REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

English and the Discourses of Colonialism

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Alastair Pennycook, English and the Discourses of Colonialism, *London and New York: Routledge, 1998.*

A central argument of this book is that colonialism serves as a crucial site of cultural production, and that many of the cultural constructs produced in colonial contexts still operate in the contemporary world. Alastair Pennycook invites scholars, researchers, and educators to reflect on the need to view colonialism not simply as a context in which European colonial nations' cultures were imposed upon colonised nations, but also as a context that produces discourses which have lasting effects in large domains of Western thought and culture. This move, according to Pennycook, is not to ignore or downplay the effects of colonialism on the colonised but rather on the one hand to avoid the often patronising attempts to speak on behalf of other people, ... and on the other, to deal with the cultural and political contexts of which I am a part, a self-reflexive move to try to explore the ways colonialism has constructed Western ways of being. This allows me to explore the complexities of my position and invite others to do so too (28).

Pennycook's purpose in this book is to articulate the complexities surrounding the central role of English and English language teaching in the colonial enterprise and the significant role of English in the contemporary world. Rather than accepting the current liberal discourse that English has become a neutral language of global communication, Pennycook argues that it remains a language to which colonial discourses still adhere, a language still laden with colonial implications. At first glance, this book may not seem relevant to the readership of instructors of technical writing. However, as educators who work in college classrooms where multiple languages and cultures intersect, we need to understand the history of our language of instruction, how that language was intertwined with colonial binaristic constructions of Self and Other, and what implications those constructions have for the diverse learners we work with. Pennycook's book may provide us with valuable insights in that regard.

The issues in this book are well researched and well documented. The sources are diversely drawn from colonial documents, travel writing, popular books on English, newspaper articles, students' writing, and personal experiences.

Pennycook begins with the dramatic British departure from Hong Kong in 1997 marking the end of British colonialism. His belief that this exit only masks the deep-running traces left by colonialism leads him to examine the development of language policies in India under British colonialism. Language policies in colonial India rightly deserve attention because of their significance as the major site of production of colonial ideologies. Pennycook looks at how various colonial language policies emerged that both reflected and produced colonial discourses. He notes that the need to provide education for Indian people was framed among competing discourses: the discourse of the civilising mission to bring enlightenment to backward peoples, and the discourse of the need to provide a productive and obedient workforce for colonial capitalism. The result was the emergence of two factions, one supporting Anglicism — an insistence that English should be the language of education, and the other supporting Orientalism — a belief that local languages were the most efficient way to spread European knowledge in India. What was important about these discourses, suggests Pennycook, was that Anglicism and Orientalism, although competing discourses, were complementary with each other and complicit with colonialism, i.e. both Anglicist and Orientalist factions contributed in their different ways to the maintenance of colonial rule. Thus, debates on colonial language policies reveal the "double-edged sword of language education, the quandary that provision of both education in the first language and education in English were equally part of colonial rule"(31).

Pennycook's argument that both Anglicist and Orientalist discourses can be seen to have been complicit with the whole colonial project may have important implications for current debates about language policies in "multicultural" Canada. Pennycook reminds us that we need to investigate very carefully whose interests are served by different language policies. Thus, it may not be enough to simply advocate language ideologies in favour of a liberal multiculturalism as opposed to those in keeping with a more conservative Euro-Canadian stance. Rather, what such ideologies promote or deny must be examined within the broader social, cultural, political and economic frameworks that they support.

Pennycook then moves on to examine colonial language policies in Malaya, the Straits Settlements, and Hong Kong. He notes that although the particular material circumstances of different colonies produced their own ideological orientations, colonial ideologies flowed across the empire: Anglicism and Orientalism frequently emerged from different approaches to using education for colonial purposes. In

Pennycook's view, what is significant in the debates on the two discourses is that while the proper role for English was being debated on, constructions of Self, as "enlightened," "rational," and "superior," and Other, as "inscrutable," "deviant," and "inferior," were constantly produced, and as the debates continued, such constructions came increasingly to adhere to English. Even if at times these discourses played a lesser role in the development of certain policies, it was the production of these discourses, he argues, that was one of the major legacies of colonialism. He contends that the debates on the superiority of English have had lasting effects on the massive spread of English around the globe today. "Anglicism has been able to re-merge in a new world order in which promotion of English has become a far more viable option"(94).

In his chapter on "Images of the Self," Pennycook devotes more attention to this one particular aspect of colonial production of images of the Self: the construction of English. He meticulously documents numerous examples that support the view of the richness of English, the notion of English as some pure, advanced language, and the belief that because of their vast vocabulary, speakers of English are the most capable thinkers. He examines discourses on English in various forms of popular culture — popular books on language, magazines, newspapers, and so on — pointing to some remarkable similarities between the rhetoric of nineteenth century writers on the English language and current writing on the global spread of English. Pennycook argues that it may be popular discourses that are far more influential than academic discourses in the formulation of policies, curricula, practices, and research agendas, since those who are involved in language education are also inevitably surrounded by the everyday images of English embedded in popular culture.

What may be particularly relevant for teachers in multicultural classrooms are the unfortunate consequences of the existence of these discourses in and around English. As Pennycook points out, one of the most insidious constructions that have emerged from the glorification of English and the denigration of other languages is the relationship between native-speakers and non-native speakers. Pennycook asserts that this relationship is one of the classic dichotomies that result from cultural constructs of colonialism, dividing the world into speakers of English and non-native speakers of English. For educators, to try to challenge and change the beliefs and practices around these constructs may require arduous and persistent efforts to fight against binaristic thinking deeply embedded in colonial constructions of Self and Other.

In Chapter 6, "Images of the Other," Pennycook addresses the other side of the dichotomy, focusing particularly on how images of Chinese culture have been produced through the discourses of colonialism. Through the examination of a range of

texts, this chapter argues that popular discourses and academic discourses work together to produce cultural constructs of the inscrutable Other. It is here that Pennycook cites contrastive rhetoric, an area of research in applied linguistics, as complicit in perpetuating Orientalist view of the Other as both deviant and culturally fixed. Pennycook then launches a strong and thought-provoking critique of practices in applied linguistics, aiming to challenge the status quo of the discipline, which, in his view, has not developed the kind of critical dimension that has permeated other realms of scholarly inquiry. According to Pennycook, educators and researchers in applied linguistics have too often been guilty of assuming that what goes on in teaching, learning, testing, language policies and so forth is generally describable and understandable within the rationalist domains of applied linguistic constructions of reality (162).

Pennycook contends that for applied linguists to step out of their confined realm, they need to recognise that applied linguistics is always bound by very partial descriptions of the world, and that it always operates in conjunction with many other popular discourses. They need to engage critically with the complexities surrounding popular discourses on English and their far-reaching implications for their curricula, their teaching practices, and their students.

In the concluding chapter, Pennycook explores the question of possible resistance to popular discursive constructions of Self and Other. He points out that, given the adherence of these discourses to English and their constant reinvocation in many contexts, resistance and change is hard work. Pennycook warns against a strand of reasoning in postcolonialism, which suggests an easy appropriation of English. In his view, resistance, especially for non-native speaking students of English, is not an automatically beneficial space either. Nevertheless, Pennycook calls for counterdiscourses to be developed that can challenge the adherence of colonial discourses to English. Unless we can work in and against English to find cultural alternatives to the cultural constructs of colonialism, argues Pennycook, colonialism will continue to repeat itself, in our English classes, and in many contexts around the world.

Although Pennycook does not provide concrete solutions to the development of counterdiscourses — and he may even seem rather pessimistic, especially when he considers recent resurgences of colonial discourses in Australia — his conclusions may function as an incitement to researchers and scholars to extend and develop the inquiry he has conducted here. For example, Pennycook's insights may stimulate scholars to articulate alternative realities in their research and to seek alternative representations and alternative possibilities in their classes and teaching materials. As well, Pennycook's reasoning about the resilience of colonial discourses may help us to gain fresh insights into the reproductive tendency of genre systems which, accord-

ing to recent reasoning in North American genre theory, makes agency and resistance a difficult mission. But this is an issue that needs more investigation, and this book may serve as a starting point in such an inquiry.

Readers of *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* may find Pennycook's arguments somewhat repetitive. However, that should be a minor flaw compared with the valuable contributions this book makes to our thinking about the politics of writing instruction in the multicultural classroom. Although this is not a textbook, nor is it specifically intended for instructors of technical writing, this book does have very important pedagogical implications and offers much that is of value to anyone vested in educational practices. His work can be productive for our thinking precisely because it complicates the nature of our work by revealing that writing instruction is not a neutral undertaking, but rather a task full of social, cultural, and political implications. Pennycook's provocative and challenging arguments will be especially helpful to instructors in their efforts to re-envision and reconsider their own practices and assumptions, the influence of their practices and assumptions on discursive construction of English, as well as the relationship between instructors and their non-native-speaking students. For these reasons, this is a book highly recommendable.