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Acculturized English: A Case of Language Hybridization

(On the emergence of non-native English literatures)

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Abstract

The rise of English as a prestige language across the globe compellingly attracts many non-natives to use English as medium for the formal arena. In the field of literature, especially in Asia, the so-called non-native English writings have emerged as a result of user preference for what is established and highly esteemed.

Since English has its own innate linguistic features from both its own culture and logic, the non-native English users have created strategies to minimize the 'foreignness' of English by nativizing it: that is, by blending indigenous features of the mother tongue with English. These techniques include code switching, borrowing, embedding, contextualizing, and using syntactic devices consistent with local style.

In effect, the accommodation process produces a hybrid English variety representing the version of the non-native English user, the so-called "acculturized English", our generic label for all English variants. With hybridization as a bridging ladder to domesticate what is foreign, non-native writing in English is actually vigorously drawing up a paradigm of nativization whereby English usage contextualizes itself as it merges with local culture.

Key Terms : acculturized English, paradigm of nativization, hybridization, native transfer, non-native English

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> If English is genuinely to become the language of 'others', (i.e., to mean users in the outer and expanding circles), then these 'others' have to be accorded the same English language rights as those claimed by mother-tongue speakers. And this includes the right to innovate without every difference from a standard native speaker variety of English automatically labeled 'wrong'. This is what it means for a language to be international – that it spreads and becomes a global *lingua franca* for the benefit of all.
>
> (Jenkins 2003: 44)

Introduction

Language is a universal phenomenon, without which meaningful human communication would hardly be possible. However, it is the articulation of thought, propelled by our propensity for expression that qualifies the power of language. No gesturing can substitute for the clarity that words accomplish in the manner of expressing ideas, thoughts, feelings, impressions, and experiences. Verbalized language then becomes an indispensable tool for intelligent communication.

But language also has its own history, being user-linked and *hetero*-dynamic. It obviously operates alongside human interests and activities that shape our societal or cultural purview. Language may thus flourish or decline depending on how actively it is used. It gains dominance when its users are equally strong and powerful. Yet it is threatened with extinction when not used.

We have reached a point in history where English no doubt has gained ascendancy over other languages throughout the world. It has become the *lingua franca* of the global domain, toppling over other political predecessors in the language arena. Oddly enough, the British and the Americans, having done their part as progenitors of the English language, are said to have regenerated more vibrantly the imperialist reach through English dominant technology, which, they say, is the subtle extension of the white man's language. However we may view it, the widespread influence of English has evidently spilled over cultures, transforming even indigenous language barns. This development which has given rise to the so-called "varieties" of English evolving from literature is what this paper hopes to rationalize, if only to explain English pervasiveness among regions with multi-lingual traits.

Perceptions of English among Non-native Users

If English is at all popular among non-natives, and undeniably so, this development can be traced back to colonial history and the educational experience that these groups of people have known under colonial influence. English was and has always been a kind of 'ticket to heaven'. Schools and offices, both public and private, including governments, used English then and now as a distinguished medium for the arena of various formal functions. More recently, with the advent of technological expansion, smaller nations have been brought together to transact interests under an English-dependent technology. This form of supra-psychological invasion is what makes English overwhelmingly powerful. For this reason, English is commonly perceived as a "link language between the linguistically separated native populations" as well as "the language of the intellectual make-up of the *intelligentsia*" (Sridhar, 1982). No doubt English has successfully gained the stature "*lingua franca* of the global community."

It is from this vantage point that creative writing in English by the non-natives started, which later developed into a subculture acquiring literary recognition, and consequently gaining acceptance by the larger community. But of course, the evolution of this genre which we call non-native English did not come about very smoothly. Battles, both literal and figurative, had to be fought if only to resist what others perceived as a threatening alien invasion. As sociolinguists describe it, the process of accommodating a foreign language like English in an indigenous system radically alters many elements belonging to that culture frame: the thinking mode, perception orientation, social relationships, attitudes and values, among others. Kaplan (1966) attributes this to the historical factor:

> . . . [T]he English language and its related thought patterns evolved out of the Anglo-European cultural pattern. The expected sequence of thought in English is essentially a Platonic-Aristotelian sequence, descended from the philosophers of ancient Greece and shaped subsequently by Roman, Medieval European, and later Western thinkers.

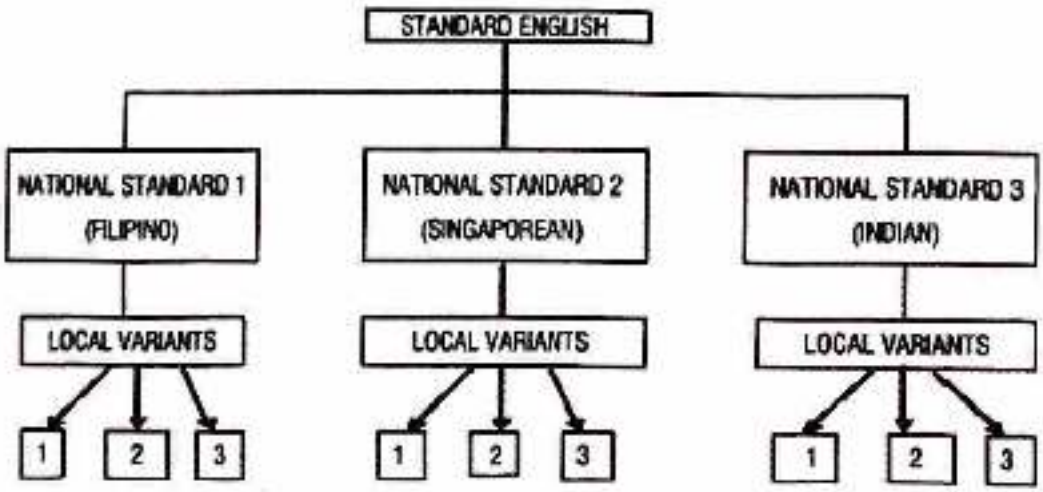
This stresses the fact that adopting an alien language implies fitting the logical system of that language into one's own local framework,

often resulting in a values counter-clash on various levels but more prominently, on the psychological and linguistic levels. The same society, which originally may have been monolingual, consequently becomes bilingual or multilingual.

In bilingual or multilingual societies where English is a prestige language for a variety of functions, there would exist a range of English varieties distinct from a national standard for each nation, which, in turn, is also distinct from the model Standard English. Quirk (1972) explains:

> The national standard, which represents educated speech as against uneducated speech cuts across regional varieties. The various national standards are distinct from Standard English, which is supra-national, in the sense that it embraces what is common to all the national standards.

This emphasizes that Standard English, according to Stevens (1977) "can be spoken with any accent, usually either from a British or American branch of the English family." The new varieties of English are therefore, the national variants whose standard variety integrates with the supra-national Standard English (Llamzon, 1983). To represent the preceding description, the diagram (mine) below should clarify:



Literature in English by Non-native Writers

The spoken genre produces the corpus for the written word. The shift to another mode however, does not necessarily transfer verbatim all the features of the original discourse. The written text, for instance, cannot capture accent, and only slightly pronunciation. With the development of literature in English by the non-natives, some interesting features have added to the genre a richer quality deserving examination. It should be worthy to explore why a number of non-natives prefer to write in English, what happens when they do, what problems they encounter, and the possible implications these would have on Standard English.

The growing trend of literatures written in English by the non-natives is overwhelming. Many scholars in fact have given this body of works a variety of names: "new English literatures" (Weir), "non-native English literatures" (Sridhar), "contact literatures" (Kachru), "nativized English writings" (Sridhar). One thing is certain: these indigenous works remain distinct from the native English literatures because of intrinsic features embedded in the linguistic cultures that produce the English variants.

Non-native English writers considerably differ in attitude toward the use of English in their creative works. On the extreme, those criticized (particularly in India) as "whores after foreign gods" by ultranationalists dismiss the charge by saying that language is a universal property. Sridhar says, "A language belongs to whoever uses it, and it is not the sole property of its native speakers". In the Caribbean, for example, where English is the primary language despite the existence of other indigenous languages like African, and Indian, "there is no possibility of choice between English and another language; one writes in English, if one writes at all" (Rancharad,1970). An Indian writer, G.V. Desani, describes his own creative experience as follows:

> I have chosen the craft of writing, and my entire linguistic creed . . . is simply to find a suitable medium. I find the English language is that kind of medium. It needs to be modified to suit my purpose.
>
> [from Weir, p. 308]

For a bilingual writer like Chinua Achebe (1975), writing can be both in his own indigenous tongue and in English, as he writes in both Igbo and English, but exclusively in English for fiction: "I think certain ideas and certain things seem better done in Igbo and other things seem better in English".

Although many of these non-native writers feel they express themselves best in English, a lot of them also admit their need to "nativize" the language to suit their own purposes.

> This nativization involves experimenting with the expressive resources of the language in various levels: vocabulary, collocation, idiomaticization, syntax, and rhetorical patterning. It also involves adaptations of English (Western) literary forms such as the lyric, the novel, the short story, and the poetic drama to express the writer's individual sensibilities.
>
> [from Sridhar,p.294]

Because non-native writing in English is essentially "contact literature" born from exposure to a "contact language", most non-native English writers commonly share the view that linguistic-stylistic adjustments must be made if their works are to have impact on their own cultures. This calls for an "interim strategy" (Schuman,1976) in order to accommodate a "dual cultural repertoire" (Serpell,1978) that will maintain the balance or bridge the gap between the indigenous and 'alien' elements in a single system. Thus, there are non-native English writers who, on the social level, adapt to some values of the alien culture while at the same time, maintain their own indigenous patterning for intra-group relations (Pride,1983).

This same strategy however, if applied to non-native English literatures, confront the non-native writer with two important problems, as identified by Ramcharad (1970): first, the difficulties of expression arising from inadequate grasp of the basic features of the language; and second, the tendency of the non-native writer, in his code switching-mixing process, to modify the language.

These two problems, perceived to be common in non-native varieties of English works, have annoyed formalists who adhere to the prescriptive norm. Accordingly, any deviation that violated the code of

L1 constituted a linguistic aberration known as "interference", which also results in a "mistake". Kachru (1982), however, in his article *Meaning in Deviation: Toward Understanding Non-Native English Texts*, carefully distinguishes a "deviation" from a "mistake" :

> . . . [A] deviation can be contextualized in the new "unEnglish" socio-linguistic context in which English actually functions: its "meaning" must, therefore, be derived with reference to the use and usage appropriate to that cultural context. Such use results in a number of productive processes which are variety specific and context specific. Because such innovations have gone through various processes of nativization, both linguistically and culturally, a description of such formations must consider the context of the situation as relevant for the analysis.
>
> A mistake, on the other hand, does not have an underlying socio-linguistic explanation: it may be essentially a marker of acquisitional inadequacy, or it may indicate a stage in language acquisition.

It is therefore very important to keep in mind the new defining context within which non-native English literature is to be viewed, if at all appreciated. Problems arise, according to Widdowson (1979), when rules of use from one universe of discourse is transferred to another. A kind of flexibility for context to determine appropriateness for either the formal or functional type is thus necessary, even significant for understanding the contact literatures in English. It is possible, Widdowson says, that what is "contextual deviation" from the native speaker's point of view is appropriate in terms of "procedures" for the non-native contexts.

People manipulate language to suit their own purposes. Kachru expounds on this by saying that "a language pays a linguistic price for acculturation – for not remaining just a 'guest or friend', but for becoming, as Raja Rao puts it, 'one of our own, of our caste, of our creed, of our sect, and of our tradition'". The price for acquiring such membership is nativization.

In an attempt to overcome the problem of "linguistic alienation" over English, the non-native English writers resort to nativization, whereby indigenous elements from the author's mother-tongue pattern are transferred into English. This includes borrowing words that highlight local color for culture-bound everyday objects, blending them with the English texts in order to achieve texture. Among Filipino writers, some of these common terms are: *buko* (young coconut), *patis* (fish sauce), *toyo* (soy sauce), *palayok* (clay pot), *balut* (boiled duck embryo), *ginamos (shrimp paste)*, *lambanog* (coconut vodka), *talaba* (oysters), and so on, with explanatory glosses either embedded in the text or as footnotes. This process however intrudes into the flow of the narrative as the attempt to bridge the cultural gap becomes a conscious one. Observe this conscious bridging excerpted from Jose Garcia Villa's *The Son of Rizal*:

> ... He was a small dark-colored man, lugging a long, narrow buri bag, which in the native tongue is called *bayong*.
>
> [from Tiempo, 1980, p.234]

A more effective device makes use of contextualizing the lexical item by embedding in a passage to make the meaning of the term self-explanatory, a strategy otherwise referred to as "cushioning" by Young (1976). Consider this example from an essay by Emmanuel Torres entitled *Jeepneys*.

> ... As every jeepney-rider knows, sitting in a packed jeepney can be both awkward and uncomfortable, if not actually perilous, specially where the passenger crowd includes housewives with their market baskets loaded with vegetables and fish, parents with smelly, yelping brats, *provincianos* lugging their boxes and buri bags, fat persons with enormous backsides, etc. The passenger list, does not always include the *hoi polloi* or the *bakya* crowd, it also includes middle-class commuters with white-collar jobs and sometimes residents who own cars and even a house in San Lorenzo Village.
>
> [from Fernando,et.al., 1976, p.56]

Note that the three local terms (italicized) in the text above do not bear explanations or parenthetical commentary. Their meanings are embedded within the context description, such that *provincianos*, as suggested, refer to people coming from the provinces classed as simple, rural folk often seen with buri bags; *hoi polloi* or *bakya* crowd by implication refer to the ordinary, lower-class people, as distinguished from the middle-class and the privileged elite described in the text. These meanings are hinted at contextually rather than directly.

Another strategy which is more difficult because it involves concretizing modes of feeling and thinking peculiar to the writer's cultural milieu is called **calquing** or loan translation. Not all loan translations of this type succeed due to the literal translations of words and collocations and idiomatic expressions from a foreign language. Oftentimes, non-native writers resort to idiomizing expressions for stylistic effect. Observe the following examples from a cover story involving young surgeons volunteering their services *pro-bono* in "The Davao Fever" by Ceres Doyo (*Sunday Inquirer*, July 31, 1994, p.3) :

> An infectious fever is silently spreading across the land. This fever was first nursed in Davao City by a group of knife-wielding "crazies" led by Dr. Jose Tiongco, young surgeons, bristling with energy and a healthy reserve of anger and hope. [par.1]
>
> Don't forget Saint Mig, they almost always insist, for it was over bottles of the brew and with hearts on fire and fervor burning that they harkened to the sound of a distant drummer and hatched the craziest of plans that is now taking forgotten rural Philippines by storm. [par.2]
>
> The Davao virus, the happy epidemic, has indeed spread . . [par.11]
>
> Ting Tiongco. . . was one of those who presided at its birth and fought tooth and nail for it to be accepted as an alternative to unaffordable health care. [par. 13]

Note the interesting blend of words used above to produce graphic imagery for description. "Knife-wielding crazies" can mean something else in another context but here it refers to the eager, young surgeons ready to serve a positive cause. "Saint Mig" for San Miguel beer, that it was while they were on a drinking spree that they thought of the idea. Is there such a thing as a happy epidemic? But the context here justifies it. These are just a few of the foregrounded elements that deck the textual landscape.

In addition to the lexical, phrasal and idiomatic transplants from indigenous language, these non-native English writers exhibit styles reflecting their intrinsic language syntactic patterns. For example, from "Awitan ng Tayabasin" (*Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, May 29, 1994,p.9) :

> To succumb to awit is to weave a story, to make a plea, to offer promises,to proclaim one's undying love, to admonish, to speak of life - - through the medium of music. [par.4] As long as there is music welling up in their breasts, as long as the Tayabasins keep alive their roots and spirit of Hermano Pule, as long as the waters of mystical Mount Banahaw and the juices of their coconuts run in their blood, the spirit of Tayabas will live on . . .[par. 6]

The paragraphs cited above sample for us some syntactic devices which Filipino English writers, such as Ceres Doyo, among others, use at times to re-create the tempo and texture of local color in their English work. The slow rhythm spread over a sentence unit by parallel structures in terms of infinitive phrases in paragraph 4, and of conditional clauses in paragraph 6, illustrate some typical Filipino strategies in most narratives.

Another mode of nativization in literature is the realistic capturing of the regional English variant with its culture-based code-mix features, a technique perfected by the acclaimed African writer Chinua Achebe in *Civil Peace*. An excerpt appears below, the part where Jonathan Iwegbu, the main character, with his family, is hounded by thieves at his door.

"What do you want from me? I am a poor man. Everything I had went with this war. Why do you come to me? You know people who have money. We. . ."

"Awrytu. We know say you no get plenty money. But we sef no get anini. So derefore make you open dis window and give us one hundred pound and we go commot. Orderwise we de come for inside now to show you guitar-boy like this .."

A volley of automatic fire rang through the sky. Maria and the children began to weep aloud again.

There are many other alternative approaches used by non-natives to pack the English more tightly in their writings, resulting in the formation of mixed styles, whatever corresponds to the author's intent. "Taken all together, we recognize at least the major processes involved – code switching, insertions, and hybridization, borrowing, and what we call the native transfer" (Pride,p.70).

Overall, it is the writer who makes the final selection for his own strategy in presenting the details he wishes to highlight. Yet at the same time, the writer also considers what his audience might expect – what would seem relevant to them from his own perception. It is here where the non-native writer of English literature makes use of his linguistic repertoire to recreate experience from his own context and yet, still effectively wield English as medium for his art. Gleason (1979), in his article *Language Variation* says that the writer may innovate but sparingly. "He operates within, or just outside, the established conventions of his art. Those conventions both control him and allow him freedom for artistic creation". This is exactly the regenerative process of all art, which by nature can never be imprisoned in a single paradigm. Somehow boundaries are stretched as the non-native writers of English literature create the new corpus of English discourse text while expressing their new dynamic of 'poetic license', the excuse for deviation from the usual western English model.

Conclusion

The experience of the non-native English writers as crafters of other varieties of English is an affirmation of the dynamism of language. Any language that attracts a greater number of users is bound beyond limits to expand and be modified by its users. Such is what is happening to the English language as can be observed from our study of the non-native literary experience.

The linguists need not be annoyed by this development. In fact, the growth of non-native English literatures provides room for further study on the phenomenon of nativization of English in different indigenous cultures where bilingualism or multilingualism is operative. Comparisons then can be made regarding the process of indigenization to understand the variables that fortify the uncontrollable growth and commanding influence of the English language.

On the whole, the profile described here confirms the strength of a language that compels people to idealize English as more important over other languages. But in so many ways, the contemporary notion of 'idealization' does not suggest subscribing to the exclusiveness of the western paradigm, definitely not the use of one type of English model. We do see the English language transferred across cultures where the processes of borrowing and adaptation occur within a kind of code mix. The traditionalists consider this a desecration, a distortion of language use that carelessly leads to the erosion of a standard for accuracy. Ironically, this process called hybridization cannot be reversed because it has naturally evolved from the cultural landscape. Everything points to the proliferation of versions under "acculturized English". As we can see, this new tradition is already defining its own paradigm to embrace everyone who uses English within the context of local culture.

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