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Linguistic currencies: the translative power of English in Southeast Asia and the United States

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ABSTRACT

English seems to be everywhere in the world today, as omnipresent as money. Just as the US dollar has been the Latin, as it were, of world currency, so English has been the lingua franca of a ceaselessly globalising market economy. This is as true in the vastly diverse linguistic landscapes of Southeast Asia as it is in the irreducibly plural cultures of the United States. How did the hegemony of English come about? What are the specific histories and political imperatives that have installed English at the head of a global linguistic hierarchy while situating vernacular languages below it? What effects does this linguistic hierarchy have in the reproduction of social relations within such nations as the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and the United States? And what are the limits of translating English into money, especially when confronted with everyday creolised speech in such forms as slang and literature?

KEYWORDS

English; translation; United States; Philippines; Singapore; Thailand; creolisation

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.¹

–Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 1967

English as a kind of money

English seems to be everywhere in the world today, as omnipresent as money.² Just as the US dollar has been the Latin, as it were, of world currency, so English has been the lingua franca of a ceaselessly globalising market economy at least since the end of the Cold War. If, as Nietzsche once said, truth is a mobile army of metaphors,³ today the truth of English – more specifically, American English – as *the* language of globalisation is due in part to the fact that it is backed by the largest army that the planet has ever known. Like money, the widespread use of English comes from the shared assumption that it can serve both as the measure and means of communicative exchange across cultures. Its geo-political reach is such that it can impose itself as the necessary language of diplomacy, international commerce, tourism, scholarship and many other transactions. Thus does it function as a universal lingua franca, imagined to have the capacity of

transcending linguistic differences. By becoming the dominant medium of global exchange, English accumulates a surplus of signifying power, thereby creating an unfavourable balance of trade with other languages.

It is the material and symbolic purchase of English over other languages that is the topic of this essay. How did the hegemony of English come about? What are the specific histories and political imperatives that have installed English at the head of a global linguistic hierarchy while situating vernacular languages below it? What effects does this linguistic hierarchy have in the reproduction of social relations? And what are the limits of treating the translative power of English as a kind of money, especially when confronted with everyday creolised speech in such forms as slang and literature that refuse reduction into a common currency? In what follows, I ask these questions in relation to the vastly diverse linguistic landscapes of Southeast Asia – focusing on the countries I am most familiar with, namely, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand—as well as in the irreducibly plural cultures of the United States. By looking at the history of English in these four countries, I want to argue that the hegemony of English is produced in and through the repression of other languages and their reorganisation into a linguistic hierarchy with significant social effects. But I also want to look into the ways by which the hegemony of English is invariably challenged, if not subverted by a particular mode of intra- and inter-lingual translation that is otherwise known as creolisation.⁴

Since the end of the Cold War, the global spread of English has proceeded at a brisk pace. We can see this, for example, in the near-universal institutionalisation of English instruction in most secondary and tertiary schools and in the programmes for teaching English as a Second Language, especially in Southeast Asia. Nearly all the efforts to teach and promote English in the region, however, have treated the language unfailingly in instrumental terms. They have sought to tap into its potential usefulness as a tool of economic development with which to foster jobs, trade, diplomacy, and so on. There has been far less concern with English as an integral aspect of the humanities – for example, in studying its literary productions – as we might see in the Anglophone West. Instead, English comes across as ‘anti-humanistic.’ Learning it is less about ‘humanizing’ Asian speakers in the traditional sense of the humanities (as self-reflexive agents of their history), as with turning them into ‘human capital,’ that is, as subjects whose modernity is defined in terms of their ability to serve as ‘good’ workers for and compliant servants of global capital.

Why has this been the case? How did English in Southeast Asia become a language associated with a doubly ‘alien’ power – that of colonialism and its enabling other, capitalism?

To approach these questions, I propose a comparative history of the spread of English in three countries of Southeast Asia that I am familiar with: the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. These are admittedly limited cases that exclude such countries as Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Brunei and others where the question of English remains no less important. And my examination of the United States begs the question of the Englishes spoken in the United Kingdom and its larger colonies, such as India. However, I hope that my more focused comparison of these three very distinct cases prove suggestive enough for thinking about the situation in the rest of the Asian region, and perhaps beyond. But in order to help understand the spread of English in Southeast Asia, it is helpful to begin outside of it, across the Pacific with one of the largest English-speaking countries, the United States of America. How did English spread

in these countries? What are the social, linguistic and political effects of the spread of English? Finally, what are the stakes for translation studies in interrogating the historical hegemony of English?⁵

The United States: monolingualism of the other

Let us begin with the scene of the crime, as it were, retracing the historical spread of English in the first post-colonial modern nation-state, the United States of America. The growth and development of English is, of course, inseparable from the history of settler colonialism. Immigrating Europeans, led by the English and followed by Germans, Scots, Irish, Welsh, French, Dutch, Spanish and others, advanced across the continent by displacing and dispossessing Native Peoples of their land. They employed African slave labour, mostly in the South, which also directly profited non-slave owning areas in the North and West.

The War of Independence between 1776 and 1783 overthrew British imperialism, leaving post-colonial Americans with the question that many other post-colonials have faced: what language to adopt for the new nation? It was not originally apparent as to what this might be. Some of the founding fathers proposed Greek – not surprising given the fascination with democracy and classical antiquity among a number of them. Others thought the new nation should be bi-lingual in German and English, given the large number of Germans residing in parts of the Eastern seaboard, especially Pennsylvania.

The key figure that resolved this question was Noah Webster (1758–1843). Webster argued for the use of a reformed English. He wrote many treatises on the need to ‘cleanse’ what he thought were the corruptions of English wrought by an equally corrupt British society into something more virtuously American, seeking a new language that would reflect the patriotic aspirations of the former colonials. In effect, Webster sought to vernacularize English, turning it from an imperial into a national language. With this in mind, he wrote his famous *Spellers* that would Americanise spelling and pronunciation, and capped his career with what he considered his most patriotic accomplishment in 1823: the publication of Webster’s Dictionary of the American Language.⁶

For Webster then, language was profoundly political. The transformation, or what we might think of as translation, of British into American English was meant to decolonise the language of empire and create an American vernacular ‘purified,’ as Webster put it, of British affectations. But Webster’s linguistic reforms also had a specific domestic aim. He dreamt of abolishing idiomatic variations and foreign linguistic borrowings that threatened the language of the new nation. For Webster, the formation of American English was meant to unify a White Republic and serve as the language of white democracy. And this entailed marginalising if not excluding those who did not speak it. Webster’s project of reinventing English brought with it a certain price. It devalued the mother tongues of non-Anglophone immigrants who, by the second generation, were compelled to give up their languages. It also meant violently suppressing Native American languages, forbidding their use in reservations and schools. Finally, he envisioned American English coming from what he referred to as the ‘abolition’ of regional and racial vernaculars, especially Black English. Such regional variations included different accents that, Webster feared, risked

misunderstanding and ridicule. He thus saw dialectical differences as potential sources of 'disharmony' that threatened to rip the unity of the new republic. Indeed, Webster's fear of linguistic difference carried over in later eras, especially during times of war. The patriotic investment in a single American speech often resulted in forbidding to the point of criminalising the teaching of certain languages, such as German during World War II. At least since the post-war period, increasing immigration from non-European countries led to conservative responses that included the English Only Movement. Hostile to foreign languages, members lobbied for the enforcement of American English as the one and only language that could be used in schools, the work place and the government. From the perspective of white American nationalism, language was meant to be continuous with conduct and character. Those who spoke different languages or in different accents were seen as sources of suspicion and subversion.

We can see then how Webster's ideas about linguistic reform provides the historical underpinnings for the US ideology of monolingualism. This monolingual ideology consists of disavowing and devaluing linguistic pluralism by associating foreign languages and non-standard accents with alien threats to Republic. The hegemony of English thus emerged by way of reorganising the landscape of linguistic pluralism into a linguistic hierarchy: a standardised American English on top, all other Englishes and foreign languages below. Linguistic hierarchy, in turn, tends to mirror and reproduce social inequality between native speakers of American and others. Furthermore, American English has historically been invested with the power of conferring full citizenship insofar as it is the language of the law, education, politics and popular culture while all other languages are relegated to a position below English, signalling the civic inferiority of their speakers.

Monolingual ideology, additionally, has played a role in the spread of the US Empire. At home and abroad, Americans have tended to rely on native translators rather than learn the vernacular languages themselves. They expect others to speak up, as it were, in the language of rule, rather than Americans speaking down in the language of the subjects of empire.⁷

This notion of linguistic and social inequality subtending the ideology of monolingualism, shapes a particular view of translation. For most North Americans, translation tends to come across as a kind of onerous labour that falls, like manual labour, primarily upon speakers of foreign languages or non-standard American English. It is the non-English speaking 'others' who must speak up, therefore, and translate their language into English. By contrast, native English-speakers enjoy the privilege of being liberated from the task of translation. For Americans, then, the work of translation is as marginal as it is expendable.⁸ If there is an American notion of translation, it would consist of a kind of linguistic eschatology: the end of translation – the goal towards which it should strive – should be an end to all translation. Speech would be fully transparent to meaning, just as language would yield completely to the intention of its speakers. By putting an end to translation one is emancipated from the demands of dealing with different languages. Conversely, to be put in the midst of foreign language speakers such as Spanish-speaking immigrants, is to feel out of place. It often occasions anger or irritation since it is a reminder that one is neither free from the labour of translation nor in total control of one's language.

These logocentric and ethnocentric notions of translation intersect to form the basis of monolingual ideology. Such an ideology is everywhere enforced and naturalised via schooling, the media, government institutions, and so on. The effect is the continuing legal, if not cultural discrimination against foreign languages and their speakers both inside and outside the US. The power of American English historically works by promising assimilation into the dominant US culture. But this promise of inclusion is in turn underwritten by the on-going discrimination towards non-English speaking others and a shared condescension towards non-Standard English speakers (except, of course, speakers of British English as members of the former Empire). Monolingualism is Webster's dream of national unity realised through the re-organization of linguistic difference into a linguistic hierarchy.

The Philippines: English as counter-insurgency

Turning now across the Pacific to the Philippines, we see how the history of the American imposition of English in what was the only formal colony of the United States in the Asia-Pacific, also took place amidst war and subsequent occupation.⁹ US forces arrived in the archipelago in the midst of the Filipino revolution against Spain. After overthrowing Spain, Filipinos found themselves besieged anew by the US invasion. The Filipino American war was followed by colonial occupation from 1899–1941. In an effort to 'pacify' Filipino revolutionaries, the US established a network of colonial public schools designed to neutralise anti-colonial sentiments. Colonial education mandated the use of English as a medium of instruction to counter the numerous local vernaculars and marginalise Spanish. As American colonial officials made clear, English was meant to act as a counter-insurgent measure to contain Filipino dissent. Initially, English was taught by American teachers. But by the 1920s, the 'Filipinization' of colonial rule resulted in replacing nearly all the American teachers with second-generation English-literate Filipinos. As the medium of instruction on all levels, English became widespread even if unevenly used and comprehended. The Census of 1939 recorded that about 35% of Filipinos regarded themselves to be fluent in English – possibly the highest number of colonial subjects claiming to be adept in the master's tongue in any part of the colonial world before World War II. More people spoke English in the Philippines than any of the hundreds of vernacular languages in the archipelago, including Spanish. All civil service jobs required English, further assuring its role as a vehicle for colonial class advancement. By the 1920s, there emerged a small but highly influential group of Anglophone Filipino writers who followed American literary models. Some took upon themselves the task of reshaping the canons of Filipino writing, privileging English as the literary language of modernity. But they also consigned vernacular literatures to the realm of pre-modern oral and folk traditions deemed inferior and therefore unsuitable for serious literary production.¹⁰

The Japanese invasion and occupation between 1942–45 sought to reverse the progress of English, discouraging its use in favour of Tagalog and Nippongo. But Japanese defeat and allied victory, shortly followed by the Cold War, insured that English would become even more widespread. Fluency in English became the hallmark of a post-colonial middle-class sensibility, evincing a liberal, anti-communist pro-Americanism. So deeply rooted was English that since the 1960s, Philippine schools have been regarded

as the 'bargain' site for studying the language among other Asians, especially Koreans, and some from the Middle East. In the 1980s, there were attempts to counter English with the institutionalisation of a national language, the Tagalog-based Filipino, along with the rise of bi-lingual education. But to this day, English continues to be the language of power and progress. It remains as one of the official languages of government and the default language of international business, trade and diplomacy. For this reason, English functions as the lingua franca of the elite and those who aspire to its ranks. It remains compulsory in all levels of schooling, public and private. English is also the language of newspapers of record whose coverage revolves mostly around the actions of the government for the sake of a largely middle-class readership. Finally, knowledge of English is crucial for employment overseas and in call centres, two of the most lucrative jobs for many Filipinos and major pillars of an economy built on overseas remittances and direct foreign investments. Indeed, fluency in English is what distinguishes Filipino overseas and call centre workers from the vast army of labourers contracted to toil in different parts of the world.

English hegemony, however, has always been highly contentious and problematic in the Philippines. Meant to unify a country characterised by a staggering linguistic diversity, it has instead enforced, as in the US, a linguistic hierarchy that reflects and reproduces class inequality. English exists over Filipino, which in turn is positioned over other Philippine vernaculars, all the while marginalising Spanish, which, for reasons that are too complex to get into now, was never widespread to begin with. Anglophone literature, though not as widely read, enjoys considerable prestige and visibility over its vernacular counter-parts among cultural elites. In social terms, middle class status, both actual and aspirational, is linked more than ever to fluency in English. In the Philippines today, as in many other parts of the world, a middle class illiterate in English would be impossible to conceive.

Singapore: English and the mother tongues

Compared to the Philippines, Singapore presents some interesting contrasts as well as similarities.¹¹ In Singapore, the spread of English also had colonial origins. The British colonisation of Malaya, which had encompassed Singapore, led to the creation of what the colonial historian J.S. Furnivall called a 'plural society.'¹² Such a society was composed by a 'medley' of ethnic groups who met mostly at the market place. Outside of the market, members of the plural society led segregated lives and had their own vernacular language schools. But frequent and necessary contact called for some sort of lingua franca. The common language of communication that emerged – 'bazaar Malay' –, like Bahasa Indonesia, was a kind of creole. It conjoined lexical items from different speech communities into a simplified grammar. It quickly became a language that was commercially functional inasmuch as it could be easily learned by nearly everyone, from the highest colonial official to the lowest dockworker. With independence in 1965, Singapore faced a dilemma: given its small size, how could it protect its sovereignty while insuring social peace necessary for national development?

The Singaporean dilemma had two dimensions: that of ethnic pluralism that threatened to rip the nation apart in the way of racial riots; and the lack of natural resources with which to provide for the people. The solution came in the way of turning what

looked like a weakness into a strength. The story is well known: Singapore's one-party government capitalised on the city-state's geographic location and ethnic diversity. The State turned the people into its most valuable natural resources, seeking to convert them into disciplined subjects and valuable resources for the global marketplace. The key to this social and economic conversion was the development of a highly efficient, merit-driven educational system fuelled by English – this time, British rather than American – as the medium of instruction.

English was seen by the State as the key for converting its people into valuable workers for the world. Here, the city-state differed from Malaysia next door where the nationalisation of Malay was meant to supplant the colonial legacy of English and subordinate the Chinese and Indian minorities in favour of the *bumiputra* majority. But this did not mean the total abandonment of English, which continued to be regarded as essential for tertiary education and the cultivation of an intelligentsia necessary for national progress. Hence, Malaysia and Singapore converged in their regard for the continuing importance of English, though in ways that differed considerably.¹³

In Singapore, fluency in English would give Singapore a competitive edge by providing the workforce needed for highly technical jobs in the global economy. At the same time, the State sought to maintain social cohesion by constructing a national culture made up of a composite 'Asian' identity. Again, language was the key to crafting national identity. The State discouraged the use of the colonial-era pidgin Malay. Instead, it sought to fix racial differences into clearly bounded ethnic and linguistic categories. Each bounded ethnicity – 'Chinese,' 'Malay' and 'Indian' – was assigned its own 'mother tongue'. These mother tongues were, respectively, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Regardless of the lived specificity of their ethnic identity as Cantonese, Bengalis, Eurasians, or other, the State assigned each group with one and only one mother tongue. English, however, was treated as a special language, the exception that proved the rule. It was seen to belong to no one in particular. For this reason, it could not be claimed as a mother tongue by any group. Instead, it could only remain an other tongue. Alien to all, English, by this logic, was available to everyone and thereby connected different groups with one another. It was precisely the ascribed alien-ness of English – that notion that it is somehow not a native language even among those who have grown up speaking it – that continues to be the source of its power. How so?

As with the US and the Philippines, there emerged in Singapore a linguistic hierarchy. English had been positioned over and above the mother tongues as precisely that which is meant to bridge their difference and make each group recognisable to one another. The State seeks to provide for the teaching not just of English but also of mother tongues with which to preserve a sense of 'Asian-ness,' however tenuously it may be connected to one's actual ethnic origins. But mother tongues, like mothers everywhere, also perform a double duty. They preserve a composite 'Asian' identity precisely by deferring to the paternal power of English. Mother tongues insure that English will remain an other tongue, apart from the rest. Positioned above the mother tongues, English could traverse and overcome their differences. Invested with a phallic significance – that is, as the symbolic object of collective investment – it is endowed with the capacity to circulate across all groups precisely by not belonging to any one in particular. Linking one with the other, English acts as a privileged and pervasive mediator and measure of difference. As the means of exchange and measure of social value

beyond the mother tongues, English exists as a kind of money. The power of English is thus directly related to the power of capitalism that puts everyone under its rule. And as with money, those with 'more' and better English are invested with greater social capital. In Singapore, and no doubt in many other states, there is thus something highly ironic about English. While it reproduces social and linguistic inequality, it also creates the volatile basis for a market-driven and State-orchestrated sense of national unity.

Thailand, or the king's English

My last, but no less important case, is Thailand.¹⁴ Unlike the Philippines and Singapore, English came to Thailand not via colonial invasion but, as with most things in Thailand, by way of Royal Mandate. By the mid-19th century, the modernising Thai monarchs starting with King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1804–1868) began to make strategic use of English in order to deal with the pressures coming from Anglo-American imperial powers. Rather than rely on translators who they felt they could not trust, the monarchs ordered members of royal family and nobility to learn English. At the same time, Thai Kings used British advisors that spoke in English but could not, for the most part, understand Thai. English thus became an essential second language in court. Put differently, it became a servant to Thai, a second, albeit privileged, language of rule. Its importance came from being the lingua franca of diplomacy and trade among Anglo merchants and Thai elites. It thus functioned as a kind of shield that the monarchy could use to protect itself from foreign pressures. The Thai Royalty used English strategically as a bulwark against the English. It served to inoculate the monarchy from Western rule while allowing for the selective appropriation of Western culture and technology. In this way, we could think of English playing a role precisely opposite to that in the Philippines and perhaps closer to Singapore: it allowed the Thai monarchy to uphold its independence with which to colonise the rest of Siam. Put differently, English was colonised by the Thai monarchy, making it into an appendage of Thai power. In the process, English itself became a subservient extension of Thai, an essential tool much like a prosthetic. In this sense, it became a kind of Thai.

What could this mean: that English became a kind of Thai? As with the monarchs, English would be the language that other Thais use when dealing with white foreigners, or *farangs*, both inside and outside of Thailand. Reserving Thai for themselves, Thais use English to inoculate themselves from the demands of *farangs*. The protective, or better yet, prophylactic power of English is also seen in its elitist origins and uses. English has historically been a way for nobility and later on a rising middle class to distinguish and distance themselves from commoners and working class. Hence, they sent their children to schools in England and later to the US. Fluency in English became an instrument in reproducing class distinctions. We can see then how English not only contributed to the protection of the Thai monarchy from the growing incursions of Anglo-American imperial powers, but was also used to demarcate a zone of privilege among the middle classes from those in lower classes. English allowed those on top to be more Thai, as it were, by separating and inoculating themselves from those below.

After the 1930s, the special place of English became even more apparent. The government made learning English compulsory in secondary and tertiary schooling. No other foreign language has enjoyed such a privilege. English literacy was deemed

to be essential for the modernisation of Thailand insofar as it was an index to the rise of an educated citizenry. 'Education,' in turn, meant not just Buddhist learning, for example, but just as importantly, it implied familiarity with Western scientific, technological and social science discourses. By 1970s, in the midst of the Vietnam War and the rise of the tourist industry, English took on even greater importance. Access to English became popularised through informal contacts with American soldiers, tourists and pop culture. New pressures to learn English emerged not only from above (as mandated by the State) but also from below (as demanded by the marketplace). As with all of our other examples, English erected a linguistic hierarchy that reflected and reproduced a social hierarchy that was linked to geo-political imperatives. Thai existed on top by virtue of the history and strength of Monarchy and court culture, while English, as the compulsory second language, was at the service of Thai. All other languages were deemed 'optional' and unimportant. English has thus played the role of the 'essential supplement' to forging Thai modernity. Integral to the construction of a linguistic hierarchy, English has had at least three effects. It has allowed the Monarchy to safeguard its cultural hegemony over Thailand. It works to reproduce and enhance class distinctions within Thai society between those who know English (especially among those who are able to travel and whose fluency comes from studying abroad), and those who, lacking social mobility, do not. Finally, as with Singapore and the Philippines, English, in its most basic and often creolised forms, has served to link Thai labour and economy to the larger global markets of tourism and trade.

The translation and creolisation of English

How are these historical comparisons regarding the spread of English useful for the study of translation? There are at least two ways by which the history of the spread of English allows us to understand how translation can reproduce social power, but also how it can disarticulate and challenge that power. First: in all cases, English came as a second, belated language and thus underwent a process of translation. In the US, British English, the dominant language of settler colonialism was translated and reformulated into American English in the wake of the revolutionary war of independence. Its continental spread was contingent on the repression of other languages. In the Philippines, as in the US, English spread through colonial conquest and education. Its dominance was achieved in large part through the suppression of vernacular languages along with Spanish. In Singapore, the very foreignness and secondariness of British English was key to re-ordering ethnic differences. Such differences were reified by being aligned with so-called mother tongues while English, a mother to none, fathered, as it were, an artificial, trans-lingual 'unity' among different groups. Finally in Thailand, thanks to the monarchy, English belatedly became an essential supplement to Thai, sustaining Thai over other languages, the monarchy over the people, and the upper and middle classes over the masses.

In short, the spread of English over other languages required sustained acts of translation, but a kind of translation that was premised on the suppression of other languages, situating these in a subordinate position to English. Hence, the odd temporality of English: coming second, it became first, achieving priority over so-called mother tongues thanks to existing colonial and postcolonial conditions. The exception, it would

seem, would be Thailand. But even there, the subordinate role of English, like that of court servants, became essential for guarding the privilege of Thai and so came to exercise a privileged role in articulating hierarchies, both social and linguistic. At the other extreme is the case of the United States with its ideology of monolingualism. As we saw, US monolingualism is premised on the powerful delusion that the end of translation should put an end to the labour of translation as such. But of course, the end never comes, and translation, like history, goes on.

This brings me to my second point. Our brief exercise in historical comparison suggests that the linguistic elements repressed in the institution of a linguistic hierarchy always returns. How and where do we see the return of the repressed? I would like to suggest at least two interrelated places. One is through the process of creolisation; and the other is in the form of literature. Both contain traces that elude linguistic hierarchy. In fact, we could push this formulation further to say that literature always entails some sort of creolisation; that creolisation, more often than not, opens the path for literary expression; and both necessarily militate against the standardisation of communication.

The creolisation of English, as with any language, is marked by the infusion of local idioms and usages whereby the standard version is invariably contaminated by the languages it comes into contact with. As a number of linguists have pointed out, 'creole' languages are notoriously difficult to define.¹⁵ They often blur into pidgins, while pidgins through long usage can become creoles. Indeed, the Eurocentric definition of creole languages as simplistic in structure and derivative in origin begs the question of whether all languages, insofar as they are derived from and mixed with other languages, begin as creoles themselves but that subsequent use and standardisation have served to obscure this historical fact from its contemporary users.

The elusiveness of the term 'creole' may have something to do with its early modern origins. It came to designate new social formations that emerged from the violent and volatile entanglements between coloniser and colonised, master and slave, settler and native in the colonial world. Stuart Hall, citing the Caribbean poet-historian Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite, points out that 'creole' is itself a hybrid term that emerged from fluid, porous and conflicted social conditions. It is formed by joining the Spanish words *crear*, to found, to create, with *colono*, a colonist in order to form *criollo*, 'meaning to be ... native to a country's ways even if not actually indigenous.'¹⁶ The *criollo* in this sense would be simultaneously indigenous and non-native, a settler by virtue of being an occupier appropriating indigenous ways and peoples while displacing them. In the New World, the term applied to both enslaved Africans and white settlers born in the colonies, both of who were seen by Europeans as their racial inferiors. Hence, in the Portuguese word *crioulo*, formed from the diminutive of *cria* 'person (especially a servant) raised in one's house,' we get a sense of the inferior status ascribed to creoles, both as colonial subjects and, at least since 1879, as mixed languages. Indeed, the process of creolisation, so characteristic of colonial and post-colonial societies, is as elusive as it is flexible. As Hall writes, 'creole is the shifting, elastic concept,' whose irreducible 'ambiguities underwrote the very idea of [colonial identity]' as necessarily of 'mixed origins.'¹⁷

One more thing worth underlining about creolisation, as Hall mentioned, is that it also carries the potential for subverting colonial power relations. Insofar as it involves the simultaneous mimicry and displacement of dominant speech and behaviour,

creolisation emulates as much as it ridicules the norms and rules of power. As Hall points out, this practice of double coding allowed those below to 'free themselves – if only fleetingly – from the daily imprint of subjugation ...' It does so by creating an excess of gestures and meanings outside of proper usage while taking exception to appropriate modes of address. Indeed, the creole languages that emerge from below are often unnerving to those on top for their aggressive disregard of grammatical conventions and the social arrangements such conventions imply. Associated with criminals, illiterates, vagabonds, members of subcultures, and other figures of the underworld, creole languages were often objects of derision and fear, especially by the middle classes who sought through schooling to drum them out of their children.¹⁸ At the same time, creole speech was also taken up by minority artists who sought to use it to challenge socio-linguistic hierarchy and the inequality and injustice they brought about. We see the intimation of criminality with creolisation, for example, in this extract from a 1967 poem by the British-Guyanese poet John Agard: 'I ent have no gun/I ent have no knife/but mugging de Queen's English/is the story of my life/I dont need no axe/to split/up yu syntax/I dont need no hammer/to mash/up yu grammar ... /I ent serving no jail sentence/I slashing suffix in self defence/I bashing future wit present tense/and if necessary/I making de Queen's English accessory/to my offence.'¹⁹

With creolised speech, linguistic hierarchy is evaded, violated and rearticulated into a new kind of speech. This tension between standard and subaltern voices is precisely what Agard's poem dramatises in the lines quoted above, where the 'Queen's English' is enlisted as an accomplice in the poem's grammatical sabotage. In creole, this struggle remains suspended and unresolved. No one language holds sway, so that speaking English entails moving in and through neighbouring dialects, related lexicons, street slang, and shifting accents. In other places, we can see the inexorable process of creolisation in the enduring popularity of regional languages and pidgins such as Spanglish and black English in the US, Taglish and Bisdak in the Philippines, Singlish in Singapore, Tenglish in Thailand, among others. In the face of the demand for standardisation and repression, creolisation re-invents, re-localises, re-vernacularizes English. As a mode of translation, creolisation thus displaces the force of linguistic hierarchy and disrupts monolingual hegemony. What emerge are speech varieties that tend to be grammatically perverse but semantically rich.

Many examples come to mind. In the US case, the most obvious sites of rampant creolisation come from hip hop music and spoken word, as well as from Asian American, Native American and African American literature. In these cases, racially mixed and radically mongrelized speech infused with regional accents and highly local usages provide us with a sense of how the repressed or degraded vernaculars strain and struggle against Standard English.²⁰ From San Francisco, for example, there is the poetry of Filipina American writer Barbara Jane Reyes. In 'To Spit Fire,' English is rhythmically syncopated with Tagalog and Spanish, calling to mind the Beat poets of the 1950s alongside the 16th-century Tagalog ladino poet Tomas Pinpin.²¹ Leaning on the syntax of African American speech, Reyes brushes against the grain of Standard English, full of feminist bravado. The poem's mixed genealogies and alternative grammar is thus inseparable from its critique of gender and racial hierarchies:

We spit fire girl, we golden in the breath
 We palabra, Pinay, know that we legit
 We speak our piece; in the letting, rejoice
 We file our fangs, girl, we got to bite down
 We loosen our grip, we widen our sight
 We street smart, whip smart; word is our bond
 We diwa, Pinay, our psalms be our salt
 We diva, diwata; our voices, for real
 We badass, we deep; our birthright, our roar
 We surge and swell, sing holy and sutra
 We cut, snap, strike; we no damn hot air
 We handle ourselves, we our own, we be
 We say our names, we say no, we say no
 We spit fire girl, we golden, we got this ²²

This kind of promiscuous mixing of the high and low, of the local and the foreign are just as pronounced in Southeast East Asian usages. From the Philippines, here is an example where we see the vernacular carnivalizing the privileged position of English.²³ It is from an essay by the famous Anglophone Filipino writer Nick Joaquin called the 'Language of the Streets', where he puts forth what he calls a 'vaudeville theory' of the origins of English from Tagalog:

Did the English language spring from Tagalog? Yes, averred the vaudeville professors; and they point out that many English words have an obvious Tagalog origin – for example, pussy from *pusa*, mother hen from *inahan*. There's something to this theory, really. Those English words, tot and toy – don't they clearly come from *totoy*, the Tagalog for child? And another Tagalog word for tot, *bololoy* – usually shortened to *boloy* or *boboy* – is just as clearly the source for boy. Where would the English suit have sprung from but from our word for wear, *suot*? ... What pronoun came first: the Tagalog *ito* or the English it? ... The friction of our *kiskis* undoubtedly sparked kiss, as the laceration of *gasgas* grows bigger in gash, and the dangle of *lulus* swings again in loose, and the sibillance of *sipsip* is scissored in sip ... But what need we to go on? Even the English word for nurse, nanny, is obviously a derivative of *nanay*." (*Language of the Streets*)²⁴

In the passage above, English is converted into a punch line rather than the horizon for organising literary expression. In fact, literature itself as far as Joaquin is concerned, comes across as always already creolised. From the start, literature consists of introducing heterogeneous elements – rhythm, prosody, syncope, anaphora, etc. – irreducible to the protocols of linguistic standardisation. Inverting the hierarchical relationship between English and Tagalog, Joaquin produces a kind of expressive excess, scattering meanings that have no proper place in dictionaries or schoolbooks. Such excess can be gleaned from the humour of the passage. Laughter as an important by-product of

creolisation is a kind of bonus that contributes to the further mixing of languages. What emerge are mutant tongues that evade the rule of English.

However, it is important to note that as much as it is tempting to idealise the resistant push and pull of creolisation, it can also produce conditions that are far from utopic. Historically contingent, creolisation varies in its deployment and has unpredictable effects. On the one hand, creole languages tend to evade the policing of official languages, and so can seem democratising. On the other hand, the very ease with which creole languages can be learned also means that they can be easily expropriated and commodified: for instance, in pop music, tourist slogans, advertising, and even in government- or corporate-sponsored literary contests. In Singapore, for example, Singlish is routinely denounced by the government but just as regularly domesticated. Over two decades ago, the government launched a sustained campaign to stem what it regarded as the danger posed by Singlish to English fluency, thereby threatening to erode Singaporean global competitiveness. In the last few years, however, State policies towards Singlish have loosened up. Certain Singlish expressions have even been turned into logos for selling the island nation to tourists and prizes have been awarded to poetry in Singlish.²⁵

Hence, while they may open up new avenues of expression and allow communication across social and linguistic boundaries, creole languages can also be used in promoting relations of power under populist guises. In Donald Trump's United States and in Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines, for example, we see how social media have contributed to the rabid creolisation of language to distract, threaten and intimidate political opponents.²⁶ Texted, Facebooked, and Tweeted, creolised languages smash the privileged perch of English for the sake of criticising so-called establishment elites who are most invested in proper linguistic forms and discourses of social respectability. But they also crowd out alternative modes of political dissent, especially from women and minorities. Ancient forms of populist expression garbed in new media, fascist neologisms, revanchist calls, racist and sexist discourse thereby poison the ground of civil society. The Janus-faced nature of creole languages means that while they may promise to open up avenues of democratic debate, they can also violently shut these down.

Conclusion: the worlding of English

It is common to speak of English as a 'global' or 'world' language. But in historicising and comparing its spread, we might put forth a slightly different and more dialectical formulation: that English is as 'worlded' as it is 'worlding'.²⁷ It is a means for capitalising on the world's resources, especially the bodies of workers, as much as it seeks to convert all other languages into an image of itself. English thus functions like money that in commodifying all things and social relations, serves both as the means of exchange and the measure of value across cultures. Reflected in and resounding from all other languages, the power of English comes through its omnipresence, the fact that it is seen as the default medium of global communication.

However, English is not merely a means for establishing power relations. As I have suggested, it is also a site for contesting those relations. Everywhere, English exists in tension and uneasy cohabitation with a plurality of languages and worlds. Where English invades and occupies other languagescapes, demanding translation, it also finds itself

submitting to and subjugated by the processes of creolisation. That is, it is constantly translated into a language other than itself. While the colonial provenance of English has allowed its dominant users to create and consolidate hierarchies – linguistic, political, social, and economic – its myriad literary and creolised versions have also furnished languages of resistance. By carnivalizing linguistic hierarchy, creolisation can furnish new forms of communicative possibilities for bringing people in contact across great social divides. Yet, the creolisation of English – its vulgarisation, as it were – is not a guarantee for more emancipatory modes of communication. It also presents enormous risks. As we have seen, it can and has led to communicative conditions for the populist and authoritarian restructuring of translative power. The promise of decolonising English is thus always shadowed by the eruptions of communicative cruelty aimed at doing away altogether with untranslatable figures of difference and dissent.

Notes

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2. Obviously, this term is a riff from Wallace Stevens, 'Money is a kind of poetry.'
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, ed. and translated by Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York: Viking Press, 1976, 46–47.
4. A number of the arguments here were first formulated in Vicente L. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language Amidst Wars of Translation*, Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2016; and Vicente L. Rafael, 'Mutant Tongues: Translating English in the Postcolonial Humanities,' in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Spring 2016, 83–113.
5. My comparative remarks on the spread of English in Southeast Asia are indebted to the valuable work of various scholars in such works as Alistair Pennycook, *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, London: Longman, 1994; Mary Louise Pratt, 'Comparative Literature in the Global Landscape,' in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, First Edition, ed. by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas, London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Published 2011, 273–295; Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2016; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso Press, Revised edition, 2016.
6. Noah Webster, 'Author's Preface,' in *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (Originally Published in 1826), Revised and Enlarged (Springfield, M A:

Merriam, 1862), xiii. See also the other texts by Noah Webster: *Dissertation on the English Language* (Boston: Thomas, 1789); *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, facsimile of the 1783 edition (Menston, England: Scholar, 1968). For an astute study of the language of Webster's generation, see John Howe, *Language and Political Meaning and Revolutionary America*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. See also Jill Lepore, *A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States*, New York: Penguin 2003.

7. See Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, chapter 4.
8. For a more detailed discussion of the American notion of translation as the end of translation, see Rafael, *ibid.*
9. For the history of English in the Philippines, see the references in the bibliography of Vicente L. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, chapters 2. See also: Resil Mojares, *Origins of the Filipino Novel: A Generic Study Until 1940*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1983; Virgilio Almario, 'Madalas Itanong sa Wikang Pambansa (Frequently Asked Questions about the National Language),' trans. Marne L. Kilates, Manila, 2014. See also Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino, http://kwf.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/FAQ_2.4.15.pdf; Vicente L. Rafael, 'Filipino, the Language Which is Not One,' *Rappler*, 21 August 2015, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/103304-filipino-language-not-one>; Bautista, Ma. Lourdes S. and Bolton, eds. Kingsley, *Philippine English: Linguistic and Literary Perspectives*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008; Gonzalez, Andrew, *Language and Nationalism: The Philippine Experience Thus Far*, Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1981.
10. See, for example, Jonathan Chua, ed., *The Critical Villa: Essays in Literary Criticism*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Univ. Press, 2002.
11. For Singapore, I have benefitted from the following texts: Lionel Wee, Robbie B.H. Goh and Lisa Lim, eds., *The Politics of English: South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. by Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Co., 2010; Lisa Lim, Anne Pakir, and Lionel Wee, eds. *English in Singapore: Modernity and Management*, Singapore: National University Press 2010; Sharpe, Leslie; and S. Gopinathan, 'After Effectiveness: New Directions in the Singapore School System?' *Journal of Education Policy* 17, no. 2, 2002, 151–66. See also Vicente L. Rafael, 'Mutant Tongues.'
12. J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*. New York: New York University, 1956. See also Chua, Beng-Huat, 'Singapore's Routes of Modernity,' *Theory Culture Society* 23: 469–71, 2006.
13. For English in Malaysia and Singapore, see Alistair Pennycook, *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, London: Longman, 1994, 183–256.
14. I am grateful to Thongchai Winichakul, Rachel Harrison, Supasai Vongkulbhisal, Phrae Chittiphalangsrri, Arthit Jiamrattanyoo and Thiti Jamkajornkeiat for their helpful comments on my arguments for Thailand. Some useful resources I've found on the subject of English in Thailand include Pairote Bennui & Azirah Hashim, 'English in Thailand: the development of English in a non-postcolonial context,' *Asian Englishes*, 16:3, Spring, 209–228; Amy H. Liu and Jacob I. Ricks, 'Coalitions and Policy Shifts in Southeast Asia,' *World Politics* 64, no. 3 (July 2012), 476–506; Adam R. Tanielian, 'Foreign language anxiety in a new English program in Thailand,' *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* Vol. 13, No. 1, 2014; Voravudhi Chirasombuti, 'History of foreign language education in Thailand until World War II,' *The International Journal of Social Language*, 186 (2007), pp. 5–12; Azirah Hashim and Pairote Bennui, 'Lexical Creativity in Thai English Fiction,' *Kritika Kultura* 21/22 (2013/2014), 132–164; Wannapa Trakulkasemsuk, 'Thai English,' in *Varieties of English Around the World: English in Southeast Asia*, Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing, 2012, 101–111.
15. See for example, Pietr Muysken, 'Creole Languages,' in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Language*, <http://linguistics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-68>. Mary Louise Pratt offers a powerful version of creolisation in her notion of 'heterolingualism' in her essay, 'Comparative Literature in the Global Landscape,' in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, First Edition, ed. by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas, London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011, 273–295. She writes:

The possibility of heterolingualism, of one language hosting (or invading or occupying) another arises from a third feature of human language that shapes the global landscape: its extroversion. Languages are not just porous, they are outwardly disposed to seize elements from others with which they come in contact. This active openness of linguistic systems makes language uncontainable and transgressive. In the new

languagescapes of global cities, the extrovertedness of language is another reason we have no idea what the world will look like linguistically a hundred years from now. (290)

Other works on creolisation and translation that have informed my discussion include Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourses: Selected Essays*, ed. by J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville: Univ. Of Virginia Press, 1989; James T. Siegel, *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1986, and Benedict Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990. My own explorations in the creolisation in the late Spanish Philippine context appears in Vicente L. Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translations in the Spanish Philippines*, Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2005.

16. Stuart Hall, *Familiar Strangers: A Life between Islands*, London: Penguin, 2017, 19.
17. Hall, *ibid.*
18. Hall, *ibid.*, 74–75.
19. John Agard, *Mangoes and Bullets*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1985. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ywy-Tthdg7w>.
20. See for example, the MLA Language Map, <http://arcmap.mla.org/mla/default.aspx>; and Rick Aschman's remarkable 'Map of English Dialects,' <http://aschmann.net/AmEng/#LargeMap4Left>. See also Edward G. grey, *New World Babel: Languages and Nations in Early America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999; Marc Shell, 'Babel in America: The Politics of Language Diversity in the United States,' *Critical Enquiry* 20 (1993): 103–27; Jill Lepore, *A Is for American*, 27–29; Don Dodd, *Historical Statistics of the States of the United States: Two Centuries of the Census, 1790–1990*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993; Shirley Brice Heath, 'Why No Official Tongue?' in *Language Loyalties: A Source Book on the Official English Controversy*, ed. James Crawford, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 20–30; Edward Sagarin and Robert J. Kelly, 'Polylingualism in the United States of America: A Multitude of Tongues amid a Monolingual Majority,' in *Language Policy and National Unity*, ed. William R. Beer and James E. Jacob, Totowa, N J: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985, 20–44; Joshua Fishman, *Language Loyalty in the United States: The Maintenance and Perpetuation of Non-English Mother Tongues by American Ethnic and Religious Groups* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966.
21. For a discussion of Tomas Pinpin, see Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*, Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993, ch. 2.
22. Barbara Jane Reyes, 'To Spit Fire,' in *To Love as Aswang: Songs, Fragments, Found Objects*, San Francisco, PAWA, 2017. Quoted with the author's kind permission.
23. 'Carnivalization' is, of course, a term I borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009. His notion of heteroglossia, like Pratt's 'heterolingualism,' is closely aligned with the notion of 'creolization' that I've been using to frame the insurgent possibilities of language. See Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
24. Nick Joaquin's 'The Language of the Streets,' first appeared in 1963, and has been republished under his pen-name, Quijano de Manila, as *The Language of the Streets and Other Essays*, Manila: National Bookstore, 1980, 3–21. For a more extended treatment of this brilliant essay, see Vicente L. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, chapter 2. And for a more extended study of Nick Joaquin's work, see Vicente L. Rafael, 'Telling Times: Nick Joaquin, Storyteller,' in Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who had Two Navels and Tales of the Tropical Gothic*, New York: Penguin Classics, 2017, 1–20.
25. See Rafael, 'Mutant Tongues.'
26. See Vicente L. Rafael, 'The Sovereign Trickster,' in *Journal of Asian Studies*, v. 78, no. 1, February 2019, 141–166.
27. For a more detailed explication of 'worlded' and 'worlding,' distinguishing these from 'globalization,' see Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?* and Pratt, 'Comparative Literature in

the Global Landscape.' See also the very useful work of Alastair Pennycook, *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, especially 1–3.

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