3 Resistance to English in historical perspective

It's good that everything's gone, except their language, which is everything.

Derek Walcott, *North and South*

The English language has had a history of imposition for political and material reasons in most periphery communities, often in competition with native languages. It is still deeply implicated in struggles for dominance against other languages, with conflicting implications for the construction of identity, community, and culture of the local people. In opting to learn and use English, therefore, students are making complex ideological and social choices. For users of English in these communities, the language embodies its controversial history since colonial times. The fact that their perception of English is colored by these conflicts of the past makes it important for English teachers to develop a historical perspective on their profession and the language.

Unfortunately for contemporary researchers, who need access to reliable and balanced sources, the colonial history of English is often shrouded in stereotypes, half-truths, and myths. On the one hand, there are the legislative records and memoirs of colonial administrators, which largely considered the teaching of English as one more 'white man's burden', undertaken for the improvement of uncivilized communities. On the other hand, there is the later revisionist historiography, which reflects the nationalist political temperament by projecting natives as holding a collective hatred towards the language imposed on them for ulterior material and ideological purposes. It is unfortunate that center scholars feel compelled to use whichever set of histories happens to be readily accessible, since such sources can lead to exaggerations of one form or another. Alternative sources of information must be tapped: past and present records of oral history, and vernacular texts of the local communities, in particular, can provide a window to the impact of English on everyday life at the grassroots level. It is understandable that many center scholars may not know the local languages or have ethnographic field experience to gain access to such materials, but it is important to delve
deeper into periphery communities to recover their occluded narratives, and develop a more complex perspective on how they have negotiated the hegemony of English.

Ambivalences in the reception of colonial English

Pennycook’s recent Cultural Politics of English as an International Language is exceptional in grappling with the paradoxes and ironies in the status and functions of English in the periphery. He goes beyond the usual dichotomies and stereotypes that characterize this historiography to acknowledge greater tension in the roles of English and the vernacular. He captures what he calls the ‘critical ambivalences’ in which English is caught up, embodying conflicting attitudes and values. Surveying the role of English in the colonial period under the dual discourses of Orientalism (‘policies in favor of education in local languages for both the colonized and the colonizers’) and Anglicism (‘policies in favor of education in English’), Pennycook (1994a: 74–5) explores the complex ways in which both policies existed side-by-side to serve the interests of the colonial agenda in the periphery. He thereby corrects the stereotypical view that Anglicism brazenly triumphed over Orientalism (which other scholars, including Phillipson 1992, have adopted).

Pennycook (ibid.: 103) theorizes the complementary relation of Orientalism and Anglicism thus:

First, both Anglicism and Orientalism operated alongside each other; second, Orientalism was as much a part of colonialism as was Anglicism; third, English was withheld as much as it was promoted; fourth, colonized people demanded access to English; and finally, the power of English was not so much in its widespread imposition but in its operating as the eye of the colonial panopticon.

Foucault’s notion of the panopticon is employed to theorize how certain discourses serve to conduct subtle surveillance and control by providing constant knowledge for the powerful on the dominated groups. Pennycook also invokes Said’s broader conception of Orientalism (Said 1979), theorizing the European scholarship on the Eastern languages and cultures as both enabling, and being enabled by, imperialist interests.

Although Pennycook presents both Orientalism and Anglicism as orchestrated to serve the reproductive agenda of the colonizers, we need to go further and see how the dialectic between these discourses also spawned native resistance against the colonial project. Although Pennycook generally acknowledges the sources of resistance in the post-colonial world, he documents little signs of resistance before decolonization. Paradoxically, within Anglicism itself there were the seeds for its destabilization—planted by English education, which created a breed of natives influenced by enlightened liberal democratic discourses, who demanded such values from colonial rulers. Opposition to colonialism and Anglicism was expressed by natives in subtle and sometimes partially expressed ways. Encouraged by local discourses, cultures, and philosophical traditions, this tradition of resistance later played an important function in the post-colonial context, engendering related forms of linguistic resistance and appropriation. Incorporating this strand into the colonial dialectic adds even more complexity to the historical background of English. This is not to deny that, despite these sources of resistance, colonialism and Anglicism had many ways of imposing their reproductive agenda.

Another more vibrant and ideologically sturdy resistance to Anglicism—also expressed in subtle forms of opposition in everyday life—needs to be taken into account if we are to do justice to periphery resistance to English. Following local English teacher Chelliah 1922 (who wrote his history of ELT in Jaffna while the British were still present), we might call this movement ‘vernacularism’. Orientalists shared with Anglicists a belief in the superiority of Western to Eastern literature and learning; they also favored the study of Oriental languages as a means to exercise social control over the populace, and to inculcate Western ideas. Not surprisingly, the position of vernacularists was different, as I will illustrate later. Vernacularism promoted the superiority (or at least the equality) of indigenous languages and cultures; it also saw through the reproductive agendas of Orientalism, and generated ways of retaining indigenous discourses and cultural traditions with or without learning English.

Pennycook’s treatment of the post-colonial status of English, especially in Singapore and Malaysia, also goes beyond stereotypes to show the manner in which Anglicism thrives in the local communities at a period of intense nationalism. He surveys discourses such as pragmatism, meritocratism, and internationalism, that make the local people still ‘desire’ English. Some features of this positive valuation of English jostle besides oppositional perspectives. Therefore

it is both the language of modernity and the language of decadence, the ‘first language’ (the medium of education) but not the ‘mother tongue’ (the racially assigned language), a neutral medium of communication yet the bearer of Western values, the language of equality and yet the distributor of inequality, the language of Singaporean identity and yet the mother tongue of few (1994a: 255).

However, Pennycook sees such attitudes of natives as still favoring the hegemony of English. He does not explicate the complex sources of resistance in everyday life, though he does introduce a chapter in the end to discuss how resistance to English and appropriation of English by local languages and cultures is expressed through Third World literature. But a discussion of resistance in literature might give the wrong impression of there being no linguistic resistance and/or appropriation in everyday discourse. It
might suggest that resistance is an élite activity, restricted to educated bilinguals alone.

Pennycook’s discussion of the post-colonial status and functions of English in the periphery stops short of answering some of the crucial questions evoked by the narration. It is possible to extend his analysis closer to the linguistic domain to understand how the conflicting attitudes towards languages are expressed in everyday face-to-face interaction in the periphery communities. Such an approach would help develop a more micro-social perspective. Because Pennycook situates English in different domains in order to understand its status and functions—such as religion, education, and mass media, somewhat in the tradition of Fishman 1967—he overlooks such considerations. We can take some of Pennycook’s insights to their logical conclusion and ask the following questions: If there are conflicting attitudes towards English, how are they sustained? How do such attitudes manifest themselves in the linguistic interaction among speakers? What implications do such attitudes have for the structure, values, and functions of English in the periphery? How do speakers in the periphery resolve these tensions linguistically?

Colonial period: white man’s burden vs. brown person’s tact

The processes by which the British spread English in the colonies and the motivations for this activity have been well described. As in other colonies, when the British brought the ethno-linguistically diverse island of what they called Ceylon under one political umbrella in 1796, they set up English as the language of official interaction above the indigenous languages of Tamil and Sinhala. It was therefore considered economical to employ local natives proficient in the language in lower-level administrative posts (as interpreters, court clerks, and regional headmen). These functionaries would also serve as linguistic and cultural mediators between the colonizers and the subjects. In order to develop the necessary local workforce, an ‘English education’ system was set up at secondary and tertiary levels. In fact, it was mandated that all native teachers (even those in vernacular schools) had to display a knowledge of English to be employed. Although English was introduced primarily to boost the colony’s financial turnover, the British were cognizant also of the ideological and cultural rewards.

English education meant not only teaching the English language, but adopting the modes of instruction, curriculum, and teaching materials used in British public schools. It is clear from the records that a rigorous schedule was instituted to ‘discipline’ the students according to the Protestant work ethic and to wean them away from their relaxed, personalized, non-formal guru-shisya learning system (Tennant 1850: 101). Students were expected to be boarded for the duration of the course so that they would be protected from the cultural and linguistic influences of the home. Apart from thus regimenting students for the imperial bureaucracy, the ‘foreign’ curriculum and Enlightenment sensibility suppressed the tradition-based, scripture-bound learning styles, and philosophical traditions of the Saiva Tamils.

According to Lankan linguist Wickramasuriya (1976), English education quickly became a ‘craze’ in the island. In one sense, locals had little choice, since it was the key to status and affluence. The secret of the social reproduction carried out by English was that it did not radically change the intra-community status quo; it merely became one more criterion for maintaining the power of the dominant caste groups. Since fees were levied for this élite education, only those who already possessed the necessary economic capital could enjoy access to this linguistic capital. Because pedagogical resources and native English staff were limited, the few English schools were concentrated in the towns; this meant that only vernacular education was available in the villages, and that most rural folk remained monolingual in Tamil. Furthermore, since Tamil ‘family ideology’ stipulated that only male offspring should study and work hard in order to boost family status and prosperity (Perinbanayagam 1988), women did not compete for English education. It was also the case that Christians were given preferential admission to English schools, and that others who went through English education often ended up becoming Christians. Thus English reinforced the social stratification in place, providing status, wealth, and power to the largely Christian, rich, upper-caste, urban males. Despite their enlightened democratic sentiments, the British did not radically challenge the caste system, but used it to carry out their goals in the periphery.

It was also the case that certain internal social contradictions and cultural peculiarities of the Tamil community enabled English to take root in the local social formation. Although it was an imperialist language symbolizing alien culture and religion, English was associated by natives with power, learning, science, and civilization. For these reasons the local community devised ways of accommodating English into their life. At the time, for Jaffna Tamil society, religion served as the ‘core value’ (Smolicz 1980) of ethnolinguistic consciousness. That is to say, Tamils defined their identity primarily in terms of religion, and not language. This is why the Saivite revivalist movement of the 19th century, headed by Arumuga Navalar (1872), fashioned an ideology according to which Tamils could acquire English and Western scholarship, provided they continued to be Saivites. Moreover, the Saiva siddhantha—the Tamils’ religious code of ethics—had leanings toward a puritanical work ethic. The fact that the mission schools of English education encouraged their own brand of Protestant work ethic struck a resonant chord among the natives. Influenced (ironically) by such Christian discourses, Saivism made a cult of excellence in education and employment, which helped to unleash the irrepressible drive for English education. The Annual Report of the American Mission in Ceylon stated in 1902: ‘The mission no longer holds the
monopoly of English education, the Saivites having nine English Schools besides 03 High Schools and 02 colleges” (quoted in Vignarajah 1994: 16).

The caste division also functioned to turn the natives towards English education. In the initial stages it was the lower castes, disgruntled with Hinduism for endorsing the caste system, who turned to Christianity and English education in order to escape their oppression. But when the upper-caste members saw that it was lower-caste groups who were prospering in the new order introduced by the British, they quickly abandoned their opposition and turned to English education with a vengeance. For Tamils, successful education in English schools assured them of socially-respected white collar employment in an arid terrain where agriculture and industry held no prospects for advancement. Thus the natives competed among themselves to acquire English and the privileges associated with it.

The fact that such native social and cultural characteristics were conducive to colonial rule did not escape the attention of the British. Missionary Strutt noted: ‘The moral character of the Tamil naturally makes the strongest appeal to the heart of a missionary... Their enterprise has caused them to be called the Anglo-Saxons of the East ... untiring industry may be safely attributed to them as well as enterprise’ (1913: 66). This work ethic was often translated into educational activities. Furthermore, the Tamil community gave priority to classical textual learning—as encouraged by the study of traditional Hindu texts. Peribanayagar records that ‘Jaffna’s scholars were by and large classicists, content to learn and understand the treasures of the past and rarely venturing forth into uncharted territories—a philosophy well suited to the demands of an imperial bureaucracy’ (1988: 97). What the above narrative illustrates is that English did not have to be brazenly ‘imposed’ on the Tamil community; to some extent, its social and cultural conditions influenced the community to participate in its domination.

Modes of opposition

While acknowledging the paradox that many factors in the local community aided the reproduction of Western cultural and ideological structures through the English language, we must not fail to note forms of local resistance against English colonialism. What partly enabled these movements of protest were the uncertainties and conflicts over educational policy among the British themselves, which served to demystify the colonialist ideology for the natives. From the beginning of British rule, there is evidence of a sincere and complex debate among colonial educators on the competing claims of Anglicism and Orientalism. The proposal for opening Batticotta Seminary in Jaffna showed them clearly favoring an English-medium education, with a secondary role for the vernacular. The chief reason motivating this decision

was the value of English for introducing natives to what they perceived to be a ‘superior’ civilization and culture:

A leading object will be to give native youth of good promise a thorough knowledge of the English language. The great reason for this is, that it will open to them the treasures of European science and literature, and bring fully before the mind the evidences of Christianity... Their minds cannot be so thoroughly enlightened by any other means. (Emphasis added; quoted in Chelliah 1922: 6.)

At other times the British educators sounded more defensive. They rationalized their divergence from their fellow missionaries in Serampore, who provided a vernacular-dominant education, by arguing that India had a better developed print culture that had enabled it to translate English works into native languages, which was not the case in Sri Lanka. They assured everyone that the larger goal of English education was to eventually produce more translators who would turn English texts into the vernacular and thus usher in a period when English would not be necessary for schooling.

Articulating the place for the vernacular in their education, they acknowledged that ‘Tamul (sic) language like the Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek, etc. is an original and perfect language, and is itself highly worthy of cultivation’ (ibid. 1922: 9). In this way they attempted to steer clear of prejudices, providing some excellent linguistic reasons why literacy in Tamil should be encouraged. They noted that diglossic High Tamil was difficult for the unschooled to read or write, and that a systematic ‘cultivation of Tamil composition’ was necessary to develop a more intelligible prose. It is worthy of note that before the advent of English, Tamils had no prose tradition; even their scholarly texts were written in verse. The development of prose, and the resulting changes in Tamil syntax, have since left an indelible mark on the vernacular (Sivatamby 1979). However, the educators of those earlier times went on to provide other reasons for teaching Tamil which smack of an imperialist agenda. They expected a knowledge of High Tamil to help their students to criticize classical religious texts: this ‘would bring into their service those poetic productions which are written in opposition to the prevailing idolatry, and thus assist their attempts to destroy it’ (quoted in Chelliah 1922: 9). The paradoxes of Anglicism and Orientalism were well exemplified through these very public debates surrounding the Batticotta seminary experience. In sum, the colonists encouraged the vernacular as well as English for a mixture of controversial reasons; while genuine development of the vernacular took place, it was achieved for certain ulterior ideological motives.

Despite the careful strategizing of their educational project, the missionaries felt defeated in the end. This was because they found that after gaining an English education, native students used their new-found skills to gain government jobs, defeating the expectation that many of them would
become native preachers. The seminary was therefore pressured by the trustees to conduct vernacular education. They realized that English education was not only unhelpful to develop preachers who could proselytize effectively in the vernacular, but also provided new 'temptations' and ambitions to local students. The Jaffna educators, however, disagreed with the trustees on turning purely to vernacular education. They therefore chose to close down the seminary amidst much dismay, after 33 years of running English education. The moral behind this experience was that whatever policies the colonists adopted, the locals carried out their own personal agendas, and foiled the expectations of their masters.

We must also note that there was conflict between the church and the state on the place of English, much against the stereotypical view that they fully collaborated in the imperialist project. Both envisioned different benefits from language education. The colonial administration wanted education to develop a cadre of functionaries who could help economize their rule; the church wanted workers who could communicate the faith in the native language and convert locals. This meant that, while the government insisted on English education, missionaries preferred the vernacular. In fact, many of the missionaries in Jaffna were from churches in the United States who did not owe much allegiance to Britain. Similarly, the Catholic missionaries who arrived with the Portuguese regime before the British favored vernacular education. Those such as Rev. Christopher Bonjean, of the Roman Catholic Mission in Jaffna, identified the limitations of English education thus: ‘I believe the system has failed in nearly all those things which would be aimed at in a good National Scheme of Education ... It constitutes a social evil, and perhaps, a political danger also’ (Sessional Paper 1867: ccccclxxiv). He saw that English was making natives faithful subjects of the imperial power, and disuniting them along linguistic lines. This led the British colonial administration to become suspicious of the missionaries' endeavors. The Colebrook-Cameron commission (sent in 1832 to make recommendations on the economic efficient administration of Sri Lanka) chided the church, pointing out that: ‘The missionaries have not very generally appreciated the importance of diffusing a knowledge of the English language through the medium of their schools’ (Mendis 1956: 73). Such friction between the agents of colonialism would have helped the natives to discern the competing interests behind English education.

The subtlest form of resistance was in the everyday behavior of the locals. Natives practiced many forms of disguising to defeat the goals and expectations of the colonial educators. While the locals desired English education, there is ample evidence that they learned it in their own terms. Although many were compelled to become Christians in order to gain English education, they practiced Hinduism on the sly. While the colonists expected the locals to imbibe Western culture and Christianity through the learning of English, the locals developed strategies of maintaining strong roots in their native religion and cultural traditions, while pretending to have accepted Christianity. Many are the stories (in oral history) of locals being baptized and accepting biblical names to symbolize their new faith—and then returning home for Hindu rituals. Others enjoyed English education on the promise of becoming preachers, only to abandon the ministry for lucrative secular positions on completion of their education. Chelliah's chronicle of English education in Jaffna includes such revealing stories as the following:

There was one great cause of discouragement in the moral tone of the school in 1843. A large number of students and several teachers were found guilty of having attended Hindu religious festivals where there was nautch dancing. Worse still, a large number were found to have been involved in grossly immoral practices. This resulted in the dismissal of many students from the various classes and all of a select class which was being trained for Christian work (1922: 37).

The ‘grossly immoral practices’ didn’t amount to anything more than drinking the local brew of toddy or eating the food offered to the Hindu deities. But these were indicative of the other cultural practices and values influencing the students of these missionaries. In other words, locals were selectively appropriating the Western culture and values, while benefiting from the economic and social rewards from English education.

Although they might have desired the advantages promised by English, locals were not blind to the politics of this alien language. Even students could see through the reproductive function of English education. In 1853 a writer calling himself ‘Henry Candidus’ wrote in the student journal Young Ceylon:

They give us a poor English education merely to suit their own selfish views, that is to say, they must have Natives to fill the minor offices and they train them up to do the drudgery; and those who have by dint of their own exertion exceeded the standard ... benevolently prescribed by the gentlemen of the School Commission, all that they get for their trouble is irritation at their present condition and ambition without the means of gratifying it.

(Quoted in Wickramasuriya 1976: 20)

Note, however, that the writer is not rejecting English education, but requesting parity in content and rewards.

Apart from this spontaneous grass-roots level opposition (which is sometimes ambivalent and ideologically unclear, since the subjects still desire colonial institutions), other forms of resistance were more vocal and uncompromising. Paradoxically, English education itself might be considered to have worked against its interests by producing locals with liberal values who eventually questioned the status of English education. They carried out this
critique from many sophisticated perspectives: its educational value; its impact on personality development; its influence on identity formation; its effect on native social and cultural systems; and its value for the development of local material and economic resources. Tamil scholars such as Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Sir Arunachalam, and Ananda Coomarasamy were vocal on the limitations of an 'English only' education. The deracination which this education led to was well expressed by Ananda Coomarasamy, who called the English-educated natives 'a generation of spiritual bastards' (1946: 32), adding by way of explanation that 'A single generation of English education suffices to break the threads of tradition and to create a nondencript and superficial being deprived of all roots—a sort of intellectual pariah who does not belong to the East or the West, the past or the future' (1957: 156). Considering other evils for the intellectual and personality development of local children, Arunachalam said: 'The policy of ignoring the pupils' mother tongue is educationally vicious and impedes the due development of his mind ... The root of the evil in Ceylon is that the vernacular is neglected' (undated: 261–2).

While Orientalism was supportive of the colonial regime in many ways, vernacularism turned out to be a more vibrant tradition of resistance constituting primarily the response of local monolinguals. Although Wickramasuriya (1976) considers that this movement was sufficiently distinct and significant to constitute a 'tradition of radical protest' against English education in colonial Sri Lanka, we must acknowledge the complexity of the motives, modes, and agencies of resistance in this tradition. The protests should not be unduly glorified. As we have seen in the examples above, in most cases the natives were not calling for the total abandonment of English, merely criticizing the lopsided nature of exclusive English education. It would have been considered impractical and premature to totally reject English at that time. Many argued for parity for the vernacular and, in some cases, that it should be accorded greater importance. Others, however, were trying to get more rewards for themselves through English education. After the closing of the Batticotta seminary, for example, the local alumni met and collected funds to continue English education at the same site on their own initiative—probably in order to preserve their vested interests.

In some cases the oppositional stance of the natives was quite complex. While resisting the reproductive functions of English, they saw value in learning English along with the vernacular. This dual position is best summarized by the life and work of the Hindu reformist Arumuga Navalar (1872), who was himself an eminent product of English education. Although he played an important role in translating the Bible into Tamil, when he reconverted to Hinduism in later life, he effectively appropriated the discourse strategies of Christians to do missionary work among Hindus and to debate the aliens. This discourse strategy accounts for his very effective

reform and apologetics. Navalar's tracts, books, pamphlets, and face-to-face debates with missionaries exemplify the indigenization of Western discourses to serve native cultural and religious needs. Quite proficient in English, Navalar also used the alien language for fighting the Hindu cause and communicating Saivite thinking. He provided the clearest example of a discursive practice that was to take a definitive shape in later times—the appropriation and indigenization of English for local purposes.

Decolonization: global village vs. separatist states

Although Sri Lanka was granted independence in 1948, it has not been easy to dislodge the power of English. While the English-educated elite who took over power were not interested in changing the lingua franca from which they themselves profited, a left-oriented populist government (still led by the Anglicized elite!) subsequently attempted to change the linguistic status quo in the name of the disgruntled Sinhala monolingual masses. The controversial Sinhala Only Act of 1956, introduced 'democratically' in the Sinhalese-dominated parliament, suppressed with increasing militancy the Gandhian-style satyagraha by Tamil politicians claiming parity for their language. Thus language became the 'core value' of Tamil ethnolinguistic consciousness. Although Sinhala became the official language of administration (with reasonable use of Tamil), and both vernaculars took over primary and secondary education (with English taught as a second language), it was difficult to root out English from many other important domains. In fact, the raised status of the vernaculars did not radically alter the local social stratification. Sinhala and Tamil monolinguals simply gained mobility into certain mid-level positions as teachers, clerks, and administrators. The professions and other elite vocations were still dominated by the English-educated. One effect was that since Tamils faced another colonial language in Sinhala, they now found English to be a relatively neutral language in which they could find escape or repatriation from Sinhala dominance.

After independence Tamil parliamentary politicians tried for about 30 years to negotiate parity for Tamil with Sinhala in the unitary Sri Lankan polity. Their failure to achieve gave rise to an armed struggle for a separate linguistic state for Tamils, provisionally named Eelam. Since establishing a de facto separate state in the considerable land 'liberated' from the Sri Lankan government in 1990, the Tamil military regime has also challenged the dominance of the English-educated bilinguals in the community, using its civil institutions and political infrastructure to promote Tamil as the dominant, if not the sole, language. What makes the language policy of the local regime effective is the partly state-imposed and partly self-imposed isolation of the Tamil region from the outside world. English newspapers and other literature published outside hardly enter the region. The economic and fuel blockade, and the denial of power supply to the 'liberated zone' by the
Sri Lankan government, reduce access to radio and television transmissions, and other forms of entertainment and information relayed trilingually (i.e. in Tamil, English, and Sinhala). Whatever is substituted by the local regime is broadcast solely in Tamil. The continuing hostilities have also led the Sinhalese and Muslim residents to vacate the Tamil ‘homeland’. All this is gradually leading to the cultural and linguistic homogenization of this society. The de facto Tamil state may be considered an example of the many militant nationalistic communities in the periphery today which are defined strictly in ethnolinguistic terms. As such, it is a test case for the scope and status of English in post-colonial communities. We must examine whether the ‘new order’ has greater success in resisting the hegemony of English.

At one level, English is opposed with a vengeance. Even in face-to-face interactions, local officials take care to enforce the use of unmixed Tamil. Interactions such as the following in a ‘pass office’, where permits are issued after inquiry for traveling outside the liberated zone, are quite typical:

1 Office: *appa kol umpukkan enoorinikal*? ‘So why are you traveling to Colombo?’

2 Applicant: *makaLinTai wedding ikku pooreen*? ‘I am going to my daughter’s wedding’


4 Office: *enkai poriinikal? Where are you going?’

5 Applicant: *cari cari, kalyaanavui TTukku pooren, maken*? ‘OK, OK, I am going to a wedding, son.’

In a context of heightened linguistic consciousness, even a single borrowing from English gains saliency. The applicant (a woman from a middle-class bilingual background) is forced to drop the English loan ‘wedding’ and use the Tamil equivalent.

As in the above example, the military regime has publicly insisted on using ‘Tamil only’ in formal and informal interactions, and that the Tamil spoken should be purified of any foreign mixing. Their paradoxical objective is to develop Tamil to be fit for all modern purposes, while at the same time returning it to its classical purity. Local officials ‘police’ language use when they refuse to process petitions or applications tendered in other languages or in mixed Tamil to legal institutions, village councils, and other organizations. The alternate curriculum and teaching materials being developed by the regime use unmixed Tamil as the medium of instruction. Street names and billboards, which used to be bi- or trilingual, now have to be exclusively in Tamil. The public has been obliged to adapt its language use, although not without difficulty. In order to avoid English loans, new words are coined and periodically announced to civilians through local mass media by the military regime. Thus ‘hotel’ has become *Navakam*, ‘factory’ *toLilakam*, and ‘ice cream’ *kuLirkaLii*.

Apart from such enforced linguistic changes, Tamil has been gaining ground in other domains as well, causing a leak in the diglossic situation. Formal meetings in educational and professional institutions are held mostly in Tamil. Ironically, even the speeches made by the chief guests in the traditional English Day celebrations in schools are now in Tamil. When I used English to address a school English Day celebration, the principal spoke wholly in the vernacular, translated my speech, and concluded by wishing that I had spoken in Tamil rather than English (field notes, 5 May 1992). The proceedings of the university statutory bodies, which were always held in English, are held increasingly in Tamil, and minutes are maintained in either language depending on what the speaker uses. There is also strong social pressure not to use extensive English for conversations in informal contexts. Even gate-keeping processes, such as interviews and selection tests for jobs in mainstream institutions, are increasingly held in the vernacular. As a result, an L1-monolingual stratum is beginning to emerge as a new elite group. It happens that most leaders of the military regime are monolingual, and come from the previously non-dominant caste/class groups.

There has been a noticeable decline in English proficiency in the community (Susendiran 1992). Even the traditionally elite bilingual segments of the community, drawn from professional and intellectual circles, are either totally monolingual or L1-dominant. Faculty members from the local university do not have the proficiency to sustain a conversation or read an academic paper in English. Locally trained doctors, engineers, and lawyers are also monolingual, or display only passive bilingualism. A small percentage of senior members in the social groups mentioned above—especially those who have gone abroad for training, or studied in the older educational system—display more proficiency in English. In fact, it is the relatively older generation that displays English proficiency, and even they find fewer opportunities for sustained use of the language. Most locals today are therefore L1-dominant, or passive bilinguals with a stronger rooting in their native culture, since English has passed out of use at home and in other informal social contexts, and social pressure encourages solidarity with Tamil culture and its values.

Granted this general weakening of the status and currency of English, it would be a mistake to consider that English has no future in Sri Lanka. At least in slightly altered forms, it still plays important communicative functions in this society (as I have displayed through extensive linguistic data in Canagarajah 1993b). Some groups still use English quite openly in certain situations: the more prestigious intellectual and professional groups feel compelled to use some English during in-group communication as a mark of their learning and status; teenagers exchange a few phrases loudly in public to display their participation in international pop culture and the world of
fashion; drunks and street brawlers (with the advantage of loosened inhibitions) may switch from Tamil to show their familiarity with English expletives; manual laborers, farmers, and fishermen speak some English in order to present a macho image. Despite the censorship, English words are also essential when discussing military matters: shelling, gunboat, supersonic jet, bomber, sentry, heli (the local abbreviation for what might be called a ‘copter’ or ‘chopper’ elsewhere), camp, base, army, navy, sniper, anti-aircraft guns are in the daily lexicon of all age groups. Modern Tamil political poetry, too, cannot avoid English mixing, as displayed by the title of a recent poem ‘Phoenix’ (Pushparajan 1985). Ironically, the ‘official’ resistance songs published by the regime, which had been written and composed by senior cadre members, include English borrowings, as in the refrain of a popular lyric:

6 tuppakki cattankal, keeTkum ‘Gun shots will be heard.’
 sel vantu enkaLai taakkum....' SHELL will blast us.'

The spread of English lexicon is so widespread that even traditionally monolingual speakers from rural backgrounds can code-mix for rhetorical effect. In some fish vendors’ bargaining discourse, I found significant occurrences of English words related to marketing: number + rupees (e.g. twenty rupees); nouns related to seafood items (e.g. fish, crabs, prawns); and adjectives like fresh, good, tasty, and cheap (Canagarajah 1995a). In a two-hour recorded interview with a traditional folk-dance artiste of a Saivite village, I found the following uses of English words: show, select, make up, ticket, light, original, social, school, interview, entry, hire, camera, television, foreign, video (Canagarajah 1995b). In the last two data sets, the speakers knew Tamil equivalents, and used them in other instances or with other interlocutors; they chose English purely for rhetorical effect. While some of the above may be linguistically simple borrowings, they are nevertheless motivated by complex rhetorical and pragmatic considerations.5

Such use of English is so pervasive, cutting across discursive boundaries, that English may be considered to have infiltrated all domains of ‘pure’ Tamil speech. Just as opportunities for using ‘pure’ English for social interactions are becoming infrequent in this society, the chances of using unmixed Tamil are now slim. When I spoke unmixed Tamil in formal gatherings (with much effort and self-consciousness after my return from postgraduate studies abroad), members of the audience remarked that it was stilted and unnatural. They considered a code-mixed Tamil as being common even in such formal contexts. What we find, then, is that English has infiltrated both forms of diglossic Tamil. It is such an ‘Englishized’ Tamil that is becoming the unmarked form (Scotton 1983) for many contexts, while unmixed English and Tamil are becoming marked (or rare). English forms, whether used as loan-foods or as code-switches, perform dynamic social and rhetorical functions in a society that has a high linguistic consciousness and is subject to various forms of censorship. The very fact that people have to make an effort to use unmixed Tamil is an indication of the ‘naturalness’ of Englishized Tamil. At a time when even such simple mixing is officially frowned upon, the persistence of English in such contexts is quite significant; what is remarkable is not that Tamil is gaining power, but that English still has so much currency in Jaffna. There is an ironic reversal of roles here: amidst powerful forces of Anglicist reproduction during the colonial period, there was a vibrant tradition of vernacular resistance; in the post-colonial period, in subtle ways, English resists the militant vernacular nationalism.

Accounting for the persistence of English

By a strange paradox, at a period when Tamil separatism is most militant and politically successful the community is also very ‘internationalist’. The community is aware of, linked with, and influenced by the West, possibly more than ever before in its history. This is partly because the political struggle itself had to be ‘internationalized’ for its success. There are Tamil lobbying groups in Western capitals, collecting funds and seeking recognition for Eelam. Tamil information centers operate hotlines, electronic mail, and news networks to keep the world informed about the struggle. The need for arms and specialized training requires liaison with Western military and diplomatic officials, with the result that, as shown above, the techno-jargon of modern warfare accounts for many of the English borrowings which have passed into common Tamil usage. Additionally, as a side effect of the fighting, thousands of Tamils have sought economic and political refuge in European and North American cities. The local community is very much in touch with the diaspora, and in most cases is only able to survive in war-torn Tamil regions through the cash and gifts sent by their acquaintances outside. To the extent that almost every other person is thinking of going abroad under some pretext, the need for an international language is very widely recognized.

The international hegemony of English still looms over the Colombo government’s ministries of education, commerce, and communications. It serves as the link language between these institutions and the civilian population, so the Education Ministry, for instance, is forced to use English, rather than Sinhala, when it corresponds with Tamil parents, teachers, and education officers. The Tamil community also needs English as a bridge to the symbolic and material rewards that are tied to the international educational and professional centers: A mother sending a telegram to a son studying in Sweden will have to write it in English, for the benefit of the local postal department; someone wishing to obtain a professional certificate in accounting or architecture will have to study, and write the test, in English.

The post-colonial Tamil community has been characterized by an ideological tension that could affect attitudes towards English. On the one
hand, there is the Saiva-Tamil strand, which as well as displaying a religio-
linguistic chauvinism also endorses caste hierarchy; on the other hand, there
exists a liberal-democratic tradition, inculcated by the missionary
educational institutions and epitomized by the Youth Congress of the
independence period, which militantly opposes casteism, and encourages
interaction with other cultures and 'enlightened' contemporary philosophies
(Sivatamby 1990). While the former strand can be expected to oppose
English, the latter favors it. Such internal cultural contradictions explain the
peristence of English.

The foregoing should make us expect the mode of social stratification to be
quite complex. Although a new monolingual élite has certainly come into
prominence, English still props up the status of the bilingual professional
élite who have traditionally dominated this society. It is possible therefore to
speak of two parallel élites in the Tamil community: the bilinguals
dominating the professions enjoy social status and economic security, but
hold no political clout; the monolinguals dominating the local administration
and politico-military hierarchy enjoy significant power, but lack economic
security. It is still important, however, for the bilinguals to display proficiency
in Tamil in order to appeal to the local solidarity that will assure their status,
and for monolinguals to at least code-switch in English to prove that they are
not inferior to the professionals. Thus English is perceived in the local
context as a class marker (i.e. as the language of the educated and rich),
although it is not rigidly marked for caste, gender, region, or religion. English
is therefore well embedded in the society, and still exercising its influence on
socio-economic stratification.

The linguistic stratification of codes will enable us to appreciate the
currency of English in the post-colonial Tamil community. Certain discourses
require a heavily Englishized Tamil: politics, military activity, music, cinema,
sex and romance, education, medicine, law, current affairs, fashion, Western
cuisine, and travel. Certain other discourses demand relatively unmixed
Tamil: folk religious rituals, folk arts, domestic relations, rural cultural
practices, local cooking and dress. Unmixed Sanskrit is used for orthodox
Hindu temple rituals, and a Sanskritized Tamil for religious discourses and the
arts (such as Bharata Natyam) belonging to the Hindu classical culture.
In terms of situations, the language of formal use could be Tamil (in rural,
traditional or Hindu institutions) or English (in urban, administrative,
educational, and professional institutions). Mixing is relatively less in formal
communication. In semi-formal or semi-official contexts (in educational and
vocational sites) and informal contexts (in family relationships, intimate
interactions, or polite social intercourse) an Englishized Tamil is in use. All
this should be qualified by a consideration of the addressee: those who
appear educated, rich, urban, professional and of the older generation are
expected to reciprocate in English; those with the reverse identities are
expected to possess less competence in English. This pattern suggests, then,
that notwithstanding the decrees of the nationalistic regime English is still
employed by the people for some important discourses, to claim material and
symbolic rewards in their daily social interaction.

Negotiating language choice: Jihad vs. McWorld

It is important at this point to explore the negotiation of codes in micro-
social encounters, to see how resistance and accommodation to English are
manifested in interpersonal communication. This level of analysis will also
shed light on the ways in which people reconcile the demands of competing
codes and ideologies in their everyday communication. By manipulating to
their advantage the prevailing sociolinguistic stratification of codes, speakers
can tap complex rhetorical resources and social meaning. Important in this
process is the social dynamic of speakers attempting to alter or redefine the
status quo. Speakers may attempt to use codes to renegotiate and perhaps
resist the established identities, group loyalties, and power relations.

Even traditionally monolingual speakers from rural backgrounds can
deploy certain English borrowings to claim a dual ethos, or straddle group
membership. In the example previously cited (data 1-5), note how the officer
who chastises the petitioner for using an English loan uses one himself.
Although the Tamilized form of 'England' is _inkilaantu_, he chooses the
former. He is probably indicating to the petitioner that his insistence on the
use of the vernacular should not mean that he is himself rustic, ignorant, or
uneducated. By using English borrowings he is implying to the addressee that
he is at home in her culture also. The strategy might be aimed for leveling
the inequalities of status in the relationship (Heller 1992: 134). Although the
monolingual official has more power in political terms, he may desire to level
off the symbolic inequalities with those proficient in English.

Monolinguals can strategically employ the few English tokens at their
disposal to considerable economic advantage. In my study on the use of
English borrowings by fish vendors, I have explored the many functions
performed in the bargaining process (Canagarajah 1995a). Consider the
following interaction in a crowded fish market when a vendor notices a
trouser-clad buyer turning away from another vendor after finding the
later's fish too expensive:

7 V: ayyaa Raai irukku vaankoo. ancu ruupaa Raai. 'Sir, come, I have
prawns. Prawns for five rupees.'
(Buyer does not respond; goes toward other vendors)
8 V: FAY RUP. 'Five rupees.'
(Buyer, turns round, and comes toward V.)

The same message repeated in English dramatically elicits the attention of
the buyer. In using English (the code being highly marked in the market place,
where Tamil is conventional) this vendor has greater chances of attracting the
middle-class buyer to himself. Often this also functions to specify the addressee, as English-competent bilingual buyers are alerted to the fact that the vendor is specifically addressing them. Few in the market can be presumed to be competent in English. Many buyers, when interviewed, admitted to being flattered when they are addressed in English, as the vendor was perceived to be 'accommodating' (Giles 1984) to the buyers' preferred code. By using such skillful strategies in the bargaining process, the vendors are often able to persuade the buyer to pay them a favorable price.

Bilingual élites, for their part, are forced to use some Tamil even in conventionally English-only contexts, in order to court vernacular solidarity. After an English drama competition in a school, when the judge began his prefatory comments before reading out the placing to an avid student audience, the formal silence of the auditorium was punctured by two sarcastic calls in English: 'Don't speak in English!' and 'We can't understand you!' The audacity of the demand (ironically, made in the language the speakers claim not to know) gained serious attention, and the judge was forced thereafter to self-translate his comments. There is a subtle power struggle here: if the speaker had persisted in speaking English, ignoring the veiled threat of the audience, the latter would have booed and jeered him off the stage (as monolinguals were clearly in the majority in the uninhibited auditorium). This would have seriously damaged the status and identity of the 'judge'. In effect, the monolingual audience enjoyed the threat of drawing an 'élite closure' (as defined by Myers-Scotton 1990), that would ostracize the English-speaking 'judge' from their circle. So even if English is the conventional code for this context, the judge had to give in to the use of Tamil.

The strategy of self-translation adopted by the judge—first uttering a unit of thought in English, and then paraphrasing it in Tamil—was an effective reconciliation of the conflict he had to face. While he was asserting his right to use the conventional code for the context (and thus saving face among the educated bilingual circles, who would consider his use of Tamil for the occasion a scandal), he was also making a concession to the immediate audience by using Tamil. This strategy enabled him to maintain solidarity with the educated bilingual community, while at the same time bonding with the vernacular community. He was thus able to hold dual identities at once—cosmopolitan and local. This strategy is increasingly adopted by bilinguals to accommodate to monolingual addressees in formal contexts.

The interactions discussed here complement the somewhat macro-social description of linguistic and social stratification in the previous section. Sometimes the code chosen can violate the conventionally expected code for that context. This serves to modify any rigid compartmentalization of languages we may posit. Through code alternation strategies, both L1-dominant and L2-dominant bilinguals can shift their identities, roles, and group solidarity, thus also qualifying any rigid (pre-linguistic) establishment of these features for the community. Since these unconventional code choices and negotiation of identities result in gain or loss of status, power, and material benefits, they prevent a rigid stratification of this society and constitute it in dynamic tension. The significance of such code alternation strategies for the status and currency of English should not be missed. The fact that English can be used creatively—even by monolinguals, in unconventional situations with complex socio-economic implications—suggests the continued life of English in this society. English is so much a part of this social formation that it functions dynamically to negotiate meanings, identities, and material rewards in day-to-day, face-to-face interaction, from the lowest social stratum upward. The activity is, furthermore, quite radical. Through code alternation, people are subtly resisting the prescriptions of the regime and the dominant social opinion proscribing English. Perhaps it is the mechanism of code-switching that enables them to do this. They are able to get away with using English since they are using it with Tamil. This activity enables them to pretend to others and themselves that they are only using the vernacular, when if circumstances necessitate it, they are quite ready to claim the benefits of English.

What, then, is the position of English in a militantly nationalistic post-colonial state? The micro-social description above suggests the vibrant afterlife of English. It is now well noted in sociolinguistic literature that mixing of codes can enable a speech community to reconcile the psychological and socio-cultural tensions it faces between two conflicting languages, and thus maintain both codes (Romaine 1989: 39). This serves to explain the persistence of English in many periphery communities. Blanc and Hamers (1982) have posited that Chiac (a hybrid of French and English) reconciles the conflict of New Brunswick youth in Moncton who cannot afford to be left out of the economically powerful urban North American English, nor lose their traditional rural Canadian-French identity. They satisfy both needs by mixing the codes in their conversation. Heller (1992) demonstrates how French–English switching similarly serves Quebecois, while Swigart (1992) accounts for French–Wolof mixing in Dakar the same way.

It is a measure of the pervasive influence of English in post-colonial communities that it has Englishized the vernacular itself in a subtle, unconscious, and deep-rooted fashion (through mixing), apart from itself getting vernacularized. Apart from Chiac (mentioned above), sociolinguists have begun to identify the development of hybrid languages in other periphery communities. Swigart (1992) has noted a Frenchified Wolof in Dakar, and Pandit (1986) has posited an Englishized Hindi in India as distinct codes, assuring the continuance of bilingualism in these politically-charged communities. A thorough grammatical and sociolinguistic description of these hybrid codes is currently being attempted.

Our consideration of the language question has served to produce significant insights into the socio-political dynamics of a nationalistic periphery society.
English continues to subtly stratify and regulate such a society, despite the intensification of ethnolinguistic nationalism that has considerably checked its overt forms of dominance. Periphery communities, then, must still contend with the international hegemony of English. Blommaert (1992), to take one example, shows the irresistibility of English despite the nationalistic ujamaa experiment in Tanzania. However, if Tamil is becoming Englishized, it could be said that local communities are getting even with English by Tamilizing it. This process has oppositional implications in the context of the burgeoning ‘English-only’ and ‘standard English’ movements of the center. The subtle forms of vernacularizing English we have seen above show the extension of the tradition of linguistic appropriation established by local scholars such as Navalar during colonial times.

It is important to situate this micro-social perspective on Tamil society in the context of larger geopolitical tendencies. We must realize that globalization (spurred by technology and mass media) and nationalism are competing tendencies in the late 20th century. Ben Barber (1995) has recently explored this dialectic in his insightfully-titled book Jihad vs. McWorld. He is correct to say that these two trends—i.e. globalization (in the terms set by Western superpowers) and factionalism (in terms of ethnic, religious, or regional differences)—exacerbate each other. The more one becomes prominent, the claims of the other gain strength. (The growth of militant religious and ethnic groups in the United States and Europe proves that factionalism is not limited to periphery communities alone.) So the challenge for periphery communities is this: while the demands of globalization and internationalism would encourage the learning of English, the equally strong pull of nationalism would motivate resistance to English. How can these contradictory demands be reconciled? Rather than asking which tendency is going to win over the other, the more important questions to pose are: How do people learn to live with these tensions in their everyday life? How do they transform these constraints in their favor? How do they creatively manipulate these tensions to conduct their life with dignity and self-determination? The manner in which the Tamil community appropriates English to dynamically negotiate meaning, identity, and status in contextually suitable and socially strategic ways, and in the process modifies the communicative and linguistic rules of English according to local cultural and ideological imperatives, is very instructive. These are the strategies by which the powerless carve a niche for themselves in the face of historical forces.

Conclusion

To return to ELT, both Pennycook and Phillipson explore the colonial history of English to show how the discourses of ‘English as an international language’ and ELT derive from the colonial expansion of English and Anglo-American imperialism. They explain how the colonial experience helped to construct the functionalist, scientific, and apolitical strands in these discourses that indirectly favor the linguistic imperialism of English over the vernaculars in periphery communities. While this is certainly true (and I have shown above how the natives themselves participated in the construction of these discourses to some extent), another important development should not be ignored. The same historical conditions generated a significant tradition towards the resistance and appropriation of English which is currently finding fresh impetus in post-colonial communities. The ways in which this periphery tradition of appropriating English may serve to redefine ELT are explored in the following pages.

Notes

1 For a historical account on the motivations accompanying these activities, see Mendis 1956.

2 The prospectus of the Batticaloa seminary (which in 1823 was the second university-level institution to be founded in South Asia, after that in Serampore, India) records the educational objective as follows: '[T]hrough medium principally of the English Language it is designed to teach as far as the circumstances of the country require, the sciences usually studied in the colleges of Europe and America' (quoted in Chehillah 1922: 10). Chehillah 1922 provides useful insights into the syllabus, teaching material, and pedagogies adopted by the missionaries in Jaffna.

3 For a detailed account of the developments in the status of English vis à vis the vernaculars, see Kandiah 1984 and Canagarasah 1995b.

4 The 'liberated zone' is quite fluid in its boundaries, since the fighting between Sri Lankan and Tamil forces continues. Although much of the northern peninsula and considerable areas of the north and east of the mainland constituted the de facto Tamil state during the period of my study, the power of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the militant organization that is spearheading the fight for separation) has been restricted to the north-east of the island since 1996.

5 For a detailed argument on the ways in which borrowings can be rhetorically complex and constitute code-switching in post-colonial communities, see Gysels (1992) and Myers-Scotton (1992).

6 This project has been inspired by the recent calls of Y. Kachru (1994) and Sridhar (1994) for more research into how English co-exists with other languages in periphery communities, to redress a 'monolingual bias' in second language acquisition scholarship.