

English and the Language of Others

ROBERT J. C. YOUNG

Faculty of Arts & Science, English Department, New York University,
19 University Place, 514, New York, New York 10003, USA.
E-mail: rjy2@nyu.edu

Any consideration of English in the context of a literature for Europe prompts the question of whether English can be contained within the paradigm of Europe, whether it could or should ever be restrained from overflowing its edges and boundaries. While English was created from the crucible of European languages, its filiations have long since stretched far beyond the borders of the continent. Close observation of the dynamics of English, and of English Literature, it could be argued, illustrates one reason why contemporary Britain finds it difficult to limit itself to an exclusively European dimension.

For a long time now, English has undergone cultural encounters with the language of others who dwell far beyond the limits of its own originating continental space. Moreover, as we know, English itself as a language has spread around the globe: for some time now, more literature has been written in English outside Britain than from within it, with the result that English literature has found itself marked by other cultures in the categories used to describe its own ‘others’: world literatures in English, Anglophone, postcolonial, Commonwealth literature, etc. All these ways of describing literatures in English written outside Britain have particular nuanced implications – some describe the language, others political formations – but in every case the general assumption is that they are written, or read, in English. In fact, being defined by the language rather than the country, they are probably more consistently written in English than English literature itself.

‘Indian English’ is now possibly the most widely spoken form of English on earth – or so David Crystal somewhat improbably claims on the basis of being greeted with ‘Hello, how are you?’ by schoolchildren wherever he went on a visit to India.¹ So perhaps those who complain about the globalization of English should start with India, except that they need to remember that there the language locks inexorably into a Hindi which is itself spattered with English and ‘chalta hai’! English has shifted. Hinglish has reached. Let’s prepone that talk!

If English has become Indian, then maybe it's not so much that English has been globalised, overpowering all other languages, as that it has a constant facility of self-hybridisation, mixing with other languages in a recurring 'make-nice'. English has long been a lingua franca, ever since it came into being, as Sir Walter Scott put it in *Ivanhoe*, as the 'mixed language, in which the Norman and Saxon races conversed with each other' (Ref. 2, p. 27). English, you might say, is at least suited to be a global language since it's already a hybrid compound of the languages of Europe: just as with Conrad's Kurtz, all Europe went into the making of it. Now it is merging with other languages of the world, picking up not just individual words but developing new hybridised forms – Banglish, Chinglish, Punglish, Singlish, Spanglish, Inglish, Hinglish ...

'That Flintoff, yaar – he's too good, innit?'

'Hey Bhai, did you ask that rasmolai on a date or what?'

'That boy is a good for nothing badmash!'

These phrases are taken from *The Queen's Hinglish: How to Speak Pukka*.³ It's a sort of modern Hobson–Jobson, the difference being that while Hobson–Jobson charted the dialect of the British in India, and the development of Babu English – '*We are happy to inform you that your request has been rejected*' – the *Queen's Hinglish* charts the ways in which South Asians in Britain are blending English with Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, changing the language in a way that's already apparent in contemporary literary works such as Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag*,⁴ Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*⁵ or Daljit Nagra's recent collection, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*.^{6,7} Is there something about English that facilitates this kind of absorption? The author Baljunder K. Mahal writes:

English is and always has been a greedy language. Throughout the centuries it has been gathering exotic words from other tongues like a wildly successful gambler hording chips ... its relentless appetite for the new making it at once the largest and most versatile of all the world's languages. (Ref. 3, p. v)

English has always been voracious, insatiable, languishing in a constant state of desire for other languages to partner with. In recent years, as from the very first, English has been engaged in a constant practice of mixture, absorbing other languages and dialects, a process that has been further developed in much writing from the Caribbean, as in the work of Sam Selvon, Erna Brodber or even Derek Walcott, who move across different registers between standard English and multilingual creoles, or, in a different way, in West Africa, in books such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*.^{8,9}

The modern idea of languages cheerfully compounding, of languages as engines for producing mixture, constantly transgressing all forms of fixity and purity, is the very opposite of the way in which language has generally been thought of for the past two or three hundred years. A predominant idea in

England, starting in the 19th century, was to try to remove the later encrustations of French and scholarly Latin and restore English to its purer plain Anglo-Saxon forms, a strategy endorsed by many from Hazlitt to Hopkins to Herbert Spencer, from George Eliot to George Orwell. However much it was repeated, very few people actually took much notice of this tiresome pedantic recidivism. As a result, I used to think that language was truly a demotic force, a matter of the power of the people that could not be controlled from above. The constant laments voiced in Britain about new expressions, forms of speech, pronunciation, or 'Americanisms' used to encourage me in this impression. As the complaints indicated, the upper classes found themselves unable to control the shifting power of language that the people produced. The people would speak the way they wanted to speak, and the way that suited them. Today, the powers that be, such as the BBC, have abandoned the attempt to maintain an obligatory Standard English with Received Pronunciation.¹⁰ But elsewhere it has been a different story. This sort of linguistic eugenics formed the basis of the creation of modern Turkish with a Romanized script in the 1920s, in which Kemal Attaturk's linguists simultaneously attempted to remove all trace of Persian and Arabic words from Turkish (where this was impossible, they simply declared that the Iranians or Arabs had taken over words that were originally Turkic). A similar kind of linguistic eugenics, propelled by political and communal interests, has also driven the creation over the past 200 years of the literary and even spoken forms of Hindi and Urdu, whereby one language was divided into two, with two scripts, Perso-Arabic or Nagari, with each trying to rid itself of words associated with the wrong influence – Persian or Sanskrit. The intense history of the language politics of South Asia means that there the choice of language can never be separated from cultural, religious and class or caste issues. The examples of Turkey or India show that, in some circumstances, language can be controlled, driven by ideologues from above. What we often see is a tension between those at the top, seeking to preserve and maintain a language, as has long been the case in France and used to be the case in Britain, and the uncontrollable demotic transgressive elements below who use and develop language according to their own inclinations, a power struggle between the classes such as Bakhtin or Voloshinov describe.^{11,12}

What these tensions suggest is that even with a single language, there are very often many different languages in play. This is certainly the case with English, even in England. In speaking or listening to English, any individual necessarily finds him or herself engaged in a constant process of cultural translation. How different is this from the situation outside Britain? One of the distinctive things that emerges in any study of postcolonial literature is the degree to which many if not most postcolonial societies, and the writers in them, operate in a multi-lingual environment. However worldly wide the spread of the language, to write or read

in English is nevertheless not the same all over the world. In one respect, though, it is the same: it's surrounded by other languages. How is English being affected by these cultural encounters around the world, and by what different situations of production and reception?

Already if you walk through the streets of London, you will hear almost every language on earth. Outside Britain, in most countries where writers are writing in English, English usually has a different status and, most importantly, is surrounded by other local languages. To write in English in Asia, for example, is to submit to a multilingual world of intense language rivalries. Thus, Indian literature in English is always part of something else – in a country with as many as 800 languages, 2000 dialects, 23 official languages and major written literatures in 12 or more of them in a tradition that goes back 2000 years. For any Indian, writing in English involves the exercise of a choice that includes an implicit relation to other local languages. What is English's relationship to them, beyond its historical identity as the language of the former coloniser? Do the different languages exist in isolation from each other, like a mosaic, according to different discrete traditions, as in the classic European model, or do they exhibit more intimate relations that affect the internal dynamics of the language and how it is expressed?

In the 19th century, Indian intellectuals were certainly influenced by the tree/filiation *stammbaum* model of languages developed by European historical philologists, which produced the idea that nations and races should be sealed homogeneous units comparable to a language, with the corollary that the nation should have a single language with borders as clearly marked as those on the map. Although the emphasis in the post-independence era usually gets placed on communalism and religion, it is interesting to think of the importance of language politics for the history of South Asia.¹³ Pakistan's decision to make Urdu the national (but not official) language of the state was the primary catalyst of the Bangla movement in East Pakistan in the 1950s and its eventual secession into Bangladesh. Sri Lanka continues to suffer from a Civil War whose origins are generally traced back to the Sinhala Only Language Act of 1956. So here are two secessionist civil wars that were partly produced by ideologically-driven language policies derived from ideas of 19th-century European philology. Intimately linked both to the independence movement and the events of Partition, India had its equivalent language movement with the development of Hindi as a national language, which, as with Urdu in Pakistan, also produced a counter-reaction from other language groups, above all in the South, particularly Tamils. The language movements were the primary catalyst for the reorganisation of the states according to languages in 1956 from British India to its modern form, and they were also instrumental in preventing Hindi from becoming the single national language as Gandhi had envisaged: today it shares that position with English.

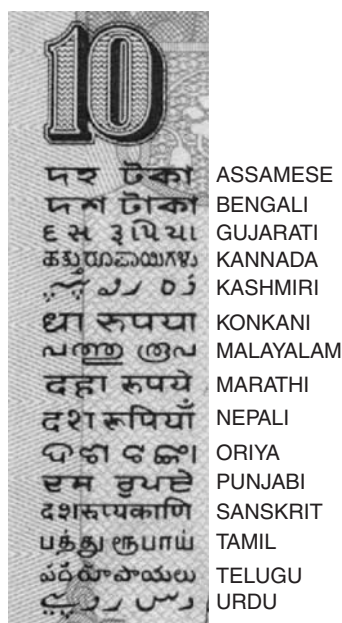


Figure 1. Indian banknote (detail)

With one official language per state, Indian literature is now required to reflect these state/language formations rather like the Indian banknote (Figure 1).

Despite this range of scripts, some of the official languages of India, such as Sindhi, do not appear here. The reason for this is that when the English annexed Sindh in 1842, Sindhi was being written in three different scripts – it doesn't appear on the icon of different languages on Indian banknotes because Indian Sindhis still cannot agree on a common script.

Meanwhile, those who write in English risk being accused of betraying their nation and its many mother tongues compared to those who write in the indigenous so-called regional or *basha* languages (here Hindi functions as both a national and regional language). This dichotomy assumes a monolingualism of the state, the writer, and the reader, and neatly divides the different languages up like the mosaic of states on the map as if they never interact, cross or interfere with each other in everyday life. Writers, it seems, are expected to choose just one language, and certainly not move between languages within a single work, even if that is often the way people speak. Moreover, for many Indians, educated in English-medium schools, there is no necessary correlation between the language they speak at home and the language in which they write.¹⁴

Whereas some early Indian writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand were regarded as provocative pioneers, today writing in a regional, or *basha* language, is customarily considered to be more authentic, more properly Indian, with English

language authors such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, or Jhumpa Lahiri, criticised for displaying what Meenakshi Mukherjee has described as ‘an anxiety of Indianness’, driven by an interminable desire ‘to explain India’ to non-Indian audiences, anglicising it and homogenising it in the process.¹⁵ This *frangi-desi* argument incidentally remains firmly fixed within nationalist parameters and denies the possibility that a non- or transnational literature may be in the process of formation, a diaspora literature creating entirely imaginary homelands. Those who are most bothered about English in India are generally part of the nationalist generation of the Independence era. Despite their criticisms of English language writers and their espousal of vernacular literatures, it is noticeable that these critics themselves write and publish in English. If you ask them why, they say that they write in English because that is the universal language of Indian academia. Why should novelists not be allowed to write in a universal language too? While the novelists themselves understandably find this critical cult for non-NRI ‘authentic’ Indianness irritating and patronising,¹⁶ publishers and readers seem markedly less bothered, as is a younger generation, who are quite happy with Bollywood’s ‘English’ style of random code-switching between the languages as in Radio Mirchi’s tag-line, ‘Ladki ko mari line, girlfriend boli, I’m fine!’.¹⁷

Vikram Seth, by contrast, has been received very differently in India than the likes of Rushdie and Roy. In 1998, the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* was hailed as being more authentic than the English original, and enthusiastically welcomed as a coming home, rather as if the Greeks had come out to welcome back the Elgin Marbles. Yet as Rashmi Sadana has pointed out, the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* is peculiar in one respect: it omits the whole episode where Haresh goes down to a Chamar community of leather workers to inspect the cleaning of leather and making of shoes, a topic regarded as distasteful and polluting for an upper caste Hindi readership.¹⁸ This censorship suggests that writing in English allows Indian writers to broach topics that remain unsayable in Hindi or other *basha* languages, and puts a different perspective on the hostility often shown towards Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, a novel centred on the story of caste transgression and its violent social suppression.^{19,20} At this point, we may note that while the literatures of India are generally classified according to the different regional languages, there is also a separate category allocated to Dalit or ‘untouchables’ literature, not defined in terms of its language, but rather by the stigmatised social status of its writers, even though, following Ambedkar, much Dalit writing has been written in Marathi. In this context, English represents a language identified with a secular Nehruvian perspective, comparatively free from caste or nationalist, although not class, signifiers. The identification of English with secularism has meant that it has become increasingly attractive to Dalit writers, who either write in English, such as Narendra Jadhav²¹ or who eagerly welcome English translations of their work (for example, Macwan²²).

All these issues complicate the classic formulations of the problem of what language a writer in a multilingual environment should choose to write in. The author most associated with this dilemma is the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who in 1982 changed from writing in English to Kikuyu for his novel *Devil on the Cross*.^{23,24} For Ngugi, the practice of writing in English, the language of his former colonial master, became unthinkable, a betrayal of his own national culture. Ngugi's situation, however, was complicated by the fact that his 'nation' operates in a multilingual environment in which different languages are spoken by different ethnic groups. His decision to reject English, therefore, and to write in his native Kikuyu, was in part an anti-colonial strategy, but also simultaneously an assertion of a minority language against the dominant language of Kenya, Kiswahili. Although Ngugi now writes in Kikuyu, he then translates himself into English, which remains the language in which his novels are most widely read. So in the end, it seems, he has to succumb to the power of English anyway. More positively, you could say that English has taken over a special role as the language of translation. It is by a long way the most translated-into language, the largest target language on earth. This means that, as in the case of India, where English is the official language of communication between the state and those states that have official languages other than Hindi, it becomes a kind of mediating medium between languages. Should we allow a different role for translation in this context than is customarily the case with European literatures? This also raises interesting questions about World Literature in English, since Ngugi's works in English are all translations but still get classified and taught under the rubric of Anglophone literature. Should we make a distinction between translated works and those (such as Ngugi's or Beckett's) translated by their own authors? To what extent is World Literature really – that is, effectively – World Literature in English, the language in which it is usually taught?

Other writers have developed an alternative to Ngugi's dilemma, in that they have written in English instead. But rather than write in regular English, they have sought to transform or translate English to some degree back into the unwritten local language. You could think of such writing in English as what Walter Benjamin, after Schleiermacher, calls a 'foreignising translation' – foreignising the language rather than domesticating cultural difference. Arguably, it was the Irish who invented this strategy, J.M. Synge translating Aran islanders' Irish into a Hiberno-English ('Father Reilly's after reading it in gallow Latin') full of untranslatable words – 'streeleen', 'banbhs', 'cnuceen', 'loy' (Ref. 25, pp. 71, 19, 21, 32, 79). This technique is different in that it can be anti-colonial or anti-nationalist or both at the same time.

He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Johnson. He thought:

– The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine!

I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (Ref. 26, p. 189)

While Stephen Daedalus' words are sometimes cited as a nationalist argument for using a native language against that of the coloniser, the important point that is often missed is that these words are in fact written in English, not Irish. Joyce refused the language nationalism of the Gaelic League, just as Gabriel rebuffs the language nationalism of Miss Ivors, who in 'The Dead' chastises him for not writing in his 'own' language.

'And haven't you your own language to keep in touch with – Irish?' asked Miss Ivors.

'Well,' said Gabriel, 'if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.' (Ref. 27, p. 234)

Joyce too was attacked, even though in fact he did not have the luxury of choosing to write in 'his own' language, for the simple reason that he did not know his own 'mother tongue' Gaelic well enough – the language that, as Derrida puts it in *Monolingualism of the Other*, was his 'mother tongue' that was never his, an original that he never knew. 'You see, never will this language be mine. And truth to tell, it never was' (Ref. 28, p. 2).

Joyce's manoeuvre in this situation was to corrupt a masculinist English into the femininity of Irish Gaelic – producing a new language that he liked to call 'Girlic'. Outside Ireland, this ambivalent strategy, of translating the dominant culture back into your own mother tongue as you write in its language, was followed by Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* (1935),²⁹ by Raja Rao indigenising English in *Kanthapura* (1938),^{30,31} by G.V. Desani in *All About Mr. [H.] Hatterr* (1948),³² by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958),³³ and then, perhaps most famously, by Salman Rushdie who in *Midnight's Children* (1961)³⁴ hybridised English into 'Anglo-Indian', a double-coded hotchpotch of English, Indian-English ('That one,' Mary said, 'What does she know about politics-politics? Only to get her nails into my Joseph she will repeat any rubbish he talks, like one stupid mynah bird') and Hindi/Urdu words or translations ('sistersleeping pigskin bag' swears Tai the boatman at Dr Aziz in what appears to be a somewhat euphemistic translation) (Ref. 34, pp. 140, 19) – all of these writers subjecting proper English to the improprieties of polyphonic processes of code-mixing from which rotting English will never recover.

But then to hybridise English is, in a way, as I have suggested, simply to take coals to Newcastle, English to the Angrezi, a process of code-mixing which in some ways is a kind of translation, but a translation that simultaneously goes on *within* a language as well as *between* languages – what Roman Jakobson calls 'intra-lingual translation'.³⁵ It is this double process that defines the essential

characteristic of any process of cultural translation. So global writing in English is not a fixed form but one engaged in a constant process of intra-lingual translation, merging with the languages of the world but always specifically responding to the particular demands of different localities, becoming, in Sheldon Pollock's formulation, a kind of 'cosmopolitan vernacular'.³⁶ English indeed has reached.

References

1. D. Crystal (2005) Mother-tongue India. Talk for Lingua Franca (ABC, Australia).
2. W. Scott, Sir (1996) *Ivanhoe*, edited by I. Duncan (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
3. B. K. Mahal (2006) *The Queen's Hinglish: How to Speak Pukka* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers).
4. S. Saadi (2004) *Psychoraag* (Edinburgh: Black & White).
5. G. Malkani (2006) *Londonstani* (London: Fourth Estate).
6. D. Nagra (2007) *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (London: Faber).
7. E. N.-M. Chien (2004) *Weird English* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
8. K. Saro-Wiwa (1985) *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Saros).
9. For a recent collection of 'rotten English', see D. Ahmad (ed.) (2007) *Rotten English: A Literary Anthology* (New York: Norton).
10. T. Crowley (2003) *Standard English and the Politics of Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
11. M. M. Bakhtin (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press).
12. V. N. Voloshinov (1973) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, translated by L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press).
13. J. Das Gupta (1970) *Language Conflict and National Development: Group Politics and National Language Policy in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
14. A. Chaudhuri (2001) *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (London: Picador).
15. M. Mukherjee (2000) *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).
16. V. Chandra (2000) The cult of authenticity. *Boston Review*, February/March.
17. G. Das (2005) English as she's spoke. *Outlook India*, 3 May.
18. R. Sadana (2007) A suitable text for a vegetarian audience: questions of authenticity and the politics of translation. *Public Culture*, 19(2), 307–328.
19. A. Roy (1997) *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo).
20. Kothari argues, on the other hand, that the treatment of caste in *The God of Small Things* is romanticised and relatively superficial, see R. Kothari (2003) The elephant and the ant: Indian literature in English/Translation. *Critical Practice*, 17.

21. N. Jadhav (2005) *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India* (New York: Scribner).
22. J. Macwan (2003) *The Stepchild [Angaliyat]*, translated by Rita Kothari (Delhi: Oxford University Press).
23. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1982) *Devil on the Cross*, translated by the author (London: Heinemann).
24. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey).
25. J. M. Synge (1907) *The Playboy of the Western World: A Comedy in Three Acts* (Dublin: Maunsell).
26. J. Joyce (1917) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: The Egoist).
27. J. Joyce (1914) *Dubliners* (London: Grant Richards).
28. J. Derrida (1998) *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin* [1996], translated by P. Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
29. M. R. Anand (1935) *Untouchable*. With a Preface by E. M. Forster (London: Wishart Books).
30. R. Rao (1938) *Kanthapura* (London: George Allen & Unwin).
31. R. Sethi (1999) The nativisation of English. In: *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 39–58.
32. G. V. Desani (1948) *All About Mr. Hatterr* [sic] (London: Aldor).
33. C. Achebe (1958) *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann).
34. S. Rushdie (2006) *Midnight's Children* [1981] (London: Vintage).
35. R. Jakobson (1959) On linguistic aspects of translation. In: R. A. Brower (ed.) *On Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 232–239.
36. S. Pollock (1998) The cosmopolitan vernacular. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57(1), 637.

About the Author

Robert J.C. Young is Julius Silver Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University. He was formerly Professor of English and Critical Theory at Oxford University. He is the author of *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (1995), *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory* (1996), *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001) and *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (2007). Robert Young is a Member of the Academia Europaea.