

English, lingua franca, cultural imperialism and dictionaries

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Abstract

Many argue that English should be taught to non-natives as a lingua franca with as little reference to British and American models as possible. But the fact remains that English has been the language of the two most powerful nations over the past two centuries, and the economic, political and cultural importance of the United States in today's world is overwhelming. Dictionaries, both monolingual learners' and bilingual, have a role to play in helping learners decipher Anglo-Saxon culture. This is no easy task, however, and this paper will examine to what extent dictionaries manage to present cultural information in an unbiased fashion and steer clear of an imperialist viewpoint.

The problem with the English language is somewhat similar to that with the US dollar. The dollar serves as the international currency but it has never really been a proper international currency, as it is also the currency of one specific nation, namely the United States of America. There are undeniably all sorts of problems attached to this status, not least the fact that only the US is legally entitled to print dollars.

Similarly, English has indisputably become the world's international linguistic currency, a lingua franca which people all over the world are eager to learn as an instrument of empowerment, in order to become part of the global village, be it in commerce, science or the entertainment industry.

It has left other languages with claims to international status far behind and it is now without serious rivals. But English isn't Latin: Latin was a lingua franca for centuries, long after it ceased to be the native language of any nation. And it is not Esperanto: it isn't a disembodied artificial construct without a history, a language that could be claimed, at least in theory, by everybody in general and nobody in particular. English happens to be the language of the most powerful nation on the planet, and that of the country 'formerly known as' the nation that ruled the waves.

In the *ELT Journal*, Marko Modiano [2001] argues that teachers of English as a foreign language throughout the world must be careful not to inculcate their values and their world view to their pupils through the teaching of English. "The teaching and learning of a geographically, politically and culturally 'neutral' form of English, which is perceived as a language of wider communication and not as the possession of native speakers, is one of the few options we have at hand if we want to continue to promote English language learning

while at the same time attempting to somehow 'neutralize' the impact which the spread of English has on the cultural integrity of the learner". Barbara Seidlhofer [2001] says that "we are witnessing the emergence of an endonormative model of lingua franca English which will increasingly derive its norms of correctness and appropriacy from its own usage rather than that of the UK or the US, or any other 'native speaker' country". It is a view shared by David Graddol [1997] when he says that "those who speak English alongside other languages will outnumber first-language speakers and, increasingly, will decide the global future of the language". Seidlhofer even goes as far as to suggest that "if 'Euro-English' is indeed an emerging variety as a European lingua franca, then it should be possible to describe it systematically, and eventually also to provide a codification which would allow it to be captured in dictionaries and grammars and to be taught." This type of approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language is one that strives to dissolve the links between the language and its culture(s) of origin and their dominant values in order to be appropriated as a communicative tool by non-native speakers.

At the other end of the spectrum, an ideologist like Margaret Thatcher [2000], for instance, claims that "English is undoubtedly the language of values", and John O'Sullivan, editor of the *National Review* and member of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, proclaims that "English is a language soaked in liberty, and [that] the legal and political heritage deriving from the Magna Carta spreads liberty to wherever that legal tradition takes hold." From this point of view, English is meant to be much more than a lingua franca in the non-English-speaking world, it is seen as the very embodiment of quintessentially Anglo-American values that the English-speaking peoples have a duty to spread far and wide.

So where does this leave teachers of English as a foreign language and purveyors of English teaching material? Are the neutral and non-cultural approach or the all-inclusive approach (one that gives equal importance to all varieties of English and not only to the US or UK varieties) the way forward? Or is indoctrination inevitably part and parcel of the business of teaching English to non-native speakers?

The neutral approach seems to ignore the fact that one thing that makes learning a foreign language exciting is the fact that it is inextricably linked with the culture(s) of the people who use it. Take the culture away and learning a language could suddenly become as much fun as learning the Morse code. One of the reasons people wish to learn English more than any other language is to gain an insight into the ubiquitous US culture and to try to make sense of and see through the cultural artefacts we are all exposed to. In an age where the share of American cinema in Europe varies from around 60% to more than 90% depending on the countries, US cultural imperialism is very much a reality, and not learning about American culture and devising a less Anglo-Saxon brand of English is not going to help to redress the balance in favour of other cultures; if anything it would be likely to lessen the understanding of people who are exposed to American values and culture whether they like it or not. As a matter of fact, many learners of English, at least in Europe, seem to like the idea of learning a culture-based form of English. Many language schools and many dictionary publishers use the American and the British flags as the symbols of their trade, and a student learning English as a foreign language today basically has a choice between the British variety and the American variety of the language (in France and no doubt

elsewhere, some language schools actually dispense altogether with the former alternative when they advertise their 'cours d'américain'). One could argue that with the culturally neutral approach there is also a risk of a two-tier English language developing, with, on the one hand, English as it is spoken by native speakers and, on the other hand, bastardized versions for the rest of the world.

When it comes to teaching English to non-native speakers, a middle way can surely be achieved between the two positions outlined above. In my opinion, the principle that must underpin that middle way is that language must be studied within the context of the culture(s) that produced it and which is (are) produced by it.

Indeed, there seems to be a tendency in lexicography (both monolingual and bilingual) towards providing more cultural information to the user. All four major English-French bidirectional dictionaries on the market (*Collins-Robert Comprehensive*, *Grand Larousse*, *Oxford-Hachette* and the *Harrap Unabridged*) now give many notes of a cultural nature. These notes give information about some key historical events (the American and English Civil Wars, for instance), politics (with notes on "backbenchers", "chief whip", "shadow cabinet" and "devolution"), traditions ("pantomime", "sponsored events") and society ("death row", "the NHS", "broadsheets and tabloids"). Often a note is provided when a translation or a gloss would fail to give adequate information to the user; for instance, both the *Collins-Robert* and the *Harrap Unabridged* give a note for "best man" and the *Harrap* explains the different connotations of the word "Arab" in French and in British English, that of the word "Asian" in British and American English and provides a note about the symbolism of the colour blue in Britain. The *Collins* has notes about baseball and cricket and explains the origin of certain idiomatic expressions connected with these sports. The *Harrap Unabridged* also has a section where culture-specific allusive phrases are explained (phrases commonly used such as "I may be some time", "because it's there", "dark satanic mills", "Houston, we have a problem") and features a chronology of the major historical and cultural events of the Anglo-Saxon world. So the tendency in these dictionaries is to link language and culture very firmly. Even if they leave many areas of culture unexplored, these notes are not just a gimmick and there are enough of them to provide valuable help to the reader. This approach has nothing to do with promoting cultural imperialism, it simply gives the user the tools to better understand another culture and it is undeniable from the feedback from dictionary users that this approach is very much appreciated.

A bidirectional bilingual dictionary, by its very structure, gives equal status to both languages treated and is usually the result of collaborative work between the native speakers of both languages.

From a linguistic viewpoint, a monolingual English learners' dictionary is a one-sided affair which always runs the risk of being perceived as too one-sided from a cultural viewpoint as well. This is especially noticeable when it comes to the treatment of items where different cultures overlap and of sensitive areas in terms of politics and history.

The *Oxford Guide to English and American Culture*, as the name indicates, is entirely devoted to culture (in the wider sense of the term) and the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* also offers extensive coverage of cultural items. Both books provide a wealth of very valuable information and insights to the learner of English with an interest in Anglo-American culture. As mentioned before, it seems to me that accusations of cultural imperialism cannot be made simply on the basis of presenting and explaining cultural information. However one is entitled to question the perspective from which the information is presented, especially when the items in question may be viewed from the perspective of another culture. In this respect accusations of cultural imperialism may be much more justified when they deal with the substance of certain entries.

For instance the *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture* has an entry about Henry Kissinger in which he is described as a man “who travelled around the world to improve US relations with other countries and to find solutions to international conflicts”. His involvement in operations such as the toppling of the democratic government of Chile or the “secret bombing” of Cambodia, to mention but two, or the mere fact that he is a controversial figure, to say the least, are not even hinted at. In a similar vein, the article about the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution merely gives the official story of the start of US direct involvement in Vietnam in 1964 (US Navy ships being attacked by Vietnamese vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin) even though it has been amply proven that the incident had been fabricated by the US in order to sell the war to the American public. What would a Chilean or a Vietnamese user of the book make of entries like these? A more critical approach seems necessary on the part of dictionary editors on very sensitive issues like these.

Similarly, in the article about Dunkirk, the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* mentions only that it is the French city where “the British army was surrounded by the German army, but thousands of British soldiers escaped and were brought back to England in a collection of small boats.” The fact that the French and the Belgian armies suffered the same predicament, that many French soldiers (as many as 110,000) were also evacuated to England and that the Germans took thousands of prisoners goes unreported. The same thing occurs at the entry “Gallipoli”: the fact that it was an Allied fiasco is not mentioned.

Further back in time and still in the history department, at the entry for “Richard I”, both the *Oxford* and the *Longman* mention that the king was called “Richard Cœur de Lion” as well as “Richard the Lionheart”, but it is not explained why the French nickname. Moreover, neither dictionary has an entry for “Angevin Empire”, and the *Longman* entry for ‘Plantagenet’ does not mention the Anjou connection at all.

The *Longman* has one entry for Acadia and one for Cajun, but the expulsion of the Acadians by the English and how these people came to populate the bayous of Louisiana are glossed over.

Interestingly, both books mention fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* or *Beauty and the Beast* because they are traditionally adapted as pantomimes in Britain or because they have been made into cartoons by Disney, but the names of Charles Perrault and

Madame Leprince de Beaumont or the fact that these stories originated in France are nowhere to be found. Such oversights, though most probably not deliberate, may give the reader the impression that the non-Anglo-Saxon world has been airbrushed out of the picture as irrelevant and dispensable even when it has a direct link with the cultural item being dealt with. And this in turn may give credence to the idea that there may very well be an element of indoctrination at play in the way the material has been devised. This is why it is essential that editors of educational material for learners of English should adopt a critical perspective of their culture in order to inform and educate the reader without inadvertently imposing their own world view and in order not to disinform or alienate their readers.

It seems that studying a foreign language is much more rewarding and exciting when language is not artificially divorced from culture. Apart from other considerations, this approach allows non-native speakers to apprehend the dominant US culture on a more equal footing. But this must be done without interpreting the dominance of English on the world scene as objective proof of its intrinsic superiority over all other languages and in turn as the proof of the superiority of Anglo-Saxon culture and people, construed as a totally separate entity, over all other cultures and peoples.

On the contrary, by emphasizing the connection between cultures and by presenting the English language and Anglo-Saxon culture at large within a wider context and with a critical eye, English teachers and editors of ELT material have the opportunity to avoid being seen as purveyors of imperialistic values. Moreover, one must not forget that in many parts of the world the only contact that some people will have with Western civilisation is through English. In this context it could be argued that publishers of educational material have a duty not to be too insular in their approach to language and culture.

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