Globalisation and the Myth of Liberalisation

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In this paper my concern is with the Arab university and, more specifically, with English departments in those universities. My concern is with who does what to whom and why. Who globalises whom? Why do they globalise them and to what effect?

My argument is then that the global village of diversity and reciprocity is a myth and that myth is destructive of the individuality and independence of English departments in Arab universities. In the first part I shall attempt to put a context to the discussion in terms of the place of English teaching in the Arab university. Then I want to look at three different ways in which globalisation has had an impact on the teaching of English and English departments. These are: modes of discourse, assessment and evaluation, and the spread of affiliation or links to other organisations. My final points are suggestions concerning strategies to empower our departments and their students to take an active role in the changing global environment. I am not proposing an isolationist or head-in-the-sand approach but rather a critical and pro-active response to the world of instant communication.

The role of departments of English language and literature has been fundamentally affected by the changes from colonial to post-colonial status and now to a post-post-colonial or globalised state. This is a process which has gone on for many years. Edward Said in Culture and Imperialism (1993) gives a rather depressing and, even now, a much too easily recognisable picture of English departments in the Gulf region:

> Asked in 1985 by a national university in one of the Persian Gulf States to visit there for a week, I found that my mission was to evaluate its English programme and perhaps offer some recommendations for its improvement. I was flabbergasted to discover that in sheer numerical terms English attracted the largest number of young people of any department in the university, but disheartened to find that the curriculum was divided about equally between what was called linguistics … and literature. The literary courses were, I thought, rigorously orthodox, a pattern followed even in older and more distinguished universities like those of Cairo and Ain Shams. Young Arabs dutifully read Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen and Dickens as they might have studied Sanskrit or mediaeval heraldry …It was an anachronistic and odd confluence of rote learning, uncritical teaching and (to put it kindly) haphazard results.
> …The reason for the large numbers of students taking English was given frankly by a somewhat disaffected instructor: many of the students proposed to end up working for airlines or banks in which English was the worldwide lingua franca. This all but terminally consigned English to the level of a technical language

stripped of expressive and aesthetic characteristics and denuded of any critical or self-conscious dimension. (Said: 1993: 368-369)

Said goes on to point out the paradox that English which was once "the language of ruler and administrator has now … sunk to a low, uninteresting and attenuated level." whereas "… in other contexts English has acquired remarkable prominence and many interesting new communities of literary, critical and philosophical practice …" (ibid:370)

In this brief passage Said brings to our attention the key changes in the last forty years. As the rulers' language it held a privileged status and so did those who studied it. A familiarity with the language, poetry and culture gave entry to a sophisticated club where people could come and go and talk of Michelangelo. The vestiges of this period are seen in the curricula to which Edward Said refers and there are still plenty of those around.

The post-colonial experience saw the assertion of national language and culture at the expense of English language and literature and then the influx of "the technical language" to which Said refers. And it is this technical English which proliferates in the globalised/globalising community pushing the literature-based curriculum into the hinterlands. The slogan of 'language not culture' has accompanied this invasion of English throughout educational institutions from primary to tertiary. It is somewhat paradoxical that the victim of this process has been high culture of literary criticism and that base commercial English-language culture is virtually omnipresent. However it should be remembered that the reaction against the onslaught of globalised commercial culture has been extensive in the west particularly in Europe.

We are then faced with an English which some claim is now a second language rather than a foreign one. School and university students are under great pressure to acquire this magic key to success much as our ancestors had to learn Latin and indeed Arabic. It is an attractive notion that the babbling tower has given way to nation speaking unto nation. There have been wonderful moments when, through English and the Internet, RAWA, the voice of Afghani women, was able to broadcast and inform the world in a way that no foreign journalist could. There are many other examples of the powerless making their voices heard but these are the exceptions to the rule whereby the voices heard are generally reflections of the voice of the globaliser. In this social context it is said that English departments are under pressure to abandon their traditional pursuits and become facilitators or trainers for commerce.

How does this manifest itself? Let us look at the control of the discourse. There are two main ways in which this can be seen to be happening: firstly through the dominance of one linguistic culture and secondly through the imposition of computer discourse. Let me cite an example.

The scene is a translation course on Arabic and English scientific or academic text at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London. The students are Arabic speakers. The lecturer explains the rhetoric and discourse of the English language scientific text. He then asks the students to translate an

Arabic text into English. The students perform the task. He then asks them to translate the text into Arabic. The lecturer is astonished to find that, when they translate back into Arabic, they use the rhetorical structure of the English text. The Arabic rhetoric has been lost. The English model has become the correct way to do it. Something has been lost – and not just for the Arabic text. The English has lost something too. It has lost the possibility of new modes of expression and thought entering the language and enriching it. This one way traffic benefits neither side and I believe this is becoming more the case rather than less.

The influence of technological change has also affected the discourse: through the use of large corpora of language and secondly through computer modelling and mapping.

Increasingly the source material for research and language description is based on computer corpora databases derived from a myriad of 'real' usually native language sources. This is fine for such research purposes but less so when it comes to teaching materials and testing when the contexts extend beyond the limitations of the corpus. A corpus of language is by definition a block of dead language – it is completed on the day it is used. The sources are usually journals, newspapers and conversations taken from native sources. As far as providing the input for receptive skills this is useful but where it falls down is with the productive skills or, to put it another way, when the learner answers back! The use of frequencies and concordances come to dictate the models for production. It can and frequently does lead to the description of competencies. In fact the competencies become a prescriptive recipe, a denial of creative response. The language becomes controlled by the limitations of the prescription, a series of typical actions or speech acts, and is thus restrictive and behaviouristic. It restricts human possibility to the range provided.

Hyland (1993) summarises this kind of discourse:
> … it relies on a crude form of behaviourism, attaches too much importance to performance over knowledge and understanding, artificially separates the mental and physical components of performance … competence-based education is part of a broader political programme aimed at vocationalising the whole educational system and undermining the values of a liberal education. (p. 57)

In this year celebrating the birth of George Orwell (who, in the best Orwellian tradition, is not George Orwell!), it is worthwhile remembering his descriptions of language and thought processes in Nineteen Eighty Four where he describes how control of the discourse reduces the power of expression. Need I enter the world of acronyms?

Orwell describes how the dictatorial state of Oceania controls the minds and thoughts of its population. He was of course writing about the futuristic world of 1984 seen from the perspective of 1949 when the book was published. His description of the diet of culture fed to the people is frighteningly relevant.

> And the Ministry (of Truth) had not only to supply the multifarious needs of the Party, but also to repeat the whole operation at a lower level for the benefit of the proletariat. There was a whole chain of separate departments dealing with proletarian literature, music, drama and entertainment generally. Here was produced rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means on a special kind of kaleidoscope known as a versificator. There was even a whole sub-section – Pornsec, it was called in Newspeak – which …
> (Orwell: 1949: 45/46)

It is a pity Orwell did not live to see the Internet. He is particularly good when it comes to describing Newspeak, the language which Oceania seeks to impose on its people:

> The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. it was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words… Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought …
> (ibid: 312/313)

It is a complex matter whether language change is the result of deliberate manipulation or a consequence of social or technological evolution. Orwell was discussing deliberate control but I think that, whatever the reason, the control of the medium tends to favour the controller and I have suggested this tends to be a one-way traffic.

A similar process applies to computer modelling which offers a pathway approach much used in businesses and increasingly in educational software. You phone your bank and a disembodied voice offers you a series of choices. You press a button and are offered a further series of choices. The medium itself is determining the type of discourse to be undergone and that is a reduction to a set of common actions provided by the supplier. I do not suggest that this mode of discourse is an assault only on the Arabic university. It is an assault on humanity! It is not human. We are much more complex, more logical, more illogical, more inventive and more stupid. We are storytellers, juggling with time and relevance and self and others. We are not machines.

Evaluation and assessment offers us another example of the threat to independence.

There has always been a tendency for teachers to play down the importance of testing. It is just something we do at the end of a course possibly joined with some coursework. However there is now a movement towards standardisation of language attainment both in the descriptions of thee outcomes and in the

actual tests used to achieve this. In the Gulf area there is an increasing use of American or British tests, in particular TOEFL and IELTS. These are the tests used for entry to American and British universities but now they are being used for various purposes such as entry to university departments and as exit criteria. In 1997 I gave a paper attacking the use of these tests as wholly inappropriate and illustrative of a post-colonial dependency in their iconic status (Tennent 1997). However the main points are underlined in an article by Taylor (2000: 3/4) . He sums up as follows:

> … This history of Language Centre testing over fifteen years shows a pattern. First there is a demand for proof of some international standard for student level. In response to this demand the university enters a somewhat expensive contract with UCLES. When the UCLES product arrives there is excessive faith in it, with the result that tests are used for a purpose or level for which they were not designed. As the Centre scales back its expectations, it begins to change the UCLES tests even within the domain for which they were designed. By the end of this contract period little remains of the original test(s). For the next few years all tests are designed in-house. Then the cycle begins again.

He cites one example of as diagnostic proficiency test used as a placement device:

> In the first round of testing 2 students achieved Band 2 (adequate for university work), 48 achieved Band 1 (marginally adequate) and 494 received Band 0 (serious problems). (ibid: 2000: 4)

Possibly the test did what it was meant to in its own terms but clearly it is administratively unacceptable. It did not relate to the reality on the ground. These imported exams have their functions in their own settings: TOEFL provides a useful benchmark for entrance to US colleges and IELTS for UK and Australian universities (Davies 1990) but they are being used for entirely different reasons in entirely different settings.

Pennycook (1994) shows how the English Language Teaching phenomenon has become a major business concern not only with textbooks but also with examinations, pointing out the large amounts of money involved – these are not charitable institutions. They are not philanthropists. Then why is it that these examinations – and we all know the power of the examination upon the syllabus – are infiltrating our universities and institutions? One argument runs that it gives employers a means of assessing the applicant's proficiency. I cannot imagine that employers know or care about 'bands' or IELTS or TOEFL or PET. They judge what comes up before them at interview. They place much more credence on the status of the institution or the reference and that takes a long time to build. I think it has more to do with dependency culture, touching the hem of the iconic provider. Perhaps graduates of UK and US universities have a vested interest in the superior status of their qualifications and seek to impose this on Arab universities. Perhaps it is the power of marketing the myth of standardisation and affiliation. Pennycook, in his chapter *ELT from Development Aid to Global Community,* (1994: 145-182) shows the power of this business and how it influences the discourse.

If we are to standardise our courses and assessment, whose standards do we use? What kind of standards do we use? Is it a question of one fit for all? Who is affiliated to whom?

My argument runs that this is a one way process and, perhaps, this is even more so when it comes to the field of affiliation and experts or consultants.

To give an example: not so long ago a distinguished silver haired American came to consult, advise and evaluate our department. He presented equally distinguished and long curriculum vitae which revealed his experience and expertise in mediaeval literature and management of a college for native-speaking American students. He was indeed an honourable man and he set about his task in the professional way we would expect. However what was interesting in this exercise was that he had no experience or obvious knowledge of the Arab world nor of the teaching of language and literature to non-native speakers of English. His main recommendation seemed to be that we should institute a course in mediaeval English although he conceded that the teaching of Middle English might be dispensed with. He suggested expanding a survey course at the expense of a language skills course and seemed to conclude that our syllabus could then be compared with an American college degree course. His fat report is not untypical of the fat reports which now gather dust in our archives and we can but hope his will join the others fairly soon.

While he may have perceived that we did not constitute a department of native speaking American students and that we were not situated in the American Mid-west, he did not doubt that that was what we should aspire to! Still, I have no doubt he was an honourable man.

We need people to come from outside to bring new ideas and to help us see ourselves in a critical way but they should be people whose experience has some relevance to ours. A member of an English department from Indonesia, China, Norway or Belarus would be a lot more relevant to our needs. Perhaps they might invite us back as consultants to their universities?!!

It is paradoxical that the possibilities implied by a globalised world of rapid communication and an increasingly common language for that communication should be constricted by the processes I have described: a vulgarisation of the lingua franca, an increasing control of the discourse from provider to consumer through influence and technology, an increasing domination of course structure and assessment and an increasing reliance on native-speaker expertise and institutional dependency. English literature and language departments which were once the cradles of intellectual elite are losing their position in spite of an increased reliance on English in so many other aspects of society. If the language teaching aspect is being taken over by schools and specialised language courses for specific purposes, and if the literary function is seen as a vestige of a by-gone colonial inheritance, what then is the function of English literature departments in Arab universities? The need for highly skilled translators remains an obvious one but what else?

Pennycook (1994) concludes The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language with an up-beat note drawing upon Edward said.

> English offers a community of speakers through which oppositional projects can be taken up. Said (1990) speaks of the possibilities presented by some of the new social and political movements around the world, such as new and insurgent democracy and ecology movements, but laments that few of these movements ' have the capacity and freedom to generalise beyond their own regionally local circumstances.' But English does offer some possibilities in enabling what Said calls a 'common counter-articulation'…. If English is the major languages through which the forces of neo-colonial exploitation operate, it is also the language through which 'common counter-articulations' can perhaps most effectively be made. (P. 326)

What is this counter-articulation? Pennycook quotes from various writers representing the post-colonial experience (pp 263-266). Writers ranging from Achebe to Baldwin speak of being able to adopt the language of the coloniser and strike back, of taking English into their own domain and presenting it to the world as new English expressing their own identity. He (P. 295) cites Zahra Al Zeera (1990):

> The fight against dependency is made possible by empowering the next generation to use the weapon that created it – the English language.

To me this does not mean the mastery of sub-technical or business language but to make the cultural debate a two-way process. It is scarcely controversial to say that the best new writing in English comes not from the American or British literary establishment but from the ex-colonial nations such as India and the Anglophone parts of Africa as well as the immigrant populations of the West. Arab writers are also beginning to make their voices heard. This process does not serve to diminish or deny the English language cultural tradition but to enrich it with new possibilities. On a macro level the former colonial nations learn to engage with the discourses of the oppressed and on a micro level the language is embellished with innovative figurative expression. Arabic metaphor brought into English challenges the non-Arab reader and adds to his linguistic and conceptual inheritance. The history of ideas and narratives is one of borrowings and re-creations. Stories, songs and technologies travel; they are embraced and re-constructed. They succeed or fail, becoming part of the recipient culture or they fall away. The two-way process transforms them and adds nuances in a wonderfully unpredictable and human way. Northrop Frye (1980: 65)) saw this, not just as an inter-language or culture phenomenon but an essential part of the process of understanding:

> It seems to me, that once again, some such conception as that of 'recreation' is needed to make sense of such questions. Every reader recreates what he reads: even if he is reading a personal letter from a friend he is still recreating it into his own personal orbit. Recreation of this kind always involves some kind of translation. To read is invariably to translate to some degree, however well one knows the language of what is read … What can be translated is what is loosely called sense, the relation of many signifiers to a common signified. Each reader, translator or recreator, renders his text into a form determined largely by his own cultural context

It is this process of recreation which I think should constitute the goal of our literary and critical studies: the student should be encouraged not only to recreate existing texts whether of drama, poetry, prose or indeed film and television scripts, but also to create new texts. I think that it is time for a critically and linguistically-aware Arab literature in English to challenge the ignorance and stereotypes perpetrated by the Western-dominated media. In essence it is time to educate back. I would like to see this creative enterprise as a key component of English Department goals. I want to see plays, films, novels, short stories with narratives and images which tell it like it is not mirror images of the western input. There are many stories and it is time the West heard them whether through the stage, the cinemas, the written word or the Internet.

To sum up, I think that globalisation in its present manifestation constitutes a threat to the independence of the teaching of English in Arab universities. I believe this one-way transmission of language and culture needs to be transformed into a two-way process if the ideals of the global village are to be realised. In departments of English I think we need to concentrate on the following:

1. Departments should focus on various genres aiming at both a critical awareness and production. There should be more emphasis on productive and creative skills in the different genres.
2. There should be greater cooperation between departments of Arabic and English literature in areas such as comparative studies of literature and rhetoric.
3. Translation should be more integrated with other courses.
4. Evaluation and assessment should be internal incorporating the best external practices but not sub-contracting to external agencies.
5. There should be greater cooperation between Arab universities involved in similar enterprises in terms of affiliations and consultancies rather than a dependency on native-speaking agencies.

In general, it is time to educate back.

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