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The following quotations may be seen as representing a range of opinion in a debate about the role of English as an international language:

i) 'English is neutral'

...since no cultural requirements are tied to the learning of English, you can learn it and use it without having to subscribe to another set of values [...] English is the least localized of all the languages in the world today. Spoken almost everywhere in the world to some degree, and tied to no particular social, political, economic or religious system, or to a specific racial or cultural group, English belongs to everyone or to no one, or it at least is quite often regarded as having this property.

Ronald Wardaugh (1987)

Languages in Competition: Dominance, diversity and decline. Blackwell

ii) 'English is imperialist'

What is at stake when English spreads is not merely the substitution or displacement of one language by another but the imposition of new 'mental structures' through English. This is in fact an intrinsic part of 'modernization' and 'nation-building', a logical consequence of ELT. Yet the implications of this have scarcely penetrated into ELT research or teaching methodology. Cross-cultural studies have never formed part of the core of ELT as an academic discipline, nor even any principled consideration of what educational implications might follow from an awareness of this aspect of English linguistic imperialism.

Robert Phillipson (1992)

Linguistic Imperialism. OUP

iii) 'English is democratic'

there have been comments made about other structural aspects, too, such as the absence in English grammar of a system of coding social class differences, which make the language appear more 'democratic' to those who speak a language (e.g. Javanese) that does express an intricate system of class relationships.

David Crystal (1997)

English as a Global Language. CUP

What is your opinion? Discuss, with reference to the roles played by language in the development and maintenance of 'society' and of 'culture'. You may refer to any non-English speaking society with which you are familiar, in order to exemplify your points.

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1 Introduction

This essay explores three different perspectives on English as an international language: that it is neutral, imperialist and democratic. Section 2 discusses these perspectives and defines key terms such as English as a lingua franca (ELF) and World Englishes. In section 3, the roles that language plays in society are explored; specifically, those of unifying, expressing identity and modernizing. In section 4, the role of English as an international language (EIL) in Myanmar is assessed, drawing on the discussion in sections 2 and 3.

2 Discussion: Three opinions on EIL

2.1 English is neutral

It is true that English is the least localized of world languages, spoken in five continents as opposed to more geographically restricted world languages such as Mandarin. It is a commonplace observation that speakers of English as a second language outnumber first language speakers (Graddol, 2003) with the former group forecast to grow faster. Also, English is used by a range of cultural groups, some of whom might appear unsympathetic to mainstream Anglophone culture. For instance, Abouelhassan and Meyer (2015) describe Egyptian Islamists using English to communicate their religious message globally. However, more controversial is the claim that English belongs to everyone, regardless of location or language proficiency.

Kachru's (1985) three circles model can provide clarity.

Kachru separates English-speaking societies into three circles: inner, outer and expanding. Inner circle countries are generally overwhelmingly monolingual, with English spoken as a dominant first language, such as Australia. The outer circle includes postcolonial countries such as

Singapore, India and Nigeria (Bruthiaux, 2003, 160) where English is an official language, playing a role in domains such as government, education and media (Bolton, 2008, 4). English is also used as an interethnic lingua franca within the country.

Outer circle English users are said to have “ownership” of English. Widdowson (1994) argues that speakers “take possession of the language” by being nonconformist in their usage, particularly with lexis. This nonconformism to inner-circle norms leads to a nativized variety of English such as Ghana English, with its own set of lexicogrammatical features, such as “chop box”, meaning lunch box (Crystal, 2003, 163). Norms of correctness are decided within the country. These distinct varieties are defined as **World Englishes**.

Expanding circle countries are defined in opposition to outer: few deep-seated historical links with the inner circle, no nativized variety and English is not used domestically as an interethnic group language. Instead, English is spoken as a foreign language to communicate with speakers of different L1s internationally. This is **English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)**. This and other models (e.g. McArthur, 1987) accounting for differences in international English use presuppose a “pluricentric” view of English where many varieties exist.

Returning to Wardhaugh’s description, World Englishes may seem neutral because they no longer belong to inner circle countries. However, it seems that Wardhaugh’s view that English “belongs to no one” is challenged by the ascription of ownership of World Englishes to speakers of these varieties. ELF, used in interactions between non-native speakers, is perhaps closer to being culture- and identity-free, but, as will be seen in 3.2, challenging this view are theories that ELF speakers do identify strongly with different groups.

On another, non-Wardhaughian reading, languages might be understood as “neutral” when they are used as a lingua franca that does not favour one particular ethnic group e.g. English in Singapore (Rubdy, et al., 2008, 44).

2.2 English is imperialist

In *Linguistic Imperialism* Phillipson (1992) refutes claims of neutrality in a different way, arguing that the spread of English disempowers periphery countries and carries inner circle culture, as implied by the parallels between his ‘linguistic imperialism’ and territorial imperialism.

Whereas Wardhaugh’s account might see varieties as being equally powerful, Phillipson (1992, 15) does not. He describes *Linguistic Imperialism* as a “theory for analysing relations between dominant and dominated cultures” with reference to English. Thus, asymmetric power relations underpin his argument, which hinges on continuities drawn with the colonial period. The book abounds with examples such as “we used to send gunboats...; now we’re sending English teachers” (1992, 8).

However, coercive, colonial-era power relations are not analogous to contemporary English language use in the periphery. Firstly, language policy has seen an about-face since the colonial era. A strong reaction against English in the aftermath of independence has now become a strong interest in English on the part of citizens in, for example, Malaysia (Gill, 2005). Further, other writers (e.g. Jenkins, 2007) indicate that today’s periphery countries include such economic powerhouses as Germany and China. These are far from “dominated cultures”.

One of the main causes of English's recent spread is quickening globalisation including trade, jobs and culture. The desirability of this culture is one of the attractions of English (Ostler, 2005, 513). This, not coercion, is the key to English's success.

That said, societal perceptions are powerful. English's colonial undertones are politically highly salient in certain multilingual, postcolonial societies. Commenting on English in Malaysia, Zi Hao (2017) argues that "every dominant language we now speak is a result of past violence", revealing great antipathy towards English. English's colonial past is likely to be invoked when its role in society is contested. Stephen (2013) suggests the cause is conflict with Malay which is pulling one way as the language of nation and identity while English pulls in the opposite direction.

Furthermore, although Phillipson's polemical claims may appear overstated, it is useful to delineate three "local effects" of English's growing role in less powerful periphery countries, examined with reference to Myanmar in section 4. First is displacement, defined as "English tak[ing] over in specific domains" (Phillipson, 1992, 27), such as computing and, in Europe, higher education, where English language medium programmes have increased by 1000% in the last decade (Brenn-White & Faethe, 2013). Next is concern that the presence of English might privilege elites within the periphery through education or access to better jobs, leading to greater inequality. Finally, in supporting inner-circle governments' geopolitical objectives, Phillipson (1992, 235) claims that ELT aid is "inextricably interlocked" with diplomacy's political and commercial interests.

2.3 English is democratic

Crystal's description refers to the fact that, structurally, English does not code status differences. Interestingly, Crystal (2003, 9) himself does not think this accounts for English's success. More important for him are extralinguistic factors, notably the power of its people.

There are a number of ways less 'democratic' languages code status differences, such as using two words for you, of greater or lesser formality, as in French. Asian languages such as Javanese and Japanese code status differences by using honorifics to show respect to an interlocutor (Meyerhoff, 2006, 82). These might include address forms, deferential verb forms and politeness suffixes.

In intercultural communication, speakers are faced with using their own politeness norms or those of the target culture. Meyerhoff (2006, 96) describes Japanese students retaining respectful politeness norms in the USA.

However, it is not clear that all varieties of English are as 'democratic' as Standard English, or that ELF speakers accommodate to inner circle norms. There is evidence that in ELF settings, discourse norms remain from L1. One choice amongst ELF speakers is to "cling to the discourse pragmatic norms of their L1 community" (House, 2010, 383). Thus, if local discourse norms are undemocratic, the English variety spoken may be less democratic in turn.

3 – The role of language in the development and maintenance of society and culture

3.1 Unifying

Languages can be classed as national languages and official languages. National languages have an ideological role, as “symbol[s] of national unity” (Holmes, 2013, 103), while official languages are used for administrative purposes. A single language can play both roles.

National languages create unity in two senses: firstly in presenting a unified nation to the outside world, legitimizing the country both inside and out; they “naturalize political boundaries” (Kroskrity, 2000, 111). Secondly, they help citizens of a country appreciate shared values with their compatriots, helping to promote solidarity in a population (Robichaud & De Schutter, 2012, 134). This is especially important in binding multilingual and multiethnic societies. In Tanzania Swahili was chosen as the national language because it “acted as a kind of social cement between very disparate groups” (Holmes, 2013, 108).

Disparate groups within societies are appeased by the choice of a national language that does not represent the dominant ethnic group, but is instead a neutral lingua franca, for example the adoption of Bahasa Indonesian in Indonesia (Kirkpatrick, 2011, 2). Indonesia and Tanzania are both examples of countries choosing *local* languages to focus on unity and national identity in the postcolonial period (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004, viii). Myanmar also chose a local language, but selecting the dominant ethnic group’s language has created long-term resentment.

If national languages unify, the corollary may be that minority languages exert a divisive, centrifugal force. Critics of multilingual societies claim that they are inherently less stable (McRae, 1986). This might stem from the difficulty of creating a shared sense of national

identity and reflects the fact that language is a powerful resource to express identity, through which differences can be accentuated. In the Balkans, a prototypical example of ethnic disunion, Suleiman (2006, 56) argues that speakers of Croatian sought to stress linguistic differences with Serbian to underscore ethnic difference between the groups.

English can also challenge the primacy of a unifying national language, as in the example of Malaysia in section 2.2, but it is more commonly seen as neutral.

3.2 Identity and solidarity

Language expresses and constructs speakers' identities, signalling membership and non-membership of groups such as national, ethnic racial, class, gender and professional (Kroskrity, 2000, 111). Accent, lexis and grammar are all important in expressing identity, which can result in deviations from the standard variety. For example, in the UK, some London accents feature a glottal stop, an example of speakers seeking solidarity within their local area.

In World English settings, English is considered to have an identity-expressing role (Jenkins, 2007, 196). Local identity is expressed through local lexis (e.g. chop box in 2.1), accent and code-switching, which is a rich way of expressing identity and projecting local identities (ibid.). Galloway & Rose (2015) state that in Singapore, the local variety Singlish “reflects a shared identity”.

ELF identity is more contested. Speakers might associate with inner-circle speaker communities such as the UK, with their speakers within their own country (as with World Englishes), or with other non-native speaker communities (Jenkins, 2007), such as a region. Some also claim that, since ELF interactions take place between speakers from a wide range of L1s, ELF identities are more fluid as speakers accommodate to interlocutors of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds

(Baker, 2015). Alternatively, English spoken in the expanding circle might be culture and identity-free.

On this view, local languages express identity while ELF is simply a language of communication. This might well be Wardhaugh's view. In outer and expanding circle settings, English can also impact on social class identity. As a status symbol, it acts as a powerful class marker (Bolton, 2008, 8).

3.3 Modernizing

English plays the role of a modernizing language in societies and of the language of science and technology. It is the language of the internet and within schools can be used to teach science, mathematics and technology subjects, becoming perhaps more important in higher education. The majority of scientific journals are published in English and it enables access to publications. Furthermore, it also enables access to jobs in the technology field.

On this view, local languages might be seen to impede modernization. However, there is evidence that other languages can fulfil this function too. Bahasa Indonesian, for example, has been elaborated for this purpose (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 48).

4 – EIL in Myanmar

4.01 – Country Overview

Myanmar is extremely diverse and multilingual, recognizing 135 'national races' and over 100 ethnic languages (Lo Bianco, 2016). It is also extremely divided, which has led to decades of

ethnic strife. Barmars, the largest ethnic group, comprise 68% of the population, while seven larger ethnic minorities include Karen/Kayin (6.2%), and Shan (7%) with their own states and ethnic languages (Aye & Sercombe, 2014, 149) (see map, appendix). However, Burmese, originally the Bamar tongue, is the only national and official language. English was an official language until it was removed in 1974 (ibid, 153) and is spoken by approximately 5% of Burmese (Bolton, 2008).

The country was isolated from 1962 until elections in 2012. As a result, it is underdeveloped, ranked 148th globally for development (UNDP, 2015). More optimistically, as with neighbours Cambodia and Laos, strong economic growth and steady increases in inward investment are forecast (ibid.).

4.1 English is neutral

4.1.1 Southeast Asian identity – projecting lingua franca in ASEAN¹

Myanmar English is difficult to categorize. Despite its similar colonial history to nearby outer-circle countries such as Malaysia, Kirkpatrick (2007) sees Myanmar as expanding circle, because of historical isolation and low proficiency. However, official documentation such as passports are entirely in English and it is used widely at universities (British Academy, 2015). Perhaps, then, it lies somewhere between the two circles, though, effects of isolation have been such that a self-conscious World English local variety has not become nativized. A further linguistic effect of isolation has been the retention of a slightly archaic variety, dependent on outdated British norms.

However, in opening up, a regional ASEAN ELF appears to be developing, as English has been chosen as the working language of ASEAN. The organization seeks to encourage a regional ASEAN identity (Kirkpatrick, 2011, 3) and it is possible that a shared variety of English would help achieve this. It has been said that ELF speakers can use English to identify linguistically with an international non-native speaker community (Jenkins, 2007, 191). So, Myanmar and other ASEAN ELF speakers may project a South East Asian identity through English. There is growing evidence that a self-conscious ASEAN variety is forming. One shared feature are East Asian discourse norms such as preferring not to interrupt (Kirkpatrick, 2011, 220). Hashim et al. (2016) identify lexis features including particles such as *lah* and *wah*. Though characteristic of Malaysian and Singapore English, it is claimed they are used by all ASEAN nationalities in ELF settings.

However, it seems that this variety is heavily influenced by Malay so perhaps the status and power of respective ASEAN Englishes should be borne in mind. Sung (2015, 329) explains that hierarchical relationships among varieties are informed by perceived statuses of varieties on the global linguistic market.

Linguistic power is unequal in ASEAN because Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei are outer circle, with English playing a greater institutional role than in expanding circle countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and perhaps Myanmar. In terms of economics, a parallel inequality exists. Though a regional trade bloc, there are wealth disparities far greater than within, for example, the EU: Singapore has a GDP per capita 40 times higher than Myanmar (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017).

Thus, it is possible that Singapore English might be perceived as more prestigious, with norms spreading from the wealthier regional outer circle epicenter. This is consistent with Hashim's description of ASEAN ELF lexis.

4.1.2 The possibility of English as a neutral lingua franca within Myanmar

For members of ethnic minority groups, Burmese, representing the largest ethnic group, is considered hegemonic (Jönsson, 2010, 63) whereas English is seen as more neutral.

Potentially, English might be viewed by ethnic minorities as a neutral interethnic group language, as it is in India (Ostler, 2005, 509), Singapore (see 2.1) or, to a lesser extent, Malaysia (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 28). Historically, there are precedents: when the constitution was written in 1961, some ethnic minorities wanted to maintain English as an official language (Hlaing, 2007, 154). Further, in Kachin state, many still want to see English replace Burmese in this role (South & Lall, 2016b).

Of course, different ethnic groups have different goals and varying degrees of willingness to cooperate with national policies. Another study found that only the most die-hard ethnic nationalists wish to see Burmese replaced by English as the lingua franca (South & Lall, 2016a, 146).

More speculatively, ethnic minority groups, some of whom were more sympathetic to British colonial rule, might appeal to the history of English within the country in calling for English to play a greater role.

But, militating against this, the national government are very determined to promote Burmese as the national, unifying language. Further, low English proficiency, with only 5% of the population

speaking English even amongst those groups who might seek its introduction, could also limit this possibility. Further, the lack of a self-conscious, Myanmar variety may mean that it feels unnatural to speak English with other Burmese.

4.2 English is imperialist

4.2.1 Continuities with the colonial past

In the colonial era (1885-1948), English was important at all levels of education. Entering university required a high level of English (Hlaing, 2007) and it was the administrative language. (Ireland & Van Benthuyssen, 2015, 2). From around the 1930s, there was fierce resistance to English instruction led by student organizations (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 51); this struggle was expressed in Burmese, which was situated as the anti-colonial language until independence in 1948.

Immediately after independence, Burmese, in a nation-building role, became the university medium of instruction. But English was reinstated in the 1970s to respond to declining standards (Ireland & Van Benthuyssen, 2015). Nowadays, young Burmese want to learn English to get good jobs. Many feel they have been cut off, and English will help them quickly catch up (British Academy, 2015).

Today, there is a high level of ignorance of the colonial period and few associate it with speaking English. Discontinuities with English now and then are the fact that now it is seen as instrumental, helping to modernize rather than being imposed from above. As the language of higher education, it seems to reflect a global trend (see 2.2) rather than being a relic of the imperial past. Perhaps, though, one commonality as shown in 4.2.4, is that it remains inegalitarian.

4.2.2 Displacement

4.2.2.1 *Domain loss*

Almost all higher education institutions in Myanmar have adopted a policy of English as the medium of instruction (British Academy, 2015), but given low proficiency levels teacher explanations are often in Burmese. It is thought that English is the natural language of science and technology and that it will prepare graduates for the modern labour market. However, this might have consequences for Burmese: there is a danger of “domain collapse” (ibid.). Lexis relating to science and technology is not elaborated in Burmese, and that which is falls into disuse. There may also be a danger of English appearing increasingly in other domains inside Myanmar, such as business.

4.2.2.2 *Ethnic Languages*

There is a danger that ethnic languages will be displaced in competition with English and Burmese. Kirkpatrick and Sussex (2012) identify an “overwhelming regional trend of people to learn their respective national language and English”. The Philippines, for example, teaches English and national language Tagalog in a bilingual education system, marginalizing ethnic languages (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 38).

Ethnic minorities continue to seek mother tongue-education while ongoing national education reforms also state this goal. It has proved viable in more conciliatory states such as Mon (South & Lall, 2016b). Burmese education reforms also seek to improve English proficiency to prepare for English medium of instruction at secondary and higher education. The two objectives may not be compatible. Students may encounter English and Burmese for the first time at school,

creating significant difficulties for students learning three languages at primary level. Lack of training for ethnic minority teachers is also a concern (Aye & Sercombe, 2014, 158), whereas English teacher training may well receive foreign agency funding (see 4.2.3).

In the rush for economic progress, English might be seen as modernizing and ethnic languages as hindering development. Indeed, a common sentiment is that the country needs to ‘catch up’ fast. It might also be politically expedient to promote English as it does not challenge the unifying Burmese tongue whereas local languages potentially do.

The consequences might be displacement, especially in institutional settings, of the language of ethnolinguistic identity, while two languages of wider communication prevail. If this happens it is quite possible that attitudes to English and Burmese would harden.

4.2.3 ELT aid supports inner circle governments

Phillipson claims that English and ELT-aid are utilized by inner circle governments. Kirkpatrick (2007, 36) concurs that the “British government sees great advantage in the spread of English...especially in post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and...China”. In this light, Myanmar has been proposed as “a site of Sino-US Geopolitical Competition” (Haacke, 2012), with recent American-Myanmar rapprochement diminishing China’s political control in Myanmar.

In 2014, a nationwide British government-funded ELT project (britishcouncil.org, 2014) coincided with the arrival of US State department teachers. Both build capacity in public sector English language teaching. As a result, these schemes will probably help consolidate UK/US influence in educational and wider governmental institutions in Myanmar. Therefore, it seems logical to view ELT aid as complementing governments’ larger geopolitical objectives.

4.2.4 Greater inequality

Wealthier Burmese living in large cities are more likely to achieve English proficiency, given greater educational opportunities. In describing Burmese English language education Kirkpatrick (2010, 53) states that resources and materials are poor. They are likely to be worse in state schools and in rural areas. Also, as discussed in 4.1.1, ethnic minorities face an additional linguistic burden in achieving fluency in English. Furthermore, English acts as a middle class identity marker (see 3.2). Class differences are manifested through knowledge of English which might act as a barrier to education and jobs.

Within higher education, knowledge of English is assumed. Materials are written in English, as are entrance and end-of-term exams, though in lectures teacher explanations are usually in Burmese (British Academy, 2015). This particularly disadvantages those with low proficiency. Here, English has a status role. For example, high-profile English public speaking competitions take place at universities with the final attended by statesmen including the president (<http://www.president-office.gov.mm>, 2017). Given low levels of proficiency nationally, much higher education practice represents an idealized view of a fluent student body.

Looking forward, one of the results of economic development is likely to be the growth of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Bolton, 2008, 11). Related to this, the arrival and expansion of multinational companies and increasing tourism will create jobs that require English-speaking workers. This may well also increase the gap between those who speak English and those who do not.

4.3 English is democratic

4.3.1 Burmese norms in English

Burmese is less democratic than English. It features a wide use of complex kinship terms denoting “formality, courtesy or intimacy” (Burling, 1965, 107). These terms become honorifics to refer to non-family members who are either junior, equal or senior to the speaker. Forms commonly heard in Yangon include *ko* (male of the same age), *u* (older male) and *daw* (older woman).

Clearly, inner circle English is more democratic than this. However, Burmese often use these honorifics when they speak English: young men describe their friends as, for example, *Ko Aung* seeing it as a respectful and solidarity-seeking way to talk. Also, they tend to use forms of address which signal the interlocutor’s status. So, a teacher will be referred to as *saya* or “teacher”, and management referred to by their job title.

Furthermore, as discussed in section 2.3, discourse norms may remain from L1. Norms like a reluctance to criticize those in powerful positions may well remain in English encounters.

5 Conclusion

After examining the three different perspectives on EIL in terms of theoretical background and the roles of language in the development of society, I have found that English in Myanmar can indeed play a somewhat neutral role between different ethnic groups. The importance of this role may increase with the emergence of a local ASEAN identity, expressed through a regional lingua franca. Though English is no longer an imperial language in Myanmar, there are some risks associated with its widespread use for both Burmese and ethnic minority languages. Finally,

while English may be more democratic than Burmese, the variety used in Myanmar retains some less democratic discourse norms.

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Appendix 1 (Political map of Burma/Myanmar)



<http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/Map-of-Burma-states-and-division1.jpg>