

## **ISLAM, ENGLISH, AND 9-11**

An Interview with Alastair Pennycook

By Sohail Karmani

KARMANI: Since the events of September 11, 2001 there has been growing pressure on Muslim governments to reform educational curricula, the belief being that the worldview currently being promoted at schools, colleges and universities was partly responsible for motivating the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. For many such as Susan Glasser in her Washington Post article (2 February, 2003) this means 'more English and less Islam'. What is your analysis of such formulas? And, in your assessment, do you think English represents a significant threat to Muslim languages and values?

PENNYCOOK: I find this idea quite intriguing. I came across an article recently suggesting that more English teaching in the southern regions of the Philippines might be a good antidote to 'terrorist' activities. What could this mean? I am also struck by a question that keeps returning: One of the things that most interested, and initially surprised, me when I was looking at British colonial language policy, was the way in which British generally promoted education in local languages, and denied people access to English. Access to English was seen by the British as a dangerous thing, while a limited and carefully regulated education in local languages was seen as the best way to develop and maintain a local workforce that could participate in colonial capitalism and remain obedient to the new imperial rule. English was only for a certain elite and a class of translator/mediators between the rulers and the ruled. After 'independence' this changed, and English was hugely promoted for very clear economic and political goals. Now we might just see the first as British policy and the second as American policy (after all, they started promoting English in the Philippines a hundred years ago), but this seems inadequate. The British promoted Confucian education through Chinese in Hong Kong as the best means to maintain a compliant population; why not promote an Islamic education through Arabic for similar goals? Is it because, unlike under colonial rule, the content of that curriculum can no longer be enforced? The question that I often come back to is this: Why in the last fifty years has it become evident that the promotion of English rather than local languages is the best pathway to the current global hegemony? I don't think we should assume that the answer to this is as evident as some would have us believe.

But let me return more closely to your question. The notion that a language, English, could somehow be a threat to a great religion looks on the face of it rather bizarre. How could this system of grammar and vocabulary threaten a vast set of beliefs and practices? Of course, you only have to take one step back from this reduced view of what 'English' is to see at least two ways in which it can be a threat. First, to the extent that there is a very special relationship between Islam and the Arabic of the Qur'an (a relationship which interestingly does not exist for Christianity, even though, rather ridiculously, some seem to believe that English is somehow the language of the Bible), the spread of English may perhaps potentially sever this link (and perhaps more so in non-Arabic Muslim populations, where the learning of classical Arabic may be easily pushed out of the curriculum). But this, I think, is not a great immediate danger. Second, it is also possible to see threats to Islamic values in the system of English itself, as you show so wonderfully in your piece, 'The Im-perfect Future' (Karmani, 1997). But again, I don't think this is a major threat. I think we have to take one more step back and look at the much bigger package of cultures and ideologies that comes with English.

Many now claim that English is no longer tied to any culture since it is now the 'property of the world' rather than the possession of the English-dominant nations. But such a proposition misses the point that English is deeply embedded in a set of social, cultural, political and economic relations. They aren't so much part of the language as intertwined with it, and thus to advocate, for example, a more secular curriculum with greater access through English to certain jobs, economies and cultural forms, is to advocate a set of changes that may have profound affects on families, religious affiliations, social movements and so on. But this is where the I think the biggest challenge lies for Islam: The Muslim world, in my view, needs to be cautious about setting itself in opposition to globalization or English. On the one hand, such a move can revive (or invent) traditional and conservative modes of life and politics that run the danger of being more repressive than the perceived threats of change. On the other hand, an oppositional position overlooks the point that Islam is part of globalization anyway: it is a spreading, transnational religion, and as such is part of current globalization. The hard question, it seems to me, is how Muslim teachers, students, scholars and writers can acknowledge their complicity with English and globalization and find a way not of simply opposing English but rather of appropriating English for Islamic purposes. Does this make sense to you?

KARMANI: Actually, it makes a lot of sense. During the Soviet era in Afghanistan the madrasahs (traditional Qur'anic schools) were seen by the then US administration and the Pakistani government of General Zia ul-Haq as being instrumental in the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union or as the US saw it the war against communism. And I imagine it was also believed that the madrasahs kept the Afghan Mujahideen in a state of perceived 'ignorance' while effectively transforming them into a formidable fighting force against the Soviet occupation of a Muslim land. So it's curious that as part of a plan for a \$3 billion US aid package to Pakistan, President Pervez Musharraf is now negotiating a strategy on how to 'modernise' the madrasahs with English playing a key role (Washington Times, 1 July, 2003). But what's often glossed over in these discussions is the fact that the purported 19 hijackers of the 9-11 attacks came mostly from middle-class westernised backgrounds and in all probability spoke fluent English.

I take your point about the need for Muslims to explore ways of appropriating English and acknowledging a complicity between (or perhaps a concurrence of) Islam and the globalisation of English, but could you elaborate on why or how you feel an opposition to English might result in more repressive modes of life and politics.

PENNYCOOK: OK. I need to be careful about this. I'm certainly not trying to juxtapose a notion of necessary modernity with tradition. And I should also add that I'm very wary about making any suggestions about knowing what Muslim teachers should or should not do. My comments are based on my understandings of a range of different contexts. My comments about the dangers of opposition possibly leading to repressive modes of life and politics are based on the observation that opposition to change and modernity is often used to rationalize reactionary positions. Thus, the Christian Right criticizes modern ways of life and uses notions of 'family values' to justify limiting freedom and patriarchal forms of family life. Or more generally, oppositional politics often find themselves trapped by the definitions of the powerful, so in order to oppose English, globalization, Westernization and so on, one is pushed into an agenda that emphasizes language maintenance, localization, Arabization, or whatever. Now on the one hand, of course, these are very necessary counter-discourses to current hegemonic forces in the world: We do need to support other languages, local languages and cultures and so forth. But on the other hand, such reactions raise other concerns: First, by reacting against dominant forms of language, culture

and so on, they present only an oppositional strategy. They don't present us with ways of dealing with the forces that threaten us. If we take on board the arguments of linguistic imperialism, for example, we can support local languages and so on, but it's not clear what we as English teachers are supposed to do. It seems to me that the issue is to take up English and do something else with it. Second, reactions against ideas such as linguistic imperialism often start to look to me uncomfortably nationalist. While forms of nationalism may be useful to group around politically, I always feel they're part of the problem. And what often happens as a result, is that various majority groupings claiming to speak for the nation then lay claim to the only oppositional discourse while discounting many other people and possibilities. Mohamed Benrabah's discussion of the 'Arabization' of Algeria in his book 'Langue et pouvoir en Algerie: Histoire d'un traumatisme linguistique' (1999) [Language and power in Algeria: A history of linguistic trauma] is an interesting example of this, though we could draw examples from many parts of the world. Thus my argument is that we need to be cautious about how the terrain of opposition is formed; we need to be careful about what gets left out in any oppositional regrouping; and we need ways to move forward by using the tools of the powerful against them.

KARMANI: One significant area, since 9-11, in which the "tools of the powerful are being used against them" is in the recent language wars between global media networks. The increasing use of English for instance by Al-Jazeera and other Arab satellite TV networks has been troubling politicians and media moguls in the English-speaking West. To counter the ascendancy of Arab satellite news media the Bush administration has been pouring millions of dollars into producing Arabic language media that reflect US interests in the Middle East region. Notably CNNArabic.com was launched only a few months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and amidst an escalation in violence in Palestinian occupied territories. Another related phenomenon in which English is being increasingly employed as a tool of opposition, particularly since 9-11, has been in the proliferation of Islamic English-language websites. Both of these areas, associated with new emerging technologies in the Muslim world will be seen by some as examples of too much English being a dangerous thing.

How significant do you feel these developments are particularly in wake of the so-called "war against terror"? Do you foresee any dangers? And do you incidentally agree with David Graddol's prediction (1997: 61) that the dominance of English as the language of technology is a transitional phenomenon and that in the next decade English may even experience a decline?

PENNYCOOK: Taking the last issue first, I find this sort of thing really hard to predict. I certainly admire Graddol's attempts to work through these issues in a well thought-out way (there are lots of far less thoughtful claims about the future of English around). There certainly do seem to be shifts, for example, in the number and percentage of non-English web sites; and the potential of machine translation could be immense in all sorts of ways (including language teaching). So the argument that English is so embedded in the technological domain that it will never change is probably suspect. But if the argument that English spread will necessarily be technology-driven may be questionable, we nevertheless have to deal with the problem that English will likely remain embedded in many domains for other purposes. And here I return to the first part of your question. You give the examples of "too much English" being seen by some as a "dangerous thing". Yes, of course it is, both because of its complex relationship to other languages and because of its relationship to particular cultural and discursive formations (as discussed above); but in a struggle by Al-Jazeera and other Arab satellite TV networks to reach a wider audience, to present a different picture of the world through English than the one so commonly available, surely this is also a

necessary and urgent use of English. In the same way that a reaction to the new CNNArabic.com may be that this increased use of Arabic is not so welcome, so a reaction to the increased use of English may also have to be viewed as both positive and negative. The use of English by Indians, Africans and South East Asians as part of the anti-colonial struggle was a necessary part of that struggle; it has had many other consequences, however, including increasing the role of English in the world, perpetuating class divides between English-speakers and non-English-speakers, developing an English-speaking elite, and so forth. And all of this is why, in the end, I think we have to face the prospect that we always need to both oppose domains of pro-English policy (and particularly policies such as those supporting native speakers and opposing bilingual education, or using English to promote particular ideological positions) and also at the same time to work with and through English in order to get alternative voices heard. And sometimes these two needs may be contradictory.

I was just thinking about the article (Weiher, 2003) posted on the TESOL Islamia website, about the American invaders of Iraq knowing little Arabic. This is of course another dark side of the role of English – its connection to belief in the adequacy of English monolingualism. In a recent article (Pennycook, 2003), I started discussing the role of English as both a killer language (not in the sense in which some use it where it is linked to the death of other languages, but rather where it is linked to people's deaths) and what I called a language of discommunication (I was using examples of the role of English in the field of medicine, where it can play a pernicious role in dividing doctors, nurses and patients). It strikes me that this is another context of English as a killer language, where its role as a supposed international language of communication means its monolingual speakers endanger the lives of those who do not have access to the language. Any thoughts?

KARMANI: I think the emergence of the 'dark side of English' was very much the case as the post 9-11 events were just beginning to unfold. Certainly one of the key reasons that communication with the Taliban broke down was that the Americans pretty much demanded to be understood in English without any of the usual diplomatic niceties. I remember a Pakistani journalist remarking that the reason Pakistan was spared by the Americans was because the sort of communication that was possible in English with President Musharaf had not been possible with the Taliban and more recently with Saddam Hussein. And so it was not surprising that Hamid Karzai and Ahmed Chalabi, subsequently handpicked by the Bush administration, were both notably well-versed in American English.

And in a similar yet more subtle vein, I think it's also revealing to consider how the media construction of 'Comical Ali' has had a lot to do with attitudes towards certain modes of speaking English. Bush, Rumsfeld and Berlusconi have all committed political gaffes but I think in Al-Sahhaf's case he has been ridiculed mostly because of the perception of his 'flowery' use of English and his strong unmodulated Arabic manner. And it's also interesting how Tariq Aziz, who is often described as having flawless English, was spared the same sort of ridicule and that there were even calls for clemency when he eventually surrendered to US forces.

Which brings me to my next question, which has also featured significantly since 9-11. Back in the United Kingdom, David Blunkett, the British Home Secretary, has been using English (it would seem) as a tool against Muslims. In reference to the summer riots of 2001 involving mainly Muslim youths he suggested that British Asians ought to stop speaking their ethnic languages at home to help prevent 'schizophrenic' rifts between generations of families (The Observer, 15 September, 2002). A year on, he proposed that asylum seekers and immigrants

(mostly Muslims) needed to improve their English to pass a Britishness test (The Guardian, 4 September, 2003) and only very recently he has been warning imams in Britain to start speaking English in order to avoid 'a clash of cultures' (The Independent, 31 October, 2003). Well, one wonders that if they all end up speaking like Al-Sahhaf, will they really have passed Blunkett's Britishness test?

But more generally, what do you think has brought about David Blunkett's outbursts in linking Islam with English? Are there any similar parallels in Australia and the United States? And do you see any fundamental distinction here between the promotion of English in the Centre and in the Periphery?

PENNYCOOK: I think you're right about the 'English connection' with Pakistan and the attitude towards Al-Sahhaf. At one level it seems utterly bizarre that major political orientations can be so swayed by these linguistic connections, but on the other hand we know that it has been overt British and American policy to promote English for economic and political gain. This is where Robert Phillipson's work is perhaps at its most useful – in documenting the intentions and processes of this spread of English, though I've often also wondered what exactly is gained by such promotion. Just because the British Council loudly proclaims that it's going to spread English for cultural and political gain, doesn't mean that they're right that it will have these effects; though clearly there are a lot of economic gains now from the teaching of English. But what this shows is that it does seem beneficial to have become part of the 'English speaking community' because you're less likely to be attacked by English-dominant nations. It's also quite clear that speaking English was an important part of the UK-US-Australia alliance. I suppose the argument is that there are cultural affinities and diplomatic channels open with countries with higher levels of English use. And this is a sad reflection, because it suggests that the English monolingualism of the UK and US holds sway as a global paradigm for communication. The problem is not just the global role of English but the assumptions about how communication should happen. And the Al-Sahhaf case is a good reminder for all those who advocate a pluralist view of Englishes (acknowledging different accents, styles, lexicons etc) that such liberalism must always be accompanied by a constant struggle against the majority view, which will continue to deride those other ways of using English.

As for Blunkett, I was – I suppose rather naively – taken aback by his extraordinary suggestions. I'd thought that the UK and 'New Labour' might have moved on from these outrageous views. I don't think it started with an opposition between English and Islam: It seemed to be centrally that old argument that linguistic and cultural difference is a threat to national unity, an argument that arose again particularly in response to the 'ethnic riots' in northern England. The British have long struggled with trying to come to terms with diversity in their midst, and particularly when that diversity is not white and speaks other languages. The disgraceful Britishness test reminded me of the arch conservative Norman Tebbit's 'English test' a number of years ago, when he challenged British cricket supporters who cheered for India, Pakistan or the West Indies (international cricket matches, by the way, are called 'test matches') to either support their 'national team' (i.e. England) or to get out. The UK is very backward in this respect (and this is another aspect of the current government that makes it often indistinguishable from its conservative counterpart), and has still done little to develop bilingual schooling, language support and so on. I think Australia and Canada are quite a way ahead on this (despite their many problems and the constant threats in Australia to retreat towards its White Australia past, particularly under the current government and its appalling policy towards asylum seekers). The US is locked into its own struggles over 'US English' with its retrenching of bilingual education. Anyway, I think this is the background in the UK – an ability as yet to see itself as a multilingual, multicultural nation, and to

get beyond seeing difference as a problem. It was into this climate that the 'threat of Islam' emerged, with new discourses about fundamentalism, holy wars and so forth. The next step – to see Islam and the use of other languages as a threat to Britain, and to urge more use of English – was not a big step.

Is there a fundamental distinction between the promotion of English in the Centre and in the Periphery? There are of course many parallels – and it's certainly useful to emphasize this, since the Centre is often described as 'English-speaking,' and the promotion of English is therefore overlooked. There are also interesting parallels between these examples of promoting English for Muslims in the UK and the attempt to promote English and curb the influence of Islamic schools elsewhere in the world (the point we started this discussion with). In a sense we can see all this promotion of English as part of the attempt to develop a greater sense of alliance to the new global Empire. But I also think there are differences that we need to be aware of. While some of the goals may be the same, the effects are different. When English is promoted in the Centre, it is done through school systems and other institutions that are part of the 'state apparatus,' thus allowing for close connections between English, culture and ideology. But when English enters the diverse cultural worlds in which it is being promoted elsewhere, it is doing so through a diversity of differently oriented institutions and media. Perhaps the most worrisome image is that new modes of control (and the dominance of the US) in the globalized world are indeed becoming similar to the functions of the state apparatus. Can difference survive this onslaught? We will have to fight for it.

KARMANI: On the surface, the new modes of control often seem surprisingly similar to past modes under conventional imperialism. I'm thinking of the alarming rise in the use of English language teaching these days by Christian missionary groups particularly in the reconstruction of post-Saddam Iraq. Recently, in your excellent article with Sophie Coutand-Marin (2003) on teaching English as a missionary language you wrote:

The recent shift in global relations, with the rampant ascendancy of an aggressively conservative, capitalist and Christian United States (supported particularly by Anglophone allies in wars against Islamic states), alongside the ever-increasing global clamour for English and its changing role in the world, has led to a new and troubling set of relations between English language teaching and Christian missionary activity.

So in wrapping up this interview, I want to ask you what you see as the commonalities and differences, if any, between old and new relations between English and Christian missionary groups. And also what lessons do you think might be learnt from the past about the link between Christian missionary activity and English language teaching?

PENNYCOOK: Yes, as you know, this is something that has been bothering me for some time. As I have been trying to argue, I think we need to understand the new modes of power as both part of a long history of attempts to control the world, but also at the same time radically different. This argument often gets set up as needing to be decided between those who see globalization as merely a continuation of the old forms of imperialism (an argument often based on a position that sees capitalist accumulation at the heart of all imperialism, and thus suggests that the new era is merely more of the same) and those who consider it to be a radically new era (and therefore focus on issues of difference, such as new modes of communication, changing patterns of human movement, new literacies, shifting family relations and so on). I think we have to see it as both: globalization is intimately linked to past forms of imperialism (we lose this

historical view at out peril) and is also involves a very new and fast changing set of conditions (we lose this sense of complexity and diversity at our peril).

So, current missionary work is indeed part of the long history of missionary work but also very different. It is important to note, first of all, that there are two distinct traditions of Christian missionary work in relation to language. The first, the missionary-linguist project, has been concerned predominantly with the spread of Christianity through whatever languages were available. And in order to make languages available, this work spawned an industry of linguistic description and bible translation. Bible translation projects are carrying on as never before under the aegis of organizations such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Wycliffe International. As Wycliffe International (2003) (formerly Wycliffe Bible Translation) explains its mission:

By the year 2025, together with partners worldwide, we aim to see a Bible translation program begun in all the remaining languages that need one. Wycliffe International's work is to facilitate the translation of God's Word into every language that needs it. Wycliffe has organizations in nearly forty countries and has had a part in translating over 500 New Testaments into minority and indigenous languages. Fifteen hundred more translation projects representing over 70 countries, are in progress....Three hundred eighty million people in over 3000 language groups still wait for the Good News in their own languages. They have waited long enough!"

The point worth noting here – as well as the extraordinary presumption behind the notion of languages that 'need' a Bible translation – is that such work has had and continues to have profound effects on languages around the world. Not only is the culturally impositional practice of translating the Bible central to this missionary project, but so is describing and preparing languages for such work. These are some of the leading institutions involved in linguistic work with various languages around the world.

The second tradition draws a much stronger connection between English (or, of course, other European languages) and Christianity. It too has a long history, since colonial self aggrandisement constructed English as a language of God. This connection was somewhat limited under colonial rule, colonial authorities being more concerned with educating in vernacular languages a subservient population able to participate in colonial capitalism. It was generally left to a small number of missionary schools to promote English through their schools. But things have changed hugely now that English is so widely spread, and indeed in the last few years many missionary organizations have used the global demand for English as a means to reach 'non-believers'. These new conditions lead to a far more troublesome set of relations whereby ELT is used as a cover for missionary activity (at least it was pretty clear what was going on during colonial times), and this missionary activity is frequently linked to a range of current global ideologies.

The difficult questions we were trying to get at in our article were the grounds on which one might object to this. On the face of it, it might seem obvious to object to covert Christian missionary activity in ELT classes. But there are several different possible arguments here: From a secular humanist position, one might just argue that there is no place for religion or politics in the classroom (this is more or less the position taken by the French state, leading of course to difficult arguments about whether Muslim students in France should be allowed to wear a headscarf). From a point of view that argues that politics and ethics are inescapable in education, the argument then centres on the grounds on which one set of politics (say, feminist, environmentalist, or socialist) is preferable over Christian. In addition there are also alternative religious rather than secular

positions: From an Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish etc point of view, it might be argued that the problem is simply with the Christianity; if it were the 'right' religious point of view, it would be OK. But such a position is potentially as intractable as the Christian missionary one (though not as powerful, since the Christian is now so linked to the power of global English). I think these are difficult questions to do with power, ethics, difference and education, and we need to open up more discussion around them.

In the meantime: As-salaamo alaikam - Peace be upon you.

END.



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