British colonialism and its linguistic consequences

Background

Colonization (and more recently globalization) certainly accounts for the drastic changes in the linguistic landscapes of the world over the centuries. Conceptualized as as the directing control of politics, society and people by foreign states, colonization has imposed to the colonized several harmful challenges. The compulsory necessity of engaging with a language ascribed to oppression, exploitation and slavery stands out, though.

Moreover, colonialism, in many territories meant also an imposed mosaic of different ethnic groups and human types that prior to European penetration, had different political, cultural and social structures which were randomly obliged to coexist in that space. Such impositions regarding language and life styles reflected and altered the identity of the colonized people and, according to Türkmen (2003), played an important role essential to colonialism to be successful:

" Identity is one of the indispensable components of colonialism, if we consider colonialism as a body; identity constitutes its spirit while the economic exploitation is its corporal body. The colonizer coming to the virgin lands with the feeling of colonial desire and obsession to have cheap profit in his heart finds himself ready to defame the inhabitants, regard them as " the other". And he starts his policy by deterritorializing and reterritorializing…" (p. 189).

In that sense, people were forced to be what they are not. This is evident by the fact that the colonizers used to call the colonies " new lands", as if they were " virgin" lands, uninhabited before their arrival. Türkmen (2003)

stresses that the colonizers did not perceive their actions over the colonies as reconstruction because they did not consider the institutions and cultures established in the colonies as valuable. The colonizers also imposed their culture and language as a way to legitimize their power:

" In the colony what is asymmetrical, rather than merely different proves to be pathological. In order to legitimize their maltreatment, the colonizer tries to project the other not only different but also dangerous, primitive, aggressive, lazy, etc. The aim is making people feel that colonialism is not an unfair perpetration, rather, it is a necessary drive, for, and these people do not deserve these lands by virtue of their notorious traits. Also, the drive, after all, will promote their life standards. This is for their interest". (Robert Young in Colonialism and Desiring machine as cited in Türkmen (2003), p. 190)

As shown, the colonized is forced to internalize a new identity through the reinforcement of stereotypes by the colonizer, which is easily understandable if one thinks that the colonized finds him/herself in a circumstance they have never experienced before, after having been obliged to abandon all what constitutes his/her " world". The colonized then has no option other than " emulate the colonizer as a sole model in front of him". However, his attempt is rejected by the colonizer. Motivated by his urge for exploitation, he makes sure to set hard limits to the difference, as " to them the difference is what feeds the colonial system, what legitimize and postulates it" (Türkmen, 2003).

So the colonized loses his former identity but he is also not supported in building a new one. As Türkmen (2003) puts, it, " he will neither be like the colonizer nor himself.... Thus, he lives in a complete oblivion. All at once, he is casted out from his history, memory and citizenship". Nonetheless, through colonialism identity is not totally lost, but set in the unknown ground temporally placed between prior and after the colonizers came.

Identity and language

Identity and the cognate terms in other languages have a long history as technical terms in Western philosophy from the ancient Greeks through contemporary analytical philosophy. They have been used to address the perennial philosophical problems of permanence amidst manifest change, and of unity amidst diversity. Wide spread vernacular and social-analytical use of identity and its cognates, however, is of much more recent vintage and more localized provenance.

The introduction of identity into social analysis and its initial diffusion into social sciences and public discourse occurred in the United States in the 1960s (with some anticipation in the second half of the 1950s). The most important and best-know trajectory involved the appropriation and popularization of Erik Erikson (who was responsible, among other things, for coining the term identity crisis).

But there were other paths of diffusion as well. The notion of identification was pried from its original, specifically psychoanalytic context (where the term had been initially introduced by Freud) and linked to ethnicity on the one hand and to sociological role theory and reference group theory.

" The term identity proved highly resonant in the 1960's diffusing quickly across disciplinary and national boundaries, establishing itself in the journalistic as well as the academic lexicon, and permeating the language of social and political analysis". (Davis, 2004, p. 61)

Stuart Hall, one of the well-known scholars specialized on identity, points that identity is dynamic, not stable and is in constant flux:

" Perhaps instead of thinking as identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses represent, we should think, instead, of ' identity' as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (ibid 210)", (Davis, 2004, p. 184).

Therefore, cultural identity can be considered as a historically located set of experiences that need to be recovered in order to fulfill the desire to become one nation or one people, hence, happens to the language.

As it expresses beyond what its words signifies, language also reveals " the way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to others" (Sterling, xxx). People use language to indicate social allegiances, that is, which groups they are members of and which groups they are not. In addition, they use language to create and maintain role relationships between individuals and between groups in such a manner that the linguistic varieties used by a community form a system that corresponds to the structure of the society.

Therefore, a speaker uses language not only to express but to create a representation of him/herself in relation to others with whom s/he is interacting. The issue of respect is an aspect of the broader relationship between power and language. Power is the degree to which one interlocutor is able to control the behavior of the other. S/he then uses the language of intimacy and familiarity as they used it in greetings, communicating about family, and leave-takings. In talking about their jobs and other " external" acquaintances, they use the colonizer's language, which possibly signs distance.

Sterling (xxx) also argues that within a society or a culture, speech patterns become tools that speakers manipulate to group themselves and categorize others with whom they are interacting:

" Because of the relationship between language use and group membership, language can inspire deep group loyalties. It can serve as a symbol of unification on several levels. On the national level, language loyalty can serve an important political function. Many people in the United States are threatened by the use of languages other than English. To speak a language other than English is thought to be " un-American." This is because English is " promoted as the one and only possible language of a unified and healthy nation". On a local level, language is a symbol of loyalty to a community". (Sterling, xxx, p. xx).

For the community as a whole, socialization through language learning creates conformity to social norms and transmits the culture of the community. As s/he learns language, a child learns the social structure of the

culture, learning the appropriate linguistic form for each kind of person. This is part of communicative competence. Communicative competence is not only knowing how to speak the specific language(s) used in the speech community but also knowing how to use language appropriately in any given social situation in the community. And the ability to know that is closely related to the identity that one holds. " Speech patterns become tools that speakers manipulate to group themselves and categorize others with whom they are interacting" and that is only shared with those sharing a certain identity, whether in a community or a culture.