

Power and Privilege in the General Economy of English

Walter H. Persaud

Abstract---In Thailand, English's official status as a foreign language betrays the extensive exercise of power connected to it. Much of this force is related to the ubiquitous image of English as the international language *par excellence*, and the concomitant notion that it is a passport to fortune, status and knowledge for states and individuals. Understanding these images and the struggles over them is important because peoples' collective and individual orientation in relation to English are influenced by such images and the discourses which produce them. One of the ways in which the dominant discourse can be observed in everyday life is by looking at the frequent publicly exhortations for Thais to improve their proficiency in English so as to give themselves the chance for upward mobility and for Thailand to increase its global market competitiveness. Three of the recurrent themes found in the propagation and practice of English are internationalness, competitiveness and economic opportunity. This paper illustrates how relations of power infuse the discourse of English in Thailand by looking at the production of images of English as a cultural commodity of England.

Keywords -- Culture, English, Pennycook, Thailand, whiteness

I. INTRODUCTION

IN 2000, graduate students at one of Thailand's top universities, Mahidol, protested against a newly imposed university requirement that they produce their thesis in English. The students complained that when they entered the program, the English requirement did not exist, and as they were not taught in English, they did not possess the ability to write their thesis in English. Their complaint stated that complying with the university's English regulation would entail having their thesis translated, a cost which many of them found onerous. When the university administration ignored their complaint, the case was taken by one student to the country's Administrative Court. The university argued that the requirement was part of their effort not only to "raise the university's profile in domestic as well as international academic circles, but also encourage students to improve their proficiency in the international language (*The Nation*: 1

October 2001, p. 4). In September 2001, the court ruled in the student's favor, noting that the university could not produce evidence "to prove the English proficiency of its postgraduate students were lifted to an international level by its requirements for their thesis to be written in English" (*Bangkok Post*, 29 September 2001, p. 1). This controversy offers an example of the intensity of struggles over the English language in Thailand and especially the manner in which English's institutional location and international image are connected with exercises of power as well as struggles over the dominant images of English.

In Thailand, English's official status as a foreign language betrays the extensive exercise of power connected to it. Much of this force is related to the ubiquitous image of English as the international language *par excellence*, and the concomitant notion that it is a passport to fortune, status and knowledge for states and individuals. Understanding these images and the struggles over them is important because peoples' collective and individual orientation in relation to English are influenced by such images and the discourses which produce them. One of the ways in which the dominant discourse can be observed in everyday life is by looking at the frequent publicly exhortations for Thais to improve their proficiency in English so as to give themselves the chance for upward mobility and for Thailand to increase its global market competitiveness. In the Thai press, it is therefore not unusual to find Thais who feel proficient in the language berating and cajoling their fellows in English over their facility in the language while representing themselves as successful cosmopolitan professionals, or for English speaking Westerners to condemn the entire nation and instruct them about 'the ways of the world' in English. This hierarchical ordering of the world in English is also a common feature of school practices in Thai, bi-lingual and international schools. Three of the recurrent themes found in the propagation and practice of English are internationalness, competitiveness and economic opportunity. This paper illustrates how relations of power infuse the discourse of English in Thailand by looking at the production of images of English as a cultural commodity of England.

A main theme of the discourse of English as an international language in Asia is the notion that English is a 'unifying tongue' and the 'language of opportunity' (McGurn, March 21, 1996, p. 40). However, as noted above, this hyperglobalist theme is rife with the exercise of power. A good example of this is offered by a *Far Eastern Economic Affairs* article in the

* Walter H. Persaud teaches English and postcolonial studies in the Humanities and Languages Division at Mahidol University International College in Thailand. (+6685-245-5855; phretlaw@yahoo.com; walter.per@mahidol.ac.th)

March 21st 1996 Issue. The article tries to establish what another writer calls “the English imperative” in Asia by indulging in a familiar strategy of mixing a cataloguing of places where English is used with opinions about the presumed benefits which such uses afford (Richardson, October 15, 2002, p. 1). Thus, we learn that

in its role as the preferred second tongue, English has become Asia’s premier language. It is the language of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of customs declarations and arrival cards, of air-traffic controllers and maritime agreements, of international contracts and technical journals. It is the language of the future, of opportunity, of money (McGurn, p. 40).

Likewise, one Thai magazine columnist in an article entitled “The ABC of Success” informs her readers that “the English language has clearly become the medium of communication, the tool of developing international relations in nearly all countries of the world. It is the de facto global language and widely accepted internationally. It is commonly used in day to day work” (Yungyong Sawasdi, November 4, 1999). English, we are told “dominates the world of information technology. Around 80 percent of communications through the internet is said to be English. In computer technology, in spreadsheets, databases and other production-enhancing programmes are in English” (Yungyong, November 4, 1999). In a similar vein, another writer informs us that “as English has emerged as the leading international language ..., Asian nations that want to be significant players in the global economy or host major international events are finding that proficiency in English is a must ...” (Richardson, p.1). Numerous other similar statements can be found in the local press.

Sometimes, injunctions for Asians to recognize English as an international harbinger of opportunities are combined with blunt attacks on Asian rationality and lectures on the supposed irrelevance of ideas about Euro-American neocolonialism. Thus, one writer advises that local opinions suggesting that “the spread of foreign education was a threat to Thailand’s social and economic independence” “is both irrational and archaic” and that “it espouses an isolationist mentality from the days of yore that is unproductive in today’s world” (Levings, March 9, 2003, p. 4). The same writer goes on to assert that “European colonization has all but disappeared. Today countries like Thailand can become more open culturally without fear of colonization,” and that “paradoxically, Thailand’s success in avoiding colonialism has contributed to its low grade English proficiency today” (Levings, March 9, 2003, p. 4). Another inveighs that “English was once the scorned symbol of colonialism. No more. Today it is Asia’s unifying tongue and its language of opportunity” (McGurn, p. 40). Given the pervasiveness of the discourse of English as an international harbinger of success, it should come as no surprise to find the president of the Thai TESOL association, Suchada Nimmannit, instructing the nation that “it was time for Thai people to drop their inverted snobbery towards the English language,” and a former minister in the Prime Minister’s office, and current leader of the Thai political opposition, Abhisit Vejjajiva, advising Thais to adopt “a more

positive approach to the English language” (Cahill & Natee, January 19, 2001, p. A9). What all these interlocutors have in common is the unquestioned assumption that English is a neutral communication device devoid of politics and relations of power.

II. ENGLISH IN VIETNAM

However, as is demonstrated below, English is a site of power, often trafficking in raced and gendered identities borrowed out of colonial rule. For example, this is evident in the *Far Eastern Economic Affairs* article referred to above. A close reading of the text and graphics of the lead story suggests a racialized and gendered encoding within a hierarchy privileging white males. To begin with, on the front cover of this issue of the magazine is a caption in imposing *white* capital letters stretching almost fully across the surface reading **ENGLISH RISING**. Below it, and separated by a thin red line, is the subtitle: **Asia’s New Language of Opportunity** in smaller *yellow* letters. The five words of the subtitle are arranged in two lines with the last two in the second line, the effect of which is to allow for the spatial dominance of the huge white title, **ENGLISH RISING**. I want to suggest that first, the color and size of the respective fonts of the title and subtitle make allegorical reference to the racialized skin colors of Sino-Asians and Europeans, and second, that the form and spatial dominance of the title **ENGLISH RISING** is a metonymic representation of Anglo-American dominance and a will to control the terms of Asia’s integration into the global cultural economy of English. What I am suggesting is that in the context of the imperial history which mediates European-Asian relations, the above title and subtitle is culturally translated as the ratio **WHITENESS**: Asia where the relation of **WHITENESS** to Asia is one of establishing itself as the normative standard and the basis for measurement, and where Asia exist as the smaller value in a rationalized relationship to Whiteness, seeking its guidance and following its injunctions. In short, whatever ‘opportunities’ reside in Asia’s affair with English is not consonant with free play as suggested in “the mother tongue’s bastard offspring” such as Singlish, Japlish or Chinglish; rather they must come under the super-vision of the panoptical English/White gaze and indeed subject themselves to it as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988; Gunew 2004; McGurn).

However, the power relations represented here between Sino-Asia and Whiteness is not only racial in character but is also deeply gendered. For the whiteness of **ENGLISH RISING** does not simply set the terms of engagement between Europe and Asia in establishing itself as the normative measure of ‘yellow’ Asia, but suggests a white *male* presence in its bold capitalized form. Like the Englishman of the colonial empire, **ENGLISH RISING** stands bold and erect, self-assured of its presence in the world as only an imperialist culture can allow. It is this presence which the three young Sino-Asian women peering interestedly into a single ELT textbook below **Asia’s New Language of Opportunity** in front of a dark glass door to a business office occupied by **ENGLISH RISING** apparently long to enter, embrace and assimilate (McGurn, p.40). **ENGLISH RISING-**

WHITENESS has established itself as the undisputable master of the house, as sole possessor of the Word, as the stern distributor of 'opportunities' for Asians, and Asian women, as seen in this text, are learning the Word and waiting at its doors. Betraying the history of imperialist violence in the 'rising' of English, the lead article which the cover advertises informs us that "In the days when Danang was America's base in Vietnam, local fluency in English would hardly have been remarkable. But the GIs have been gone for a generation, so no military presence pushes Danang's salesgirls towards English. They are pushed instead, by simple economics, the same force that is driving tens of millions of their compatriots around the region to try and master English" (McGurn, p.41). How the American GIs related to the development of English among Vietnamese women is left unsaid and the reader is left to fill in the blanked out information on her own. Interestingly, while words such as 'pushed', 'force', 'driving' and 'master' are used to explain how Asian's come to English, their coming is still represented as their free choice to learn and use English, an issue which we return to below. The gendered and racial character of Asia's affair with English noted here is also evident elsewhere in Asia.

III. ENGLISH BASTARDS?

One of the themes around which the racial hierarchy established under European colonialism is evident in English is that of linguistic diversity within English. While it has become commonplace for a wide range of commentators to note this diversity, some see it as a threat to English while others see it as a phenomenon to celebrate. Thus, academics like Brad Kachru see it as an 'other tongue' having the political potential to destabilize the dominance of 'standard' English, while David Crystal sees it as Asia's particular rendering of the same (standard) language. Crystal's liberal position is commonly found among journalists and other opinion makers who have coined names such as Chinglish (Chinese English), Jinglish (Japanese English), Singlish (Singaporean English), etc. for this diversity. For these liberal commentators, the proliferation of these englishes suggests that the English language is becoming less a property of Anglo-American culture and more a sign of the language being internationalized. For example, a lead story in 'Learning Post' (a weekly section of *Bangkok Post*), entitled "English: The Asian Way" predictably celebrated the distinctive "Asian contribution to the development of English worldwide" (Bolton & Fredrickson, September 2, 2003, p. 1). However, as we shall see shortly, the precise nature and status of English's internationalism is highly ambivalent, swinging between the pendulum of a globalized universal and a localized particular, with the latter's status moving up and down as a dimension of the cultural politics of adjacent issues. Thus, for example, we find William McGurn of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* commenting on the Prince of Wales observation that "English accounts for three quarters of the world's postal mail and four-fifths of all stored electronic information," saying "this may not be as imperialistic as it sounds, for what distinguishes English from would-be contenders is how it has already transcended its national borders. While it is impossible to think

of French without the self-conscious control France attempts to exercise over its use, the idea of the United States or Britain attempting to exert the same sort of claim over English would be absurd. In embracing English, Asians are also domesticating it" (McGurn p.41). In the context of the inter-imperialist linguistic rivalry between English and French, English's internationalism as registered in its domestication in Asia is trumpeted as a liberal moment which French cannot boast of. However, having settled accounts with English's main imperialist rival, French, it is the very internationalization via domestication of English in Asia that comes under attack two paragraphs later. In characterizing this domestication, McGurn registers both his concern for the 'threat' this movement poses to standard English and his attitude towards English's domestication in Asia. He tells us:

Granted, Asia features an increasingly rich stew of dialects and creoles that some worry may ultimately threaten English's role as a common language.... Within Asia alone, quite distinct forms have been flourishing for years – Japlish, Chinglish, Singlish – all with their own jargon and constructions, ranging from the courtly prose of Indian novelists and the rough and tumble of Australia's press to the stilted instruction booklets of Japanese electronics to the bazaar banter of Singaporean Singlish. There is, of course, no real way to control the mother tongue's bastard offspring. But educators do hope that as business becomes more dependent on English, they will move to establish international standards (McGurn, p.41).

Having noted that 'standard' English is under 'threat' in Asia, McGurn expresses dismay at the impossibility of controlling its indigenization, but a desire to nevertheless see the return to hegemony of 'international standards.' The English of the United States and Britain are thus surreptitiously reinserted as the true international English and as the universal measure of Asian englishes. Accordingly, in this wishful act of globalization of a 'universal', we see the linguistic erection of Self/Other binary opposites with international English standing for the regulating Self while dialects, creoles, Japlish, Chinglish and Singlish standing metonymically for the Other. In each pair, it is the English of the United States and Britain which possesses the standard/universal Word, while Asian englishes are characterized as English's "bastard offspring" and reduced to 'jargon and constructions,' 'courtly prose,' 'stilted instruction booklets,' and 'bazaar banter.' Thus, while it is absurd for the United States or Britain to attempt to exert the same sort of claim over English as France over French, it is nevertheless widely attempted in Asia, though through more diffused channels such as mass media.

IV. GOOD MORNING BANGKOK

Another instance of this Anglo-American will to exercise control over the fortunes of English in Asia through the strategy of linguistic and cultural hierarchization is evident from a *Bangkok Post* interview with the producer of "the only English language talk show on 'free' television here in Thailand" (Fredrickson, September 24, 2002, p. 1). The program, *Morning Talk*, produced by Dr. Valerie J. McKenzie

“has developed a loyal following” (Fredrickson, September 24, 2002:1). In situating the show, the interviewer gleefully highlights *Morning Talk*'s class exclusivity by pointing out that it is produced in the lobby of the five star Dusit Thani hotel in the central banking district and has an “impressive guest list, a veritable ‘who’s who’ of Thailand” (Fredrickson, September 24, 2002:1). The show’s class exclusivity is equally matched by its cultural and racial privileging of the white American producer through the global cultural politics of English. In a section of the article titled “International English,” the writer points out that “the language of *Morning Talk* has a distinctly international flavour. In fact, non-native speakers are the norm, not the exception,” being about 85 percent. The producer suggests that “this ... is a plus since international English, not American, British or Australian is the predominant ‘dialect’ heard in Thailand” (Fredrickson, September 24, 2002, p. 1). With typical imperialist arrogance, the show’s producer goes on to say that “an interview can be hard to follow at times if the guest doesn’t speak good English, ‘but if everyone spoke perfect English then we probably should have a different sort of show.... It doesn’t matter how well or badly you speak the language initially, the important factor is that the more you try to speak the language the quicker your skills will improve” (Fredrickson, September 24, 2002, p. 1). Here we can observe the Self/Other binary working through two specific polarities, with the former being privileged in each instance. First, there is the distinction between American/British/Australian English on the one hand and “international English” on the other. Interestingly, while ‘international English’ is used to suggest the show’s liberal intentions, it is immediately reduced to a “dialect”, a particular, while the American/British/Australian varieties are grouped together and positioned as the universal and standard. This way of grouping and positioning the varieties of English referred to here normalizes the position of the white producer’s linguistic identity and cultural location. When she tells us that “an interview can be hard to follow at times if the guest doesn’t speak good English,” her apparent liberalism vis a vis ‘international English’ is again not extended far enough for her to see her minority position and for her to realize that perhaps she ought to become more versatile in ‘international English,’ rather than expecting the 85 percent of her non-native English speaking guests and her millions of viewers to aspire to her preferred (American?) variety.

The second major distinction evident here is that of ‘perfect’ versus ‘bad’ English. Surprisingly, for a show that boasts of its internationalness, it is international English which turns out to be the ‘bad’ variety, the one that is inferior and lacking and in need of foreign intervention. And, not surprisingly, the white American producer is inscribed as the bearer of the ‘perfect’ variety with the right standard. From this self-constituted position of expert, she is free to make judgments and offer advice, actions which normalize the distinctions and judgments which have been made about English and about which variety is in need of intervention. Through these distinctions, we see here the putting into service of what Edward Said calls a “structure of attitude and reference” informed by a culture that has been nourished by imperialist rule (Said, 1994: xvii-xviii,

xxv-xxvi). Said suggests that it is the history of Western imperialism that allows Western peoples today to have the self-confidence and arrogance to appoint themselves as experts and to see their cultures as the universal points of reverence. What holds the American/British/Australian language variety as one group and the ‘international’ as another is not ‘perfect’ versus ‘bad’ English, but rather this cultural structure of imperialist reference, for not only do differences reside within each category, but each category also presents challenges for cross-group communication, including among Australians and Americans.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the production, dissemination and consumption of English in Southeast Asia and its relationship to white privileges. We have seen that native English speakers are not only enjoying racial and cultural privileges connected to English, but that Southeast Asian seem intent into purchasing this form of privilege. However, with the division and stratification of English into various varieties, the apex of the English hierarchy is reserved for white English speakers. What all this means is that English as an instrument, a global commodity and a fragment of mass culture calls for more critical attention.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bolton, K and Fredrickson, T. (September 2, 2003). “English: The Asian Way,” *Bangkok Post*, (Learning Post), p. 1.
- [2] Cahill, L. and Vichitsorasatra, N. (January 19, 2001). “Thai Schools score a ‘C’ for English,” *The Nation*, p. A9.
- [3] Foucault, M. (1988). “Technologies of the Self.” In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton, (eds.) *Technologies of the Self*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, pp. 19-20.
- [4] Fredrickson, T. (September 24, 2002). “Behind the Scenes at ‘Morning Talk,” *Bangkok Post*, (Learning Post), p. 1.
- [5] Gunew, S. (2004). *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalism*, London: Routledge.
- [6] Levings, W. (March 9, 2003). “Isolationism is a Barrier to Language Acquisition,” *Bangkok Post*, p. 4.
- [7] W. McGurn, (March 21, 1996). “Money Talks,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, p. 40.
- [8] Pennycook, A. (1987). *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, London: Longman, p. 32.
- [9] Richardson, M. (October 15, 2002). “In Asia, the English Imperative,” *International Herald Tribune*, (International Education) p. 1.
- [10] Yungyong Sawasdi, (November 4, 1999). “The ABC of Success,” *The Nation* (Femme), Issue 39, p. 2.
- [11] Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage.