the University of the South Pacific, which serves 12 countries in that region, including Nauru (p.19). In Nauru, the domination of English has marginalized Nauruan and created the impression that the language is not equipped for globalization. A proposed solution for Nauru is additive bilingualism.
In Australia, English is also a ‘bully’ (p.39) to indigenous cultures – e.g. Cocos Malay and Aboriginal cultures. In the Australian Indian Ocean Territory of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the good thing about language education is that a bilingual education policy as determined by the Commonwealth government has been in place since 1989 (p.38). However, the reality is very different. For example, during a visit to the islands in 2009, author Bunce was shown a ‘speaking ticket,’ issued to students for the ‘overuse of Malay in class’ (p.53), which she saw as ‘a serious breach of the children’s human rights’ (p.52). According to her, the Cocos Malay people must be ‘granted the full authority to make their own decisions about matters that impact their culture and language.’ The Australian Aboriginal community faces the same linguistic ‘juggernaut’ (p.60). Because of the impact of Standard Australian English, traditional languages fell into decline ‘as the older, more fluent speakers died and fewer younger people gained full fluency in their ancestral languages’ (p.63). Fortunately, even though many Aboriginal languages are now extinct, language revival programs are in progress. Authors Ober and Bell call for continual support for such programs from linguists and government authorities.

History repeats itself in New Zealand, where English has been ‘a destructive and colonizing force’ to Māori language, knowledge and culture (p.77). Māori people link language to their knowledge and culture, and to lose their language is to lose their culture, and even God, as Cairns points out (p.106). Yet, education policies in the early 20th century reflected ‘no conception of the need to cater for a completely different group of people’ (p.85). Smith and Rapatahāna document the uphill battles Māori faces as English, its ‘nemesis’ (p.76), continues to dominate among the Maori community. Thankfully, hope came in 2010 when the New Zealand government signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

In Sri Lanka, the ‘complete control’ that the standards and norms of English exert on people is ‘even prior to ideology, politics and practice’ (p.108), and English usage ‘continues to reinforce inequality even today’ (p.129). Obviously unimpressed, Parakarma identifies 10 propositions on the nature of language and its use that contradicts dominant forms of linguistic assessments of the English language, such as the idea that ‘the non-standard is a better indicator of how language works’ (p.109).
Interestingly, English is personified as a ‘governess’ in Hong Kong (p.133) and as an ‘auntie’ in the Philippines (p.158) and, as we shall see later, also in Brunei. In Hong Kong, English is personified as a governess because of the perceived importance of native varieties of English in formal education. Chen et al. tell readers about an apparent ‘addiction’ to ‘native English-speaking teachers’ (p.136). This addiction is so strong that the authors ‘cannot see the English language governess packing her bags at any time in the immediate future’ (p.154).

In the Philippines, English is like an auntie, an ‘older female friend’ who commands ‘respect’ (p.159). She is supposed to ‘help the family’ but instead ‘meddles with family affairs’ (p.159). The Philippines’ educational system is under threat from people who promote using English as the primary medium of instruction but Aquino highlights studies that suggest that this has detrimental effects on children’s ‘cognitive’ and ‘affective’ developments (p.169). Aquino seems to advocate the use of L1 as ‘the initial language of instruction’ (p.168) in formal education, with English being introduced later. In this way, English can become ‘a supportive and helpful family friend’ (p.171).

In South Africa, English is compared to a ‘Siren song’ (p.191), alluring ‘socio-economically deprived’ (p.195) Black and other Colored South Africans with the promises of a ‘better life’ (p.197) and ‘the prospects of promotion’ (p.201). However, promises are not always kept. Land points out that ‘the chasm between rich and poor’ appears to have grown wider since the end of the apartheid (p.195). This means that, sadly, only a ‘chose few’ (p.195) reap the benefits of knowing English.

In South Korea, learning English is like ‘border-crossing’ (p.208) to somewhere one cannot feel a sense of belonging, thus bringing ‘feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and inferiority’ to the crosser (p.211). Yet, the desire to cross the border is unstoppable and manifests itself socially as an ‘English frenzy’ (p.208). Park explores the Korean experience in trying to cross this border and discusses the sense of ‘inferiority and inadequacy’ that oppresses Korean English-learners (p.217).

The situation in Singapore is relatively unique (like Brunei’s and Columbia’s) as the non-official languages in Singapore face not one, but two linguistic ‘partners in crime’ (p.221), in this case, English and Mandarin. Rubdy points out that Singapore’s multilingual scene is
‘vibrant’ (pg.222) but the government has actively tried to reduce its linguistic diversity through its *Speak Good English Movement* and *Speak Mandarin Campaign*, which collectively homogenize the country’s pluralistic speech community in the name of economic progress. Consequently, a number of locally spoken languages have seen a decline in the number of speakers and/or the contexts in which they are used. In response, critiques have proposed a number of ways to reverse, or at least contain, the situation (p.238-240) such as by constructing a model of ‘pluralingualism’ and developing ‘local standards for local contexts.’

In South America, the English language is considered an ‘intruder’ (p.244) among the Spanish-and Portuguese-speaking countries of Latin America but is nonetheless valued as an ‘important’ international language in many countries in Central and South America (p.245). According to de Mejía, in Colombia, it has become the ‘most important’ foreign language (p.247). However, this important language and another language become partners to preside over other languages. The Colombian *National Bilingual Programme*, initiated by the country’s Ministry of Education in 2004, refers only to English-Spanish bilingualism and ‘does not take into account the many other languages in the country’ (p.248). Fortunately, there have now been ‘initiatives which demonstrate increased sensitive towards other types of bilingualism, particularly involving indigenous languages’ (p.252).

Although the English language has a menacing presence in many cultures, it is heartening to know that it is not always domineering. Although Brunei’s ‘non-Malay speaking indigenes’ confront ‘dueling Aunties’ Malay and English, Haji-Othman points out that ‘Malay has been more damaging than English to ethnic minority languages’ (p.188) because of its domination. This means that, in the case of Brunei, the ‘not-so-clear’ but ‘present danger’ is not English (p.189).

Despite all that is said, however, what most authors of this book might want to note is that there will usually be a tendency for a language, if not English, to dominate. The authors themselves report or highlight the possibility of such cases – e.g. Kiswahili in Tanzania (‘the vexed question of Kiswahili suffocating other African languages’; Ngũgĩ, p.16), Tagalog in the Philippines (‘to cause disunity later’; Aquino, p.162), Malay in Brunei (‘Malay hegemony’; Haji-Othman, p.176), Mandarin in Singapore (‘has attempted to reduce linguistic
diversity and to homogenize the Chinese community’; Rubdy, p.229), Afrikaans in South Africa (‘children demonstrated primarily against being forced to learn some subjects through the medium of Afrikaans’; Land, p.193) and Arabic in South Sudan, which is replaced by English (‘a decolonial move to signal freedom from what had been seen as the imposition of the former government of Sudan’; Pennycook, p.257).

It may thus be unfair to put the English language in the limelight. Evidence presented in this book seems to suggest that this tendency is part of human nature, an intrinsic desire to return to an original, monolingual state of affairs believed by some to have existed before the Biblical Tower of Babel was erected. The true Hydra can thus be said to be human nature.

About the author
Wong Jock Onn is Lecturer, CELC NUS, Associate Editor, ELTWorldOnline.com and Editorial Board Member, Journal of Intercultural Communication Research. He has taught courses in semantics, pragmatics, cross-cultural communication and ELT. His research interests lie in language and culture, language learning and World Englishes. He can be reached at jock@nus.edu.sg and jockonn@gmail.com.