

South Englishes, North Englishes

by Nuzhat Amin

L'auteure explique comment la langue anglaise peut s'avérer un outil d'oppression du Sud par le Nord.

"That Indian accent...you'll have to get rid of it if you

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want to get anywhere in this field.... You know, you have to learn to talk like a Canadian...."

This was in 1975 when I first came to Canada, at my first job—as an editorial assistant in a television station. I get upset even now—22 years later—when I think of the boss advising me how to make it as a journalist in Canada. Get rid of that accent....

I was an experienced journalist when I left Pakistan in 1973. I had worked for a number of years as an assistant editor in an English-language daily newspaper in Karachi. Then I spent two years training in print, radio, and TV journalism in Germany before I emigrated to Canada.

I have spoken English all my life. In school. At college. In my social life. At work. Even at home, most of the time. Growing up in a middle-class urban family in postcolonial Pakistan, English ruled our lives. It was equated with intelligence, knowledge, culture, and was also a way of getting ahead. Predictably, I went on to get two Master's degrees, in English literature and English language.

And here was this man telling me to go to accent reduction classes. No one told my colleagues from England to learn to talk Canadian-style.

The "you-have-an-accent" accusation has been a motif of my life in Canada. This construction has disempowered me in my careers as a journalist and an English-language teacher. My purpose in this space is to show how the English language is implicated in the continuing domination of the people of the South/the Third World by the people of the North/the First World. My focus here is women from the South, more specifically from former British colonies such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka among others, who "choose" to emigrate to the English-speaking countries of the North.¹ I suggest that this was/is not so much a matter of choice, but that, in fact, women like myself were/are "destined by the social/

economic structure" to play a particular role in the international division of labour. The women I describe in this article grew up speaking English in their home countries.

English in postcolonial Pakistan

Was it a mere accident that British schools in the Indian subcontinent instilled in their students shame of their own language and culture? According to Kazi, it was *no* accident; the goals of the British education policy were to get political control and to produce a cost-effective administrative bureaucracy. In the early days of colonialism, the British sought the help of British missionaries to control the indigenous educational institutions in order to exert their own political control. But later, with the growing unrest against British officers in India, and in the face of payments of heavy salaries to a bureaucracy of Englishmen, the British decided to create "an indigenous class of a privileged few for bureaucratic jobs" (Kazi 32).

To describe the British rationale for introducing English in India, Kazi quotes Macaulay's 1835 Minute to the British Parliament:

In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of government.... We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern.... A class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. (33)

Kazi comments that a crucial part of this education policy was that the British, through English education, did *not* introduce the knowledge of economics, technology, science and politics, but instead introduced English literature, philosophy and metaphysics in an "imitative fashion." As a result, he continues, "students were able to recite King Alfred or an Oxford text, but they learned nothing of their own background and were sometimes even unable to translate English passages into their own vernacular languages" (33).

The main objective of the colonial educators in the Indian subcontinent was, as Macaulay put it, "to have a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." In this objective they succeeded. My behaviour, decisions, and perception of experiences were, and to a lesser extent still are, influenced by my Eurocentric upbringing in a newly decolonized society. This was a society where the older generation had internalized the colonizer's values, and made sure that the younger generation learnt the all-

important lesson: white is best. I grew up thinking of Pakistanis, much as in writer Naipaul's characterization of the colonized, as those condemned only to use the telephone, never to invent it, and that only the English—and by association white people—could invent, could write, could govern (see Said 209).

My Catholic convent school reinforced this message. British schools in the Indian subcontinent further fragmented their students by taking away their language. Himani Bannerji observes that the vernacular—Bengali—was such a low priority in her high school in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) that they did not even have a Bengali teacher. When she decided to “take it as a subject” for the U.K.-based Senior Cambridge exam, special arrangements had to be made. At my school we did have a daily Urdu class, but very little was expected of us, so much so that when I finished school I was unable to write a letter to my mother in Urdu, although I could construct a letter in stilted French. As Bannerji puts it, the legacy of colonialism in modern India, as in pre-independence India, was that “the way to advancement lay through proficiency in English and collaboration with Colonial State and Western capital” (38).

English in Canada

What happens to women from the South, including the South Asians whose education I have described, when they emigrate to the North? Amina Jamal concluded after living in Canada for three years that her decision to emigrate to Canada was not a neutral one; that she was a product of Macaulay's scheme for creating a class of Indians who would play a particular role in the international division of labour and certainly in their home countries.

In Canada, as in other English-speaking countries of the North, emphasis on “proper,” “real,” “native-speaker” English works in concert with racism and sexism to further disempower women immigrants from the South, who are, by definition, women of colour. Roxana Ng, whose focus is women immigrants, draws attention to the unequal access to power by members of society, be they women or people from “visible minority” groups. Immigrants from visible minority groups are disadvantaged in a competitive labour market in which Canadian—or English-speaking—training and work experience are major determinants for entry into different occupational classifications:

Many visible minority immigrants, even those in professional and highly skilled technical occupations in the home countries have to take lower positions because of the lack of recognition by Canadian government and employers of their qualifications and credentials. (Ng 29)

Ng also suggests that immigrants from developing countries face discrimination in education. Quoting a Saskatchewan-based study, she charges that there's a “rac-

ist bias” in Canada's accreditation process; only four of the 95 immigrant women interviewed—those whose degrees were from British or American universities—were given recognition of upper level education.

The dominant group's negative perception of women of colour, says Ng, is seen in the way the term “immigrant women” is generally used.² It embodies “class, ethnic, and racial biases” as it is equated with the stereotype of “visible minority” women, who either do not speak English or speak it with an accent other than British or American, and women who have low-paid, low-status jobs (21). I would qualify Ng's observation. Although there is indeed a hierarchy among accents, all accents associated with white countries or the North have a higher status than accents associated with non-white countries or the South. As John Edwards points out, views of language often correspond to views of the social status of language users. “In this sense,” he adds, “the language, dialect, or accent employed provides a simple label which evokes a social stereotype which goes far beyond language itself” (79). He observes that even dictionary definitions of accent help to sustain the view that nonstandard accents are a deviant from the norm; and cites the Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

a mode of utterance which consists mainly in a prevailing quality of tone, or in a peculiar alteration of pitch, but may include mispronunciation of vowels or consonants, misplacing of stress, and misinflection of a sentence. (OED, qtd. in Edwards 79)

Edwards comments that the OED definition of accent does not match with the “value-free judgment of linguists,” and that the OED definition “reflect[s] many popular conceptions of what an accent is, and who has one.” He concludes: “It is still not difficult to find people who deny that they speak with any accent at all” (79).

Mari Matsuda makes a similar point.

Everyone has an accent ... but when an employer refuses to hire a person “with an accent,” they are referring to a hidden norm of non-accent.... People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent. (1361)

Thus women from the South, whose accents are obviously different from the particular accent that people in power in Canada or the United States have, are denied employment on the basis of having an accent. “You have a heavy accent and people don't understand what you're saying” is a refrain familiar to women from the South like myself who are denied employment on this basis. You have an accent, South women are told by people who seem to believe that they themselves are accent-less, a linguistic feat which is not possible.

This accusation is also used to deny voice to South women. Referring to the power wielded by people who are

in a position to decide what is not an acceptable accent, June Jordan talks of her experiences of being discriminated against for having an accent that is different from the constructed norm. A white woman telephoned her to ask her to appear on her television program: "She felt free to tell me that if I sounded 'Black' then she would not 'hire' me" (40). I, too, am constantly asked questions about my "accent" by colleagues who appear to think—much as Matsuda points out—that they either do not have an accent or have the right accent.

Another source of disempowerment for South women is the preference given to native speakers of English, and the assumption that only white people are native speakers, and, therefore, that only white people know "good" English. I consider myself to be a native speaker of English on the grounds that English is the language I know best, but my colleagues—teachers of English and English as a second language (ESL), linguists, and applied linguists—often position me as a non-native speaker, I would say, because I am non-white and I have a Pakistani accent. When I say that I am a native speaker, there is a look of bewilderment and disbelief on their faces. The following is one such conversation with a colleague who is well-known in the field of English-language teaching. She was asking my views on being an ESL teacher from the point of view of being a "non-native" speaker. I interrupted, "I am a native speaker."

Silence. Then, "Were you born in Canada?"

"No," I replied.

"Where were you born?"

"In Pakistan."

My interrogator breathed a sigh of relief and said without words, "So I was right. You're *not* a native speaker." She then asked, "What is your first language?"

My reply, "If you mean which language do I know best, it is English, not Urdu." I said this because there is debate as to what "first language" means. Some linguists (for example, Ferguson; Kachru) have pointed out that the terms "first language," "mother tongue," and "native speaker" do not make sense in the context of English being a world language. My colleague dropped the subject, but that does not mean that she changed her assumptions about who is a native speaker. I do not think that I am being considered by this colleague or any other for membership to the Inner Circle of Native Speakers of English.

So whenever "native speaker" expertise is required, for example, for English-language teaching, journalism, and advertising, women from the South are discriminated against on the basis that they are not native speakers. It appears that just as people in power decide who has an accent, they also decide who is a native speaker, and who, therefore, has ownership of English.

Conclusion

We have seen how the English language is implicated in the domination of women from the South, how women

from former British colonies who emigrate to the English-speaking countries of the North are further disempowered—ironically, through the language to which they feel they have as much ownership as people in the North. I have suggested that these women immigrants were "groomed" by the social structure, the economic structure, and the internalization of colonization to be estranged from the countries of their birth and that the English-speaking countries of the North as their real home—an illusion these women believe until they try to make their home in their new countries of estrangement.

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¹India became independent from British colonization in 1947. Pakistan was formed as an independent country from the predominantly Muslim areas of India in 1947.

²It is common knowledge that white women who emigrate to Canada from the United States or England are not perceived as "immigrants"; conversely, Black women whose families have lived in Canada for generations are often asked, "Where are you from?"

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