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The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language, (1994)

Language in Social Life Series: Longman

by

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ENGLISH AND ISLAM

(in The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language)

pp. 204-210

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THERE IS OF COURSE A LONG HISTORY OF CONFLICT between the Western/Christian world and the Muslim world, from the Crusades of the Middle Ages to recent confrontations between the United States and Iran, Libya and Iraq, or even the ‘Rushdie Affair’. Indeed, it is important, I think, to see the struggles around Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* as, in part, a struggle between English and Islam. Referring to this battle, Harris (1991) argues that ‘English is not just a language, any more than Islam is just a religion.... The names *English* and *Islam*, whatever else they may be, are names of two very big battalions when it comes to the international power struggle for control of the Middle East’ (p. 90).⁶ The notion of worldliness suggests that such a protracted history of conflict could not but leave its traces on the discourse/language nexus that forms between English and various discourses. For many colonized people, a strong relationship was felt between English and Christianity, since the first contact with the language was through Christian missionaries, and two of the most obvious signs of cultural expansion under colonialism were the spread of religion and the spread of the language. The same can be said for Malaysia (see Mahathir, 1970), where many Malays were suspicious of the missionary schools (Chapter 3). The

struggle for independence from colonialism in the Muslim world frequently involved strong appeals to Islam as a unifying force around which people could join in the battle against European domination (Casewit, 1985). Independence movements, therefore, often involved a revival of Islamic consciousness with a concomitant stress on local languages and a rejection of Christianity and English (or other European languages). But as Laitin (1977) points out, the strength of the Islamic opposition to colonialism often left Muslims least able to participate in independence politics. Thus, as was the case with Malays, Muslim people often emerged after colonialism with a strong sense of religious and linguistic identity that was in vehement opposition to the language and religion of the colonizers, but they also emerged as the disenfranchised within their own country.

This Islamic consciousness has been undergoing a period of revival, perhaps in part in conjunction with or in opposition to what seems to be a global trend towards religious fundamentalism, perhaps also as a response to the threats posed by the spread of Western technology, knowledge and culture. Kamal Hassan (1987) suggests it is reasonable to expect Islamic ‘revivalism’ or ‘resurgence’ to continue to spread through the Muslim world, given its present momentum and, amongst other things, a growing crisis in confidence in Western models of government and development, the reaction to increased Christian missionary work, and the weakening of autocratic and dictatorial rule in Muslim countries. According to Ožóg (1990), in the same way that many Muslims in the Middle East are rethinking many aspects of their religious, cultural and political lives, so ‘the Malays are re-evaluating much of their lives and, in so doing, are rejecting many Western ideas and practices’ (p.314). Ožóg goes on to argue that this strengthening of Islamic feeling has reinforced the idea that English is a Western language with little place in the lives of Malays. Thus, he suggests, ‘a view expressed by many, although not yet publicly by a politician, is that English is a *kafir* (non-Islamic) language’ (p.314)

Secular and Religious Knowledge

Asmah Haji Omar (1987) points out that the Malay word *barat* (the West) evokes both positive and negative reactions, suggesting on the one hand progress, modernization, knowledge, science, technology, and so ‘on, and on the other, moral

permissiveness and degradation. But there is a more fundamental connection between rejection of things Western and the Islamic religion, namely in terms of the different conceptions of knowledge. As Mohammed Nor Wan Daud (1989) explains, an Islamic worldview has a number of implications for knowledge and education. Since knowledge is an aspect of divinity, seeking knowledge and teaching are fundamentally important acts of divine worship and a lifelong process. Knowledge is an integrated concept, formed of *revealed* knowledge (the *Qur'an* and *Sunna* of Muhammad) as well as *acquired* knowledge of both the external world of nature and the internal world of human experience. 'The proper and sincere application of knowledge in one's personal and collective life forms the foundation of the only criterion of human excellence in Islam, *taqwa*' (p.113) The concept of knowledge in Islam, then, is fundamentally important, in part because revealed knowledge comes from the Scriptures and in part because its pursuit is considered a facet of a properly religious life. Significant here is that there is a profound difference between Western secular thought embodied in technological-rational knowledge and the holistic concept of divine knowledge embodied in Islamic thought. Significant, too, is the close connection between the spread of English and the spread of Western secular thought.

According to Mohammed Nor Wan Daud (1989), however, the distinction between secular/Western and Islamic/religious knowledge is not so clear cut, since much of what is taken to be Western actually has its origins in Islamic and Arabic thought. Furthermore, since, as Mahathir Mohamad (1986) suggests, Islam 'encourages the pursuit of all knowledge' (p.30), or as Asmah Haji Omar (1990) says, 'knowledge should be sought from anywhere in the world' (p.10), there may be no Qur'anic justification for such a separation:

It is indeed an injustice to history and to the true spirit of Islam that some Muslim activists (and many Western scholars also) equate Islamization with an anti-Western philosophy. Muslims are urged in the *Quran* to benefit from the signs of God in *all* parts of the world; and learning from the West, whose rise to prominence can be attributed significantly to its contact with the Muslim world, should be positively regarded as a reciprocation of a magnificently creative process.

(Mohammed Nor Wan Daud, 1989, p.120)

Nevertheless, others, such as Ashraf (1987) and Ali (1987), argue that Western secular thought is a direct threat to the tenets of a Muslim society. In her study of the problems posed by Western forms of knowledge in higher education in Bahrain, Zahra Al Zeera (1990) compares the ‘Western-imposed models’ to the Trojan Horse (cf. Cooke, 1988) and suggests that Bahrain ‘is being torn between poles, fragmented between the secular and the religious’ (p.336). She argues that:

Western secular programs are at the root of the most serious problems at the university and in the society. Problems of coeducation and secular education, Arabization, English-language domination of the job market, motivation, and bilingual, bicultural issues are all based in modernization projects. What is happening at the university is a reflection of what is happening in the society. A unidimensional, secular theory of knowledge introduced into Bahrain’s higher educational institutes is causing a crisis at different levels: linguistic and language, economic, social, cultural, academic, psychological and religious.

Mohammad Shafi also connects this split to the teaching of English, and argues that ‘in the Muslim countries there is a great disparity between the objectives of teaching English and the ultimate aim of Muslim education’ (p.33). Mahathir Mohamad (1986), the Malaysian Prime Minister, suggests that this debate is indeed alive in Malaysia today: ‘The perception of the education and the knowledge brought by the British as “secular” or “Western” shaped Malay attitudes to such an extent that they became ingrained in the Malay psyche. To this day opposition to so-called “secular” education still exists and the debate continues on the merits and demerits of education other than “religious”’ (p.22). A study by Ozóg (1990) at the International Islamic University in Malaysia found that all of the fifty students interviewed ‘were concerned that English was the main avenue through which Western, that is non-Islamic or even anti-Islamic, culture entered the country’ (p.314).

With the strengthening of Islamic feeling in Malaysia and the need to win votes from the Islamic PAS party, which has been gaining strength especially in the rural North, the government has been faced by yet another dilemma: how to support the learning of English for ‘pragmatic’ scientific, academic, business, and political reasons while at the same time supporting the Islamization of the country, which for many may seem a process incompatible with the learning of English. Clearly, whether there is an inherent tension between Western and Islamic knowledge or not, there is a strong feeling that English is connected to forms of knowledge and culture that are

oppositional or even threatening to an Islamic way of life. Once again, the difficulties of dealing with the national and international cultural politics of English can be seen. To the extent that students are wary of some of the possible implications of learning English, a useful oppositional politics can be formed, but to the extent that English is an important means by which social and economic privilege is apportioned within the society, a general resistance to learning English, especially in rural areas, can serve to maintain ethnic and class inequalities.

An Islamic Approach to TEFL

Mohammad Shafi's (1983) view that there is a disparity between the objectives of teaching English and the aims of Muslim education has led him to argue for an 'Islamic approach to teaching English as a foreign language'. This implies 'learning English which is based on the Islamic faith, thought and conduct and excluding anti-religious and irreligious ideologies' (p.34). He suggests that to avoid the 'sad and precarious' situation of Muslim youth, who, 'after being educated through the medium of English ... are transformed into split personalities', there is the 'utmost need to make English language teaching truly Islamic' (pp. 36-7). This would involve a whole reassessment of teaching methods, so that 'each lesson in the teaching of English should be based on behavioural objectives having Islamic concepts to be taught according to Islamic objectives to be achieved' (p.38). It would involve the retraining of teachers, the teaching of lexical items and Islamic concepts in context, rewriting syllabuses and textbooks, changing exam systems, and comprehensive structural support. Al Zeera's (1990) proposals for a 'wholistic' Islamic paradigm for the Orientation programme at the University of Bahrain similarly requires English to be taught within an utterly reconceptualized and Islamic framework.

Such proposals, however, face difficult struggles against both those whose interests are in favour of maintaining the links between English and a notion of internationalism (thus making claims as to its neutrality and the primacy of international intelligibility) and those for whom a particularization of English in a certain direction becomes a move towards communalism (thus making claims to other rights to particularization). Furthermore, with the domination of Western teaching practices, theories and textbooks around the world, a constant rearguard battle has to

be fought to maintain such a project. Malaysia is currently at a very interesting juncture in its gradual move towards Islamization and the simultaneous recent emphasis on English. The government, despite its strong nationalist and pro-Islamic stances, has been steering a delicate course between the more radical calls for Islamization from Islamic groups such as the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the fears expressed by the non-Muslim sectors of the population. While the PAS has suggested that the current Islamization programme is but a disguise for the underlying secular orientation of the government, liberals, even from within the Malay community, have expressed their concern that the process is dangerously divisive. According to the Tunku, 'too much emphasis on religion will lead to misunderstanding as Malaysia is a country of mixed population and mixed religions, and would not be congenial to the happy relationship that exists among the people today' (*The Star*, 28 April 1987). At the same time, the government is constantly stressing the need for education in Malaysia to meet the needs of economic development, a process which inevitably includes education in English. Thus English gets caught up in this debate around the future of Malaysia as an Islamic state.

The process of Islamization, however, is also bringing certain changes to the English language curriculum. With the increased Islamic content in the secondary school curriculum (*Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah: KBSM*), curriculum writers are not only required to ensure that there is no inappropriate material in textbooks (such as the non-Islamic celebration of birthdays), but they must also include aspects of the new Muslim-dominated moral curriculum in their work. Whether such changes will continue and have a lasting effect, and whether this ultimately may constitute an Islamic approach to English language teaching in Malaysia remains to be seen. Such changes may produce a certain Islamicization of English, but battles will always have to be fought around the use of English in wider contexts and with other communities' concerns over the changing face of English. The complex worldliness of English is tied up with questions of colonialism, neocolonialism, religion, education, knowledge and resistance. For Malays, these relationships are then bound up with their own negotiation of identity between their position within the larger Islamic community (*umma*) and their position as a linguistic and cultural group within Malaysia (Hussin Mutalib, 1990).

Notes:

6. There is, of course, a great deal more that could be said about this topic (see among many examples, Mazrui, 1990)

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