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Linguistic Failures

By: Niu Qiang, PhD and Martin Wolff, J.D.

It is undeniable that England has given the modern global community - English as the international language of commerce^[i], British common law^[ii], contract law^[iii] and maritime (Admiralty) law^[iv]. Whether by accident or design, the effect of these contributions on the world is a fundamental destruction of individual ethnic customs, social structure and culture. There appears little or no dissent amongst linguists for the proposition that language and culture are inseparable.

Language functions as a symbolic marker of a nation due to the inseparable relationship between language and culture, which is sociolinguistic in nature; while the inseparable relationship between language and culture is to be traced further to the interdependent relationship between language and thought, which is psycholinguistic in origin. And yet, armed with this knowledge, linguists worldwide sit idly by and watch as their local culture is stealthily supplanted by English culture riding piggyback on the English language, embraced officially or unofficially as the second language.

Occasionally, a scholar like Prof. Kanavillil Rajagopalan writes a controversial piece such as “National languages as flags of allegiance; or the linguistics that failed us: A close look at emergent linguistic chauvinism in Brazil,” which reminds us that not only is the English language the greatest all time export of Great Britain, but this gift is like a Trojan Horse that brings with it a potentially destructive force.

The situation in Brazil, as described by Prof. Kanavillil Rajagopalan, is not so dissimilar to that in China.

The teaching of English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) in China has become a nationwide endeavor pursued at all academic levels, from the kindergarten to the University. In the past ten years there has been an explosion in the development of public school English programs and private English language schools throughout China. EFL/ESL has become very big business in China (China Daily, HK Edition, October 9, 2002.) Reports show that ESL has become a 10-billion yuan business in China. Of the 37 billion yuan annual book sales, ESL takes up as much as 25% of the market share. And a few ESL

teachers in Shanghai command an hourly rate of 1,000 yuan (US\$120). Even on average, a student pays 10-20 yuan (US\$1.2-2.4) for one hour of ESL training.

In 1862, under the Great Qing Dynasty, the first English Language School was officially opened by the Chinese Government to train ten men for the newly created diplomatic corps. (Deyi, 1992 Panda Books) In the past ten years, there has been an alarming increase in the emphasis on English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) in China.

Now, China annually recruits 100,000 Foreign Experts (FE) to teach English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) (www.Chinatefl.com) with an accompanying 10 billion Yuan price tag. (China Daily, Hong Kong Edition, October 9, 2002.) According to one Internet recruiting web site there are 150,000 foreign ESL teachers working in China (www.AbroadChina.org). The People's Daily reports that in 2001 the industry made a 700 million yuan (US\$8,700,000) profit in Beijing alone. (People's Daily, 1/23/02) Public middle schools, high schools and universities throughout China have developed and implemented English-language programs. Private EFL/ESL schools (kindergartens, primary, middle, high and college) have proliferated to such an extent that according to statistics from the Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee of the NPC, about 54,000 private schools had been set up in China by the end of 2000, with 6.93 million registered students. (People's Daily, 5/23/01).

At first blush, it may appear admirable that China has so wholeheartedly made such a concerted effort to adopt English, the international language of commerce, as its second language. On October 24, 2002, Zang Xinseng, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Education reportedly said: With China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the approaching Olympics in 2008 more than ever is it a priority for young Chinese to learn and improve their language skills? (China Daily, 10/25/02). The same article states Beijing is striving to reach its goal of teaching citizens to speak English to improve its image as an international metropolis.

Beijing wants its 13 million residents to speak English to enhance its image as a cosmopolitan metropolis (China Daily, 10-05-02). China's Ministry of Education wants all young people of China to learn English due to China's WTO membership and China's hosting the 2008 Olympics (China Daily, 10-05-02). Certain municipal governments in China require all of their civil servants to learn some English (China Daily, 10/05/02)?

These goals or objectives beg the question, WHY?

Market studies, market analysis and affirmative recommendations from experts in the fields of business, math and linguistics should support each of the forgoing propositions, but do not appear to have been conducted.

What is the mathematical probability that each of Beijing's 13 million or so residents will need to be able to speak English for an intended or even accidental encounter with a single English speaking foreigner during the 2008 Olympics? Probably not very high.

Does a market study support the proposition that Beijing's image will be enhanced in the eyes of foreigners if all the residents of Beijing can speak English? Further, would such image enhancement translate into increased economic benefit for Beijing? If so, how much economic benefit will accrue to Beijing and does it offset the social, cultural and political costs that must be paid along the way by the people of Beijing? These questions do not appear to have been addressed by any formal study.

How many bilingual (Chinese-English) jobs will actually be created in China due to China's World Trade Organization (WTO) membership and hosting the 2008 Olympics? Does the number of new jobs requiring English support the need for all of China's young people to learn English? Answers to these questions are not readily available. And about the bilingual jobs created by the 2008 Olympics: How long will they last? A few months? Why should someone spend three or four years studying English in College for a job in 2008 that will only last a few months? Post Olympics what becomes of these Chinese English speakers?

What is the mathematical probability that all municipal government civil servants, in any particular Chinese municipality, will need to use English in their daily work? Very slim.

Is there any empirical study or evidence to support the current EFL/ESL revolution in China, which revolution may in fact have significant adverse social, cultural and political effects? (Qiang/Wolff, 4/03) It does not appear that the Chinese Central Government has issued any formal Resolution or Position Paper authorizing, condoning or supporting the current ESL revolution in China. Rather, it has been allowed and even encouraged to just evolve. Other than standardized testing for College entrance, the Central Government seems to have no set educational policy or curriculum for EFL/ESL. There is no single Ministry of Education document stating the Government policy on EFL/ESL in China. (He Qixin, 8/01)

This rush to educate has spawned an industry run amuck, without appreciable government control or regulation. (Qiang/Wolff, 9/03)

Why the concerted effort to require 1.3 billion Mandarin speakers, 25% of the world's population, to learn English as a foreign/second language? Since Mandarin is one of the six working languages of the United Nations, does the world at large have a greater appreciation for the importance of Mandarin than China itself?

Is the current EFL/ESL revolution in China a misguided, self-inflicted English colonialization, brought about tacitly, if not officially, by adopting EFL/ESL teaching as a national program? Will the West conquer China from within, without a single shot ever being fired? Will English enculturation supplant traditional Chinese culture and values? Will Beijing duck and dim sum be replaced with McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)?

Why has China apparently forsaken Mandarin for English when 25% of the world's population already speaks Mandarin, and Mandarin is one of the six working languages of the United Nations? Why does China so meekly submit to the English-based new world order emanating out of Washington, D.C., when 25% of the world's population looks to Beijing for its leadership? Does China not yet realize the reality that the emerging China has the immediate clout to demand that those desiring to do business in China or with China should learn Mandarin, rather than expect 1.3 billion Chinese to learn English?

Why should 1.3 billion Chinese learn English when 75% of Chinese college graduates will not use oral English in their whole lifetime nor will they read any English materials.? (China Daily, 11/03/03)

Could or should China learn something from the EU's prioritizing the preservation and continued use of native languages? (Qiang/Wolff 4/03)? Is the risk posed by EFL/ESL to China's social, cultural and even political structures and systems outweighed by the potential economic benefits such that China's Chineseness is for sale? EFL/ESL at any cost? Should the love of money replace traditional Chinese wisdom as the most valuable asset of the new Chingland? Should economic gain be at the expense of what makes China different from all other nations? National identity is tied directly to the preservation of the native language.

It is safe to say that the language issue should not be treated merely as purely linguistic, but rather as a potential dynamic force which may operate on various social and political factors and thus lead to drastic social transformations. Language planning has to be taken into serious consideration by policy makers where independence is newly declared, or where sovereign cohesiveness is challenged, so that national unity and harmony can be maintained.

A national language is more than just the language of government or of education; it is the symbol of a people's identity as citizens of that nation.

This language issue should not be treated as merely linguistic, but rather it is a socio-psychological issue in nature and is of political significance due to the intrinsic relationship among language, thought and culture. A national language shared by all in-group members is the potential unifying force that brings people

closer in time of social change, but it can also be a divisive power, which may break a nation into parts or groups.

Yes Prof. Kanavillil Rajagopalan, linguists must engage the issue on all fronts, including active public discussion of political and ethical issues! If not linguists, then whom?