

The Ethoglossic Power Dynamics of Interaction: English across Cultures and Races

P. B. Nayar

National University of Singapore

We are living in an age when not only is proper communication across races and cultures necessary for collective progress, but a breakdown in communication could be much more disastrous than a misguided translation of *mokusatsu*.¹ Whether it is world politicians around a table in Geneva, a group of academics at the Royal Society in London, a Fulbright scholar in South Asia, a Japanese businessman in New Guinea or an Indian Guru in California, thousands of instances of intercultural and interethnic contact and communication (and perhaps quite a bit of miscommunication) take place at any one time. Although this might be happening in any of the several languages of wider communication in today's world, such communication in English is geopolitically the most significant for many reasons. First of all, there seems to be an emerging world consensus on the primacy of English as THE language of world communication; second, English is the most non-monolithic and the most ubiquitous language of wider communication, thanks to Anglo-American political and economic ambitions; third, English literate people have the most control of and most access to not only world technology but also to the flow and exchange of world information; and finally, there are a lot of non-English speaking people in the world for whom English is either the only literate language or the primary language of learning and education.

Communication in English today can be seen as occurring between four types of interactants: (1) native speaker(NS) and native speaker; (2) non-native speaker (NNS) and non-native speaker both internationally and intra-nationally using English as a language of wider communication (e.g. Swedes and Ethiopians, Bengalis and Tamils) (3) NS and NNS in NS country (e.g. foreign dignitaries, tourists or students in the United States); and (4) NS and NNS in NNS's territory (e.g. U.S. defense personnel or experts abroad).

All four situations above have conflict potential, though obviously not to the same measure. Here, I would like to explore the power structure of the interaction in

situation (4) above, namely that of the NS abroad. I shall investigate some of the factors that generate, condition and control the power share in such interactions. I would like to argue that:

- (a) While some of the power, like in most interaction, is negotiated between the interlocutors during the interaction, quite a lot of it is also unobservedly predetermined in favour of the NS by geopolitical, geo-economic, geo-linguistic and ethnographic factors, and also by the 'political sociology' (Mazrui 1975) of English as a world language.
- (b) Failure or success in communication relates directly to the naivety and/or insensitivity of the interactants regarding the pragmatic presumptions behind the power share, and that if the NSs are aware of their superior power and make allowances for it, conflicts in communication could be avoided.

A few words explaining the terminology may be in order here. The expression 'ethoglossia' has been borrowed from Cobarubbias (1983) and is used here in a similar though not identical sense. Cobarubbias (1983: 52) defines ethoglossia of a language or a variety as 'the expressive power of a language, i.e. the communicative strength, determined by the number of functions a given language performs and the quality of such functions relative to the social structure of the speech community.' I am using it here somewhat more loosely to indicate the strength of a language as a complex function of the ethos of the interactants, and the setting, context and norms of the interaction. Thus the ethoglossia of English as a world language will be determined by who the interactants are, where and on what issue and why they are interacting, and last but not least, by whose socio-cultural rules and pragmatics they are interacting. (Ethoglossia is an interesting and convenient concept in intercultural communication because as Cobarubbias (1983) suggests, the different perceptions of the ethoglossia of the code (English) by the interactants would somewhat provide an etiology of the communication conflicts.)

Now to Power. Power is defined by French (1956 cited in Brislin 1976: 28) as "the maximum force that person A can induce on person B, minus the maximum resisting force which B can mobilize in the opposite direction". French divides power into five types: attraction power, based on B's liking for A; expert power, based on B's perception that A has superior knowledge and information; reward power, based on A's ability to mediate rewards for B; coercive power, based on A's ability to mediate punishments for B; and legitimate power, based on B's belief that A has a right to prescribe his behaviour or opinions (Brislin 1976). In this discussion of NS - NNS inter-action in English, the most immediately relevant power components are expert power (A is an expert in B's country) and legitimate power (A's native country has considerable political and economic clout),

although the other three power components do contribute less directly to the overall perception of the power share.

The other point that needs clarification is the implications of the two terms *interethnic* and *intercultural*. Although both terms are commonly used in the literature often indiscriminately and virtually interchange-ably, a perception of the differences between them is crucial for some dimensions of the power structure of NS - NNS interaction. *There is an ethnic line very nearly coextensive and coterminous with the great divide between the First and Third Worlds, separating the white from the non-white, and this becomes very significant in view of the political and economic status of most of the Third World vis a vis the First World, of which NS countries are a part.* The ghost of the "white man's burden" isn't completely laid to rest yet and years of colonial history has left indelible impressions of status roles on both peoples. Moreover, ethnic identity can be socio-politically stronger or more powerful than cultural identity in many cases, particularly when ethnicity is more 'visible', while cultural identities can be more a matter of attitude and nurture than nature. As some of the demographic attitudes of the new world would indicate, it is often more possible to acculturate and be accepted into an alien culture when visible ethnicity does not stand in the way. The categories of ethnicity in the U.S. affirmative action schedule, for instance, lumps together groups as disparate as Europeans, North Africans and Middle Easterners on the one hand, and Indians and Pacific islanders on the other, underscoring the primacy of the "visibility factor" in ethnicity. It is easier to be ecumenical and integrative when ethnicity is similar than when it is not. The status of and attitude towards Hispanics and Asians versus Polish or Irish immigrants in the U.S., and Italian versus South Asian immigrants in Britain prove the point.²

There are, however, several complicating factors involved here. First of all, there may be those that would maintain that ethnicity is necessarily a part of cultural affiliation. Then again, often ethnic and cultural boundaries and affiliations are rarely clearly marked. A Nepali, for instance, may be ethnically close to a Burmese, but his cultural identities are certainly closer to India than to Burma. Black Americans, who are officially grouped by the Affirmative Action along with black Africans have cultural affiliations more with their white compatriots than with black Africa. Finally, even the concept of race and ethnicity can often be arbitrary, based more on geopolitical factors than on any serious anthropological facts. Anthropologically most Indians, for instance, are Caucasoid.

In any case, ethnic and cultural differences together could constitute a hierarchy of conflict potential in communication. At the top level of conflict we have communication that is both interethnic and intercultural (e.g. Euro-Americans to Japanese or Kenyans to Egyptians). Then we could have communication that is intercultural without being interethnic in so far as it is possible (e.g. Swedes to Germans or Punjabis to Kashmiris).

And finally we could have communication that is interethnic without being intercultural (between people in a multiethnic society like the U.S.) This last situation, ideally, should be conflict free, particularly if the language used is the same, but in reality is far from being so.

My main concern here is the area of highest and most sensitive conflict potential, where the communication between NS and NNS of English is both cross-cultural and cross-ethnic and takes place outside NS countries. I have argued elsewhere (Nayar 1989) why this situation is geopolitically the more sensitive as a contact situation. In brief, the sensitivity could be attributed to three main reasons. Firstly, the onus of cultural adjustment is more on the NSs; secondly, two NS countries, the U.S. and Britain have a much larger international involvement, commitment, interest and responsibility; and thirdly, NSs abroad often have enough expert power and legitimate power to influence the ways of life in the host country.

There are several approaches to defining power (See Kramarae *et al.* 1984 for details). Although I am not sure we know yet all the relations between language and power, I see them as falling under five overlapping paradigms:

- (1) In Sociolinguistics: Power reflected in language structures.
 - (a) the 'tu - vous' paradigm
 - (b) linguistic hierarchies of standard-substandard
 - (c) Male - female paradigm
 - (d) Control acts a la Brown and Levinson (1987) etc.
- (2) Language and Governmental expressions of control:

Political rhetoric, Orwellian Newspeak, English as a tool of 'civilizing savages', regulatory uses of language etc.
- (3) Power as between various competing languages and their communities (See Kachru 1984) and the power of a politically powerful language in deciding mainstream national culture and values.
- (4) Intrinsically unequal power relationships in discourse as between judge-prisoner, doctor-patient etc.
- (5) Social concepts of esteem deference etc. (Erwin Tripp *et al.* 1984).

At the risk of being tedious, I would like to say that the power I am talking about here is a of a slightly different kind.

English has become the preferred unmarked language of inter-ethnic communication (Coulmas 1987). However, as Giles (1979 cited in Bourhis 1984: 35) says, the choice of a language also often reflects the prestige of the code and the dominance of the language community. The power I want to talk about here is the power that reinforces, maintains and preserves ethnic and linguistic superiority through control and dominance of interaction. This Power manifests in the form of interactional superiority and resulting face gain for the NS and the loss or absence of power manifests through exposure of interactional inadequacy and perhaps loss of face for the NNS. I want to make it clear that I am not saying all NS-NNS interactions are power games or exercises in the cold war of power, but rather, that such power games do often occur in a lot of crucial NS-NNS contact situations.

Let us now look at the why's and how's of this. In most interactions of equal status contacts, almost all power fluctuations are negotiated between the interactants. However, NS-NNS interaction does not in effect turn out to be an equal status interaction and so provides somewhat limited potential for power negotiation. As Glahn (cited in Thomas 1983: 106) rightly points out, an asymmetrical power relationship exists between NS and NNS whether the NS is aware of it or not, and NNSs frequently perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage. There are at least three reasons for a presupposed inequality of status and role relationships that determine potential power.

1. The British empire and the Sahib/Bwana/Masta mentality, which leads to a "c" and "C" concept (see Nayar 1986: 2) in culture and to an unbalanced historical perspective.
2. Insidious attempts to foster the "c" and "C" myth. NS values, culture and ways of life are presented institutionally and through the media as the desirable ideal. The media systematically portrays III world institutions as kangaroo institutions, and a myth has been created that the III world has to be "looked after". There has also been intellectual infiltration of Western values into III world minds. III World educational and social institutions are modelled after NS countries and are often staffed by NS experts, who also have the power of curriculum choice.
3. "Afrosaxonism" (Mazrui 1975: 9) and the intellectual anglicization of the colonies

In most interactions of equal power discourse and equal status contact, almost all power fluctuations are negotiated between the interactants. However, NS-NNS interaction does not in effect turn out to be an equal status or equal power interaction. Quite a lot of the power is predetermined by geopolitical and geolinguistic factors, some of which are within the control of the interactants and some of which are not. Firstly, there is the undeniable fact that NS countries happen to be politically, technologically and economically among the world's most developed and powerful countries, and this

leads to their being somehow perceived as superior. Popular media in English also help perpetuate this notion. Films and TV shows from NS countries have traditionally always glorified the greatness and power of the white man, and in all inter-ethnic situations, the white man is in control of all other ethnic groups, who are routinely shown in subservient or even servile roles. Tarzan, Superman, He Man, Bionic Woman, Wonder Woman (and perhaps even Popeye, Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse) are all white. The white man always saves, civilizes, protects and controls the world. One Indiana Jones is shown to be worth more than hundreds of crude, primitive, wicked and bungling Indians and a Chinese could at best be only his sidekick. What is more, actors get Oscars for roles like that! The images of Bond and Rambo are subliminally and subversively impacted as invincible defenders of the world, and Euro-American socio-cultural, ethical and political values are always held up as the ideal for the world. (Superman, for instance, not only fights injustice and crime, but also stands for 'the American Way'.) In addition, the role of the NSs in Third World countries as givers and providers of knowledge, technology and economic assistance contributes to a perception of superior status, and this gives the NS a great deal of expert power, reward power, coercive power and legitimate power.

A concomitant of political and economic superiority is the communicative attitude of the NS, which has often been monological, and there was little care until recently about the bilaterality of communicative responsibility, that is until there was a need (for the NS) for equal status contact. The economic power of some Asian countries like Japan and Singapore has recently made some dents in the dense monological shell of Euro-American communicative attitude.

Equally important is the geolinguistic factor. The language of communication is English, the first language and mother tongue of the NS, but the second or third or even fourth language of the NNS. For the NS, the apparent superiority perceived and fostered by a superior intuitive command of English is an obstacle very hard to overcome in interactions with the NNS. It is a sociolinguistic fact that linguistic superiority, both in terms of the status of the language and the fluency of the speaker, generates superiority of power. The NNS is bound to feel a certain amount of language insecurity even if the interaction is on his home turf and even if he is using a local form of English. (Attributes of language insecurity like the style-shift dynamic, hypercorrection, self-criticalness are all very visible in the NNS's interaction.) To make matters worse, English language proficiency is a status symbol in many Anglophone Third World countries, whose self-imposed values give their own English literates greater power and prestige. Moreover, English is also the language with the highest international ethoglossia and so is the language of spontaneous choice in inter-ethnic communications, and for very sound reasons, in many parts of the world, anglophilia is becoming anglomania.

An offshoot of the power of the NSs of English is what could be called a linguistic complacency that makes them assume the ineluctability of English as THE inevitable language of communication when one of the interactants is a NS. No matter where they are in the world, NSs get very uneasy in situations when people around them speak anything other than English if they (NSs) are part of the communicative situation or event. And yet they have no qualms about speaking only in English wherever in the world they are. This attitude of I-come-to-you-you-come-to-me-either-way-we-speak-in-English attitude ensures the NS's power and control of the interaction. In addition, the English language ability of a NNS often tends to be equated with the speaker's mental and intellectual development, literacy and educational sophistication. Inability to speak English or lack of proficiency in English is also seen as a problem or defect of some sort. (Nayar 1989, Simon 1980, Trivonovitch 1977)

There is a strange ambivalence in the attitude of native speakers towards a NNS's competence in the language. While the NNSs are expected to know the language, they are at the same time not expected to know it so well as to threaten the NS (Suzuki 1975, Jordan 1980, Miller 1977, Gannon 1980, Loveday 1982). Native English speakers are certainly no exception to this (Christopherson 1973, Mazrui 1975). This anti-integrative exclusivity can, when threatened, come out as hostile intellectual arrogance. The following example of a conversation³ between A (NS) and B (NNS) illustrates how personality conflicts arising from threatened language egos portend potential threats to further communication.

1. A: It's fascinating to see you have such a diversity in language and culture, such traditional wealth.
- B: I'm sorry, we're not quite like home, are we? We do have English, though. (laughter)
- A: Yes, you do, don't you? And some of you speak it so well too!
- B: Well, that's what I told the natives when I was over there.

A is a NS language expert, on an officially sponsored visit of a Third World country, conversing with a host country academic, B. B's accented English and non-Western paralinguistic behaviour conceals his near-native socio-cultural and communicative competence in English, acquired through educational sojourns in NS countries. A's introductory conversational *pour parler*, perhaps innocent, is interpreted by B as patronizing, particularly since B knows that his country is economically and educationally backward. B's repartee, spurred by injured pride, despite the contrived

attempt at humour, is interpreted by A as being needlessly over-familiar and unwarrantedly officious and so the next two exchanges become loaded with near-insulting innuendoes. At least some of the 'glaciality', most likely, is caused by the NNS's language insecurity and his desire to show that he cannot be linguistically dominated, and by the NS's irritation at not being able to dominate.

Saville-Troike (1983: 27) says that a fully competent NNS should possess the competence of incompetence, which is the ability to appear not too competent to threaten the NS or to disorient his stereotype image of a NNS. (See also Hudson 1980: 219). A NNS therefore must needs walk a tight rope between communicative competence and linguistic incompetence. This "damned-if-you-can't-and-damned-if-you-can situation" that NNSs find themselves in takes away much of their power share in an interaction with NSs.

A superior command of the language can also be deliberately used to extricate oneself from a face-threatening situation not only to redeem face but also to make the NNS lose face. (This can happen even in NS - NS interaction when one of the interactants has greater power of verbalization in the 'standard dialect' than the other.) In many Third World countries, in meetings, conferences or discussions, conducted in English often solely to accommodate the NSs, the NNS's more authentic facts and better logic can lose out to the NS's superior fluency and control of the language and hence control of the interactional process. A face-threatened NS can turn the table easily by using his superior verbal power, as the following example, where A (Rogers) is a NS and B is a NNS, will show.

2. B: Rogers claims that the rate of attrition is not related to salary disparities. But my data shows otherwise. Again, Rogers claims that ...
- A: Rogers claims this and Rogers claims that! Rogers doesn't claim anything. Rogers merely reports. Understand? Rogers has merely presented the report of a study, not a position paper or an election manifesto!
- B: What I mean is, in this report.. the report claims..
- A: Let's get this clear. The report never CLAIMS anything. It merely presents facts and draws conclusions. Let's get our semantics straight and not distort facts!

As it turned out later, B's data and facts were indeed nearer the truth, and A rightly suspected his potential loss of face and fought it with the power he had with him - the power of language!

Examples 3 and 4 below show how inadequacy of control over the language will constitute loss of power and face in an interaction.

3. A: Are you afraid the Mujahedeen will be here?
B: The Mujahedeen is not here.
A: But do you think life will be disrupted?
B: I.. The shops are open.
4. A: Don't you think people should have the freedom to say what they want to say?
B: Yes, but it is.. not.. it is complicated. You.. everybody has right. But sometimes it is not.. er.. er..
A: You don't think it is a matter of human rights?
B: No. Yes. I mean.. it is..
A: You do or you don't? I don't get what you are saying.

Example 3 is from an interview between a NS newsman and a Kabuli on the streets of Kabul, presented as part of a report on Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It may well be that the Kabuli just doesn't have enough English to grasp the sense of "life will be disrupted", but is too shy and embarrassed to admit it or to seek clarification in front of the TV camera. As a result, he answers it in his own way with a seemingly irrelevant answer, and by doing so runs the risk of appearing inadequate and vague. Example 4 was a conversation overheard on a U.S. university campus between a NS student and a NNS student from the Middle East, an interaction from which the NNS doesn't exactly come off with flying colours. Not only does he look silly, but also appears to have lost both his point and his face. Subsequent introspective evidence from B revealed that what he was trying to communicate in his first move was that all things in the world were not simple matters of yes's and no's and that even the concept of freedom is subject to several complicating factors. The apparent contradiction in his second move was purely a matter of syntactic complexity of English. Like many other second language learners, B had difficulty deciding whether to say "yes" or "no" when agreeing/ disagreeing with

negative statements in English. Before he could straighten that out, the rather impatient NS quickly overwhelmed him.

In each of the above instances 2, 3, and 4, the NS has near total control of the interaction and so has virtually all the power. If he happens to be benevolent and understanding, he can voluntarily relinquish some of his power without appearing to be condescending or patronizing. Otherwise the NNS's linguistic inarticulateness comes through as intellectual inadequacy. There is thus a kind of global communicative gatekeeping going on in inter-ethnic encounters in which there is a serious potential of an unequal and unfair power share being appropriated by the NSs, who hold more economic, technological, institutional and above all communicative power. This power is achieved through various conscious and unconscious strategies and tactics, sometimes intentionally and sometimes perhaps unintentionally. Even when the NNSs realize the inevitability of the loss of power, they have to put up with it and have to play the game according to the codes and rules of the NSs for reasons of political expediency and economic advantage, necessity or helplessness.

The development of stable and acceptable non-native indigenous varieties of English in different parts of the world, and the prestige some of these varieties may gain as identity symbols of the various NNS groups combined with the sheer overwhelming numerical strength of non-native speakers may in the future take some of the edge off the importance of the so-called native dialect and with it reduce some of the power of the native speaker as the controller of the language and the gatekeeper of the communication.

Notes

1. The literal translation of *mokusatsu* is "to kill with silence". Denotatively this can mean two things to a Japanese: (1) to ignore or (2) to withhold from comment. The Japanese Premier Suzuki's response of a policy of *mokusatsu* to the Potsdam Declaration of the Allies was intended to convey the latter meaning, but was mistranslated by the Domei News Agency as "The Japanese government ignores the demand to surrender". A week later, the atom Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. (Rothwell 1982: 27)
2. There is always a lot of talk in the media about illegal Hispanic immigrants in the U.S., but hardly ever much talk about illegal Irish immigrants. The latter, though not as numerous as the Hispanics, are still a sizable number, particularly compared to the population of the source country. Similarly, the fact that Italian immigrants have lived for a long time in Britain without even functional communicative ability in English does not cause the media hype or public concern that South Asian immigrants do.

3. All examples here are based on real life communicative events and situations, recorded by the author although the data have been edited and somewhat simplified.

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