

## English and politics

Ann Hewings & Caroline Tagg, *The Politics of English: Conflict, Competition, Co-existence*. London: Routledge, 2012. Pp. iv + 383. Paperback, £24.99, ISBN 9780415674249.

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*The Politics of English* is an important book. Its subject is not English as a discrete, isolated linguistic entity, but the complex set of policies, values and practices that it is an inextricable part of. In exploring a range of inter-related themes, the focus is very much on English as a *lived* language or, better, as *lived experience*. In a textbook, this approach is particularly welcomed. There is great availability, nearly an inflation, of texts about English as a world language and the many varieties that have emerged in the last two centuries. By and large, these volumes tend to provide historical, geographical and linguistic overviews of the spread of English. While this is certainly very important, *The Politics of English* distinguishes itself by offering a different and critical perspective and extremely useful insights into what English actually *means* to its many users around the world.

The intentions of the editors are made clear right from the outset: “all language use is political in nature” (p. 1). This statement underpins the entire collection and provides coherence to the various themes that Ann Hewings and Caroline Tagg have (very well) chosen.

Chapter 1, by Philip Seargeant, is a useful introduction to Global English and some of the debates about it, and covers important issues such as hegemony and language ownership. The notion of *appropriation*, namely “the idea that various communities around the world now see the language as their own” (p. 31), is particularly interesting here and, space permitting, would have perhaps benefited from deeper reflection. Above all: do we really know if, and to what extent, people really see the English language as their own? This is a crucial question that needs addressing.

In Chapter 2, Naz Rassool explores the place of English in migratory flows. This is a vital theme which not only helps the reader appreciate the significance of a global language in global migration, but

also, and even more profoundly, invites reflection on the very nature of language and its constant state of flux and hybridity. This latter aspect of language, as Rassool explains very well, is closely interrelated to people’s multiple and intersecting identities. Indeed, there could have been a stronger emphasis in the chapter on hybridity as pervasive in language in general rather than in ‘contact’ situations in particular.

In Chapter 3, Ann Hewings discusses the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language and, usefully, the teaching and learning of any subject *through* English as a medium of instruction. Once again, the topic is treated from the point of view of the implications that policies have on their most direct stakeholders. The case study of Malaysia is perfect to illustrate virtually all issues that Hewings deals with. The place of English in education in the European context is also discussed, a topic which is extremely relevant and interesting for the theme of the chapter. Finally, the discussion is further enriched by considering English in educational settings in countries where it is the primary language.

Chapter 4 deals with English Language Teaching (ELT) as a global industry. Here, John Gray frames this particular topic within the context of neoliberalism. This is useful since it provides more solid underpinnings to a type of analysis which would otherwise be seen as being simply, and perhaps inexplicably, anti-ELT. In perfect symbiosis with the general ethos of the volume, therefore, Gray offers a critique that goes beyond the confines of ELT and expands into the realm of global economy and how it affects people’s lives. In this regard, Rwanda represents a suitable environment in which the theme can be contextualised and explored concretely. The final section on academic publishing adds a further element of interest.

David Johnson, in Chapter 5, discusses a ‘classic’ theme in this field, the role of English as a literary



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language in colonial and post-colonial settings, which he introduces and historically contextualises in a more original and extremely interesting way, namely within the discourse of “national literature” and, fundamentally, of the European invention of the nation-state. Avoiding simple dichotomies and right/wrong, good/bad debates, Johnson engages with the topic in all its complexities. Of particular interest, for example, is the treatment of the opposing views expressed by Salman Rushdie and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. Rushdie, who has always been a staunch promoter of the idea of English as an Indian language, has often been seen as a sort of antidote to critics of English as an imperialist language. Rajan, however, problematises Rushdie’s position by claiming that it is actually the product of both a flawed, West-centric notion of universalism, and his self-promotion as a literary figure.

In Chapter 6, Daniel Allington follows a similar pattern to that adopted by John Gray in Chapter 4: the production and distribution flows of global media in and through English are analysed critically from the point of view of global economy. Particular emphasis is placed on the dominant positions of primary Anglophone countries such as the US and the UK and the consequently subaltern positions of the rest of the English-speaking world and, even more so, the non-English speaking world. One point that does not entirely convince me comes towards the end, when Allington reflects on the obvious discrepancy between the marketization of this very book and that of books produced, for example, in sub-Saharan Africa. While it can certainly be an expression of intellectual honesty, I imagine how the comparison could also be easily misinterpreted.

The inclusion of a chapter (7) by Guy Cook in this volume is in itself an additional element of interest. Here, it is the theme of translation that takes centre stage. With practical and well-chosen examples, the discussion offers some insightful stimuli for reflection on the very nature of translation. It then moves towards

what, by now, seems to be the main tenet of the entire book: the imbalance between English and other languages and, by consequence, between the US and the UK and other countries, producing cultural flows that Cook describes as “a depressingly one-way street” (p. 284).

The key to the book is probably the combination of the first sentence in the Introduction mentioned above and the last one in Chapter 8, where Caroline Tagg explains that “attempts to regulate language use are always grounded in a particular way of seeing – and organising – the world” (p. 323). From this point of view, a language ‘value’ such as correctness is a powerful tool to impose one’s own system and order onto other people’s systems. In essence, this is the main message that this book conveys: the English language is an integral part of a world order that is seriously lopsided.

In many ways, the discourse of “appropriation” alluded to in the first chapter by Seargeant seems to have given way to more pessimistic views. What is the solution, then? Significantly, Seargeant is also the author of the final chapter, in which he tries to imagine the future of English. One claim that stands out, and seems like a possible answer to the concerns expressed in the book, is that “If recent trends towards linguistic pluralism continue . . . English’s dominance may well give way to a future less in thrall to a single ‘global language’” (p. 346). However, Seargeant also recognises that predicting the future of English is “probably futile” and that it “necessitates predicting the future of global society itself” (p. 346), thereby re-casting a veil of pessimism on the imbalanced cultural, economic and sociolinguistic dynamics of the world.

In conclusion, this is a book which I would strongly recommend to students of under- and postgraduate courses dealing with the rules and roles of English in the world, where a critical reading of “English”, in all its complexities, is a vital component.