Language & Politics 1[1]

Moral English

Anthea Fraser Gupta

The nineteenth century administrators of British India were the first people to confront a number of educational issues which were later taken to other parts of the Empire, and which continue to concern their administrative descendants. One of these issues being the deterministic idea -- that language shapes society. Last century's British colonialists were pretty sure that English would improve the morals of the Indians. In Singapore (once part of British India), the late twentieth century government thinks English may not be too good for your morals. What can have happened?

In nineteenth century India, the children who learnt English were either European, or part European, or were upper class Indians. The Indians and the British had similar attitudes to class, and did not want to see the lower orders getting ideas above their station. There were sound commercial reasons for teaching English to some of the natives' *sons*, so that they could help in the running of the business that was India. From the Indians point of view, English skills could lead to prestigious and remunerative jobs, in the professions and in administration. In 1990s Singapore, all education is English-medium. There is still an official emphasis on the commercial and pragmatic reasons for teaching and learning English, even though English is now also a major part of the social and domestic life of many people.

> The management of success in Singapore is directly related to the ascendancy of English in the world today and the widespread use of the language in Singapore, allowing it to plug itself into the international grid of business and finance. In other words, 'the central position of English in Singapore is cause and effect' (Edwin Thumboo, personal communication). English is responsible for the new technospace in Singapore having brought phenomenal changes in the landscape and fortunes of the people.
>
> (Pakir 1991:137)

However, one thing has changed. The British rulers of India saw India as sorely in need of Reason and Morality (and Christianity, which amounted to the same thing), and saw European education as the main route to this conversion. Lord Macaulay put the issue very clearly:

> The languages of Western Europe civilised Russia. I cannot doubt that they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the Tartar.
>
> (Macaulay 1835)

The Hindoo College was Calcutta's premier English school, and in 1824, it received a very favourable report from the General Committee of Public Instruction:

> A command of the English language and a familiarity with its literature and science have been acquired to an extent rarely equalled by any schools in Europe. ... The moral effect has been remarkable and an impatience of the instructions of Hinduism and a disregard for its ceremonies are openly avowed by young men of respectable birth and talents, and entertained by many more who outwardly conform to the practices of their countrymen.

In Singapore, English is seen as importing *undesirable* 'Western values', and the official ethnic languages (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) are presented as 'cultural ballast'. Teaching them in schools is seen as enabling children to "keep in touch with their heritage and cultural values"(*Singapore 1992*:163). In his last National Day rally speech as Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew looked back on his work since Independence (*Straits Times* 27 August 1990). In the Mandarin text (translated into

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[1]   I talked on this topic at the Open University in December 1996, and am very grateful to the staff of

English in the *Straits Times* report) he expressed regret at the wholesale shift to English in

the schools:

> If I had the opportunity to start all over again in 1965, then the system of education would not be the same. I would have preserved the Chinese primary schools.
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> It is much more convenient because ages of six to 12 are the most important period to emphasise the importance of values, English as a second language.
>
> Then after a year in secondary school, the English language will become the first language and the Chinese will become second language. But time has passed. I cannot go back to make this new arrangement. But I believe as long as we can make other changes, we can succeed gradually ... [*original punctuation*]
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> I believe that cultural values are our basic strength. If we lose these, then we will not be able to solve our problems.

(*Straits Times* 27 August 1990)

The Thai writer Pira Sudham (who always writes in English) regards English as a

pschychotropic medicine:

> "[Pira Sudham] is hailed as a voice from the grassoots of Thailand but he writes in English and refuses to have his books translated into Thai -- although this would immediately widen his national audience. Meanwhile, Pra seems to have no proscription against other languages; his works are available also in French and Swedish.
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>   'Language is a product of the mind," Pira explains. 'The Thai language is structured to carry a certain pathos and expression that, to me, cripples the mind. As does the Thai tradition and culture, which teaches children not to see, not to hear and not to speak. This robs us of our innate inquisitiveness, and we grow up to be voiceless.'
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> ... Joyce says that when a child is born in Ireland, a net is cast to catch his soul. In my society it is not a net but an apparatus to maim the mind for life. To me, writing in English is like using crutches to catch up with other able-bodied people.'"

(*Report by Joyce Moy in Asia Magazine, Nov 17-19 1995*)

You may think the journalist has misrepresented Sudham -- she hasn't -- two years before

this report I heard him say the very same words in a2 talk in Singapore (to astonished

gasps).

The rhetoric of Macaulay and Grant (and Pira Sudham) gives nearly all the virtues to the Europeans, and all the vices to the Asians. In 1990s Singapore, it is somewhat (but not entirely) reversed, with nearly all the virtues going to the Asians, and the vices to the 'West'. However, ideas of vice and virtue have apparently not changed much.

The table summarises the general pattern. Good values are shown in green, and bad ones in red.

VALUE CHART

Grant/	Macaulay etc	Lee Kuan	Yew etc
European	**Asian**	**Western**	**Asian**
virility	*effeminacy*		
morality	*licentiousness*	*licentiousness (liberal values) frivolity*	morality earnestness
Christianity	*idolatry/superstition ?Islam*	?Christianity	selected religious traditions (esp. Islam & Confucianism) *superstition*
work ethic	*laziness*	*laziness welfarism*	work ethic
commercial acumen			commercial acumen
liberal ideas *democracy* parliamentary rule	*oppression despotism*	*liberal ideas ?democracy*	strong government
science	*ignorance*	science	
patriotism			patriotism
charity benevolence	*selfishness*	*individualism*	communitarian values benevolence

It is difficult to imagine a public figure who would promote immorality, laziness, and selfishness as desirable virtues. Rulers naturally have a desire for orderly and conformist societies, hence the positive evaluation of hard work and patriotism. In both periods a distinction (surely spurious) is made between religion and superstition, presenting organised religion (Islam and Christianity) as religion and folk-based practices (Hinduism

and traditional Chinese practices) as superstition. Both groups are agreed about scientific knowledge being linked with the European/Western tradition.

Not surprisingly, there is a lot of confusion about the evaluation of political traditions. The nineteenth century British writers made a difference between *liberal ideas* (good) and *democracy* (very bad) which would not transfer well to modern thinking. But the dangersof democracy are perceived by both the nineteenth century British colonialists and by the policticians of modern Singapore.

Charles Grant wrote a long treatise (1792-97) which set out what English education could do for India. One aim was to 'advance' Indians so that they could be citizens of the Empire and perhaps eventually take control of their own country. Some of them, that is. The idealism was the idealism of the early nineteenth, and was based on class and race assumptions. The class assumptions were in some cases stronger than race. So the "best class" of people could be drawn out of their ignorance and developed into true citizens. Some basic education was a good thing for "the lower classes" too, as it could promote docility and ensure that "every man kept steadily within his own place" (Charles Grant). There is a danger, however. If Indians were given the opportunity to have an English education, would that really lead to their being more docile and governable (like the Scots, with a high standard of education and very governable, so much better than the lawless and ignorant Irish) or would they become rebellious (like the American colonists)?

> If the English language, if English opinions, and improvements, are introduced in our Asiatic possessions, into Bengal for instance; if Christianity, specially, is established in that quarter; and if, together with these changes, many Englishmen colonize there, will not the people learn to desire English liberty and the English form of Government, a share in the legislation of their own country, and commissions in the army maintained in that country? Will not the army thence become, in time,

wholly provincial, officered by natives of India, without attachment to the sovereign state? Will not the people at length come to think it a hardship to be subject, and to pay tribute, to a foreign country: and finally cast off that subjection and assert their independence?

Grant thought the answer was "No", because:

> To bring a timid submissive people, whom the Tartars called '*worshippers of power*' up to the manliness of the European character, to elevate the feeblest of them, the Bengalese, to so high a point of energy, that like the American descendants of the British themselves, they should plan the daring project of an independent empire, seems to be something beyond what has yet been seen, or is reasonably to be expected for the effects of institutions, civil or religious, upon nations.

So that's all right. Meanwhile, back in modern Singapore, there are still worries about

democratic ideas being imported. Tan Keng Soon wrote a letter to Singapore's leading

English newspaper (*Straits Times*) in October 1994.

> ... the weakness of democracy is that it tends to produce governments that redistribute wealth.
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> A successful market economy tends to result in inequalities in the distribution of wealth.
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> ...[public demand for a welfare state combined with equal democratic participation of those who contribute much and those who little to society results in] a strong tendency for democracies to produce welfare states. This means high taxes and erosion of the work ethics.
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> Another problem with democracies is that it is so hard to make tough decisions.
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> ...
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> I believe that economic progress would lead to more democracy and human rights and not the other way round.
>
> ...
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> A mid-point between the two extremes of full democracy and authoritarian regimes is probably best for them [newly industrialising countries]. You could end up with something like Singapore. It is sufficiently authoritarian to be able to apply bitter medicine when needed and democratic enough to care for the basic aspirations of the people.

Everyone seems to agree that 'science' is a good thing, but being able to read English and gettting hold of all that technology brings its own problems. F Warden, writing in 1823, was concerned about the effect of the printing press:

> what would be the effects of the power and influence of the Press in the present state of the country, if the Natives are to be taught the art of Printing? The dissemination of whaever they choose to publish, would, of course, immediately follow. If we could control the Press ... by publishing only what the local authorities might approve, it would be well; but such a precaution would manifest to the discrimination of the Natives, so great a dread of the effect of our own policy in facilitating the means of diffusing knowledge, that we should excite a spirit of enquiry and of agitation under a controlled system, which would not be very favourable to our character for consistency, or to any confidence in the stability of our supremacy.

In modern Singapore, as in other parts of the world, regulation of the Internet is causing concern now. Amy Leong, in her Internet document, *Laws for the Internet*, posted on behalf of the Young PAP (the PAP is Singapore's ruling party) identified five areas of concern, three of which relate to governability:

- Pornographic materials are easily accessible now from Internet. Some parents are getting uncomfortable with such ability to access.
- Articles attacking other races and religions have appeared in some newsgroups (not necessarily in Singapore).
- Articles present in SCS [soc.culture.singapore] or a WWW site can be defamatory. The present information laws in Singapore make the writer as well as the publisher/distributor of such article liable. But in Internet, who is the publisher/distributor ?
- Political web sites have appeared as played a role in Taiwan and USA elections. Many have agreed that Internet does not yet play an important role in the current elections but its role is likely to be important few more years from now. Politicians are likely to use it for their campaigns, including video broadcast and attacking their opponents.
- More and more businesses are using Internet to conduct business. A USA company will conclude a sales in cyberspace, at least one casino is known to be operating in cyberspace and sell into any country using credit cards.

Writers sometimes (but not always) make it clear (like Macaulay) that they think the values come from the texts written in English, or the things learnt through English, and

others (like Pira Sudham) that the values are inherent in the language. What the politicians of both centuries are all doing is to attach moral values to languages. They may manipulate access to the language, or to the materials written in the language in the hope of achieving governable populations. The repeated attribution of negative values to a particular language is also intended to bring to the attention of subjects the depravity of some group or other. The depravity of nineteenth century Indians was to be remediated, while modern Singaporeans should avoid the depravity of the West. It is not quite clear whether this strategy does promote governability......