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Language and Power: Ideology of Difference and Strategy of Control in British Colonialist Discourse

Mouloud SIBER[1]

[1] Université Tizi Ouzou, Algérie

1. Introduction

In order to justify and maintain the Western imperial power in the colonial world, the imperialists adopted a variety of ideologies of difference through which they relegated the people they conquered into states of inferiority and even primitiveness. These ideologies touched on every aspect of the native life, and they were brought into a vivid contrast with the Western life. They were the outcome of the large scale scientific study of the colonial world whose observations became codified by means of forms of knowledge through which the conquered people were considered. These forms of knowledge permeate the discourse that accompanies empire. It is within this discourse that the "cultural hegemony" of the West expresses itself as an essential part of its political hegemony. It means that the colonialist discourse deploys this idea of cultural hegemony so as to consolidate the imperial domination of the Orient by the West.

Edward Said appropriates Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony" and applies it to the imperial context. Consequently, one of the aspects of the Orientalist discourse is this ethnocentric view of the Western culture as opposed to the cultures of the dominated people. One aspect of this cultural hegemony concerns language, which is deployed as an ideology of difference so as to justify the imperial undertaking. In this perspective, Orientalist discourse deploys what Said coins "cultural stereotyping" (1995: 26). He adds that language as part of culture has always been tied to race and empire (Ibid. 99). Nowhere is this most obvious than in colonialist writings like the fictions, letters and travel writings of Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Edward Morgan Forster.

My contention within this paper is to study the ideological appropriation of language within colonialist discourse so as to consolidate the English imperial domination of the Orient. The study focuses on two main aspects of this appropriation: the use of language as an ideology of difference and the mastery of native language as a strategy of control. The first concerns a stereotyping of the native language as contrasted to the English language skills. This maintains the language of the conquered people as either inexistent or inferior to English language and the English speakers' faculty to *master* not only their language but also other languages. This faculty to acquire the language of others shows the extent to which the English people are biologically gifted to dominate other people. Paradoxically, the second is

related to the imperialist powers' project of mastering the language of the people they control so as to facilitate and perpetuate their hegemony. This project is part of what Edward Said calls the knowledge and power dialectic of which the linguistic aspect is the most important element in Bernard Cohn's view (1996: 20-21). Indeed, knowledge of the natives means power over them, and knowledge of their language provides a fundamental perquisite for this domination. In order to study this issue, as mentioned above, I refer to the fictions of Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Edward Morgan Forster, which constitute samples of British colonialist discourse on the Orient. In terms of theory, the paper refers to also to Edward Said's concept of "cultural stereotyping" and the "dialectic of knowledge and power" as they are developed in *Orientalism* (1978).

2. Discussion

As soon as the British started their expansion to the Orient, they engaged in a study of the people they were to dominate. In India, for instance, historically, the first thing the English did was to study Sanskrit and other Indian languages "as an instrument of rule" (Cohn, 1996: 46). This desire to study the language of the Other was not motivated by an interest in the Indians but in the wish to facilitate their domination. This is why the imperialists did not hesitate to stereotype these languages in an aspiration to devise ideologies through which they were to validate their expansion. Therefore, this language became both an instrument of control, used by the imperialists to communicate with and dominate the conquered, and an ideology of difference through which the superiority of the coloniser and the inferiority of the colonised were codified.

3. Language as Ideology of Difference

One of the pillars of Orientalist discourse is the creation of the colonised subjects as different from the coloniser. Orientalist writers maintain this difference within a variety of realms like linguistic expression. Edward Said writes that "language and race seemed intricately tied" for Orientalist writers (1995: 99). This link is transferred into text so as to provide an ideological accompaniment to empire. Therefore, language is appropriated as an ideology of difference. This involves a stereotyping of the language of the subject people and an ignorance of their capacities to acquire and master foreign languages. Language being an inherent part of culture, this appropriation of language as an ideology of difference is part of what Edward Said coins "cultural stereotyping" (Ibid. 26), wherewith aspects of the culture of the Other are degraded.

In "The Man Who Would Be King", Rudyard Kipling considers the natives as speaking "lingo[s]" rather than languages. This can be explained by the association of the word 'lingo' with the word "shouts" (Kipling, 1953: 178), which shows that there is a kind of denigration of the status of the language of the Other. In *Letters of Marque*, he describes the people of Boondi as semi-primitives. The language they speak is pagan. It is said that "[t]hey speak a pagan **tongue** in Boondi, swallow half their words, and adulterate the remainder with local patois" (1899: 195; emphasis added). In colonial discourse, the word pagan is generally used to refer to the primitive people. The swallowing of words means that they have not yet

the utter biological disposition to articulate easily. Therefore, for one expression like 'here and now' they would say "*do kosh, do kush, dhi hkas, doo-a koth,* and *diakast*" (Ibid.). For Kipling, these people "are quite unintelligible" and it is very difficult for the English to understand the shadow of what they want to say. (Ibid.)

Similarly, Joseph Conrad in "An Outpost of Progress" writes, the blacks "made an uncouth babbling noise when they spoke, moved in stately manner, and sent quick wild glances out of their startled, never-resting eyes" (Conrad, 1998: 253). From here, one understands that Conrad considers the natives of Africa as primitives, their language being reduced to mere bubbling, their gesticulations as means of cultural expression ignored. In *Heart of Darkness*, too, he deprives the Africans from their languages as they "shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language" (Conrad, 1983: 108-109). What one understands from this is that Conrad does not attribute the people of the Congo human language. He denigrates their linguistic apparatus given their so-called primitivism. This primitivism is also shown through the physical stature and their behaviour. The people of the forest are viewed as "naked human beings – with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements" (Ibid. 99). This scene shows the extent to which the blacks are primitive, and their communication is but one aspect of this state of primitiveness.

Another way of stereotyping the language of the other is through their faculty to acquire languages, especially foreign ones. This is very pertinently exemplified in Kipling's *Kim.* In fact throughout the novel, one keeps encountering natives endeavouring to speak English, but the English they speak is far from being correct. The use of the native dialect of English with its erroneous structures is but an element that would testify to their inferiority towards the English. Instances of the native dialect of English are Mahbub Ali's use of the words *offeecially, unoffeecialy* (Kipling, 1994: 295) and Huree Babu's *faceelities* (Ibid. 297) and *opeenion* (Ibid. 298). Kipling changes the spelling of these words so as to stress the natives' "peculiar pronunciation" (Shahane, 1973: 130). Shahane argues that "Kipling's intentions [...] are to expose and ridicule the Babu's ways of expression" (Ibid.). It follows that this dialectic between the English command of Hindu and the Hindu's inability in English comes to reinforce the thesis that the British are the superior and ruling race in India whereas the Indians are the inferior and subordinate ones. When two Europeans, one Russian and the other French encounter Kim, the lama and Huree babu, their use of English language is immediately contrasted to Huree Babu's. It is said that they "spoke English not much inferior than the babu's" (Kipling, 1994: 315). This is to say that it is not because English is foreign to the Indians that they speak it in an inferior way. It has more to do with their natural predispositions to master foreign tongues while the two Europeans are endowed with these capacities so that their mastery of English is more important than that of the Indians. In this view, Kipling ideologically appropriates language as an apparatus for perpetuating the imperial of domination through fixing the Indians in states of inferiority as revealed in their linguistic skills.

This stereotypical attitude towards the language of the natives is even more important when considered analogically with the language of the conqueror. In fact, the inferiority of the

natives' linguistic capacities is contrasted to the white subjects' hegemonic linguistic power. In addition to Kim's mastery of different languages, which testifies to his capacity to acquire foreign languages, he is endowed with a coercive power. Indeed, he has the mastery of rhetoric. Thanks to his persuasive talent, he manages to get things that the lama could not get. For instance, in the first chapter of the novel, a passage which involves Kim, the lama and an old woman shows that Kim is persuasive whereas the lama is not. When the lama asks the woman for alms she does not accept on the basis that he is a false priest. However, as soon as Kim takes the flaw addressing her in very pertinent words starting with "thy man is rather *yagi* [bad-tempered] than *yogi* [a holy man]" (Kipling, 1994: 23) he got "a little rice and some dried fish atop – yes, and some vegetable curry" (Ibid. 24). It means that the native, as represented by the lama, is not endowed with the capacities to convince through words whereas the English, as represented by Kim have this coercive power to exert acts of imperial domination upon the natives. Similarly, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* this idea of linguistic power endowed upon the white subjects is understood in Kurtz. While the Africans are endowed with no language but sounds and bubbles, Kurtz is allowed eloquence and power of discourse. Kurtz was "a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out re-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression" (Conrad, 1993: 83). This gift of expression is contrasted to the natives' tendency to "howl" in their communication as if they were savages.

4. Knowledge of the Native Language and Imperial Domination

Homi Bhabha speaks about the "ambivalence of colonial discourse" as an aspect that hovers between fixing the colonised subjects in states of primitiveness and the recognition of their potential to change from these states. This ambivalence "does not merely 'rupture' this discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty" (Bhabha, 2004: 123). Edward Said considers the latter as an aspect of *narrative* which is in constant tension with *vision,* which maintains the subject people in fixed states. As far as language is concerned, it has so far been shown that every Orientalist text appropriates it as an ideology of difference wherewith the colonised subjects' linguistic heritage is denigrated. The ambivalence within these same texts is that notwithstanding this denigration, they appropriate the native languages when necessary as a strategy of control. It means that they recognise the native languages as such and deploy them within their texts so as to perpetuate imperial domination. This is revealed in the imperialists' endeavour to learn the native languages so as to establish communication and facilitate control.

In Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King", when Carnihan and Dravot arrive to Kafirstan, with the determination to become rulers over the natives, one of the first things they do is to learn the "the names of things in their lingo—bread and water and fire and idols and such" (Kipling, 1953: 178). The objective of this desire to learn the language of the conquered is to establish communication and facilitate the transfer of power from the native chiefs to the two white men. The words 'bread', 'water' and 'fire' denote the marks of power for so-called primitive societies. If the two men control these emblems of power, they would command the natives. If taken within the large association of knowledge and power in the British Empire, this belongs to the aims of the linguistic department of the British Academy that aimed at

knowing the language of the colonised Other. Bernard S. Cohn observes that ,

> the first step was evidently to learn local languages. "Classical" Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit as well as the currently spoken "vernacular" languages were understood to be the prerequisite for knowledge for all others, and the first educational institutions that the British established in India were to teach their officials Indian languages. The knowledge of languages was necessary to issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order – and to create other forms of knowledge about the people they were ruling.
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> (Cohn, 1996: 4)

In *Kim*, the imperial structure recognises in Kim's proficiency in Hindi an important asset to the affairs of empire. In fact, his linguistic aptitude is an instrument thanks to which his knowledge of the Indians and their culture becomes easier and larger. It is crucial for his career as a sahib since it paves the way to open dialogues with the natives so as to know more about their ways of life, their aspirations and fears and their attitudes towards the British imperial system. Kim's proficiency in Hindi is illustrated by the smooth and easy way through which he shifts from his mother tongue to this language. The novel is infused with native words which Kim uses sometimes to hide his white identity and other times to get crucial information for his tasks as a sahib in the service of the imperial power. Moreover, his linguistic skill is embodied in his natural capacity to think in the native language and quote native proverbs like "for the sick cow a cow; for the sick man a Brahmin" (Kipling, 1994: 100), as he says. Whenever necessary, Kim moves from thinking in English to Hindi or vice versa. Sometimes, he is shown thinking in English as a perfect sahib and graduate from St Xavier's. Some other times, he prefers thinking in the Hindi language. With Lurgan Sahib, for instance, Kim, the sahib, prefers science to Lurgan's magic. This is why he shifts from thinking in Hindi to thinking in English,

> So far Kim had been thinking in Hindi, but tremor came on him, and with effort like that of a swimmer before sharks, who hurls himself half out of the water, his mind leaped up from a darkness that was swallowing it and took refuge in – the multiplication-table in English! (Ibid. 205-206)

This is a perfect case in point where Kim's ability to shift from one language to another is at work. In this respect, Edward Said observes that knowledge of a foreign language becomes an instrument both of control and "assault upon populations, just like the study of the Orient is turned into a program for control by divination" (Said, 1995: 293).

In a similar way, Forster in *A Passage to India* considers the knowledge of the native language as an instrument of control and power. The Anglo-Indians learn the aspects of the native languages thanks to which they could give orders to their Indian subordinates. This is best illustrated in Mrs McBryde, who "had learnt the lingo, but only to speak to her servants, so she (learnt) none of the politer forms of the verbs, only the imperative mood" (Forster, 1979: 41). The expression "imperative mood" is very suggestive of this interest in the native

language only for the sake of domination. Indeed, the imperative mood of the native language is "necessary to issue commands" and keep control of the natives (Cohn, 1996: 4). Again, "The Life to Come" (1922) can be compared to this line of thinking, whereby knowledge of the native language means power. However, in this story, Forster turns the dialectic upset down. He writes that any disinterest in knowing the language of the natives as well as their psychology brings about failure. When Mr Pinmay was sent to a village to convert its native inhabitants he "knew little of the language and still less of the native psychology and indeed he disdained this last" (Forster, 1972: 66). The result of this lack of interest is nothing but failure to convert the natives. The failure implies that they are not aligned to the missionaries, who would control their lives following the requirements of the colonial administration.

The hostility Pinmay receives in the beginning on the part of the natives is finally rewarded as he manages to gain the confidence of the natives after learning their language and establishing communication. He converts the chief of the villagers, and baptises him Barnabas. He confers him a Western education; the image of him "lin[ing] the steps of a building labelled 'School'" (Ibid. 69) This would testify that; the aim of conferring the English education to Barnabas is to use him as his supervisory body among the natives. Again, this is a strategy similar to Kipling's and the use of the babus as servants of the Raj. Like Huree Babu and Mahbub Ali, Barnabas "proved an exemplary convert. He made mistakes, and his theology was crude and erratic, but he never backslid, and he had authority with his own people, so the missionaries had only to explain carefully what they wanted, and it was carried out" (Ibid.). It is only thanks to the knowledge of the natives' language that communication is established and the foundations of an empire are laid.

5. Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, it is clear that language is appropriated as an ideology of difference and the mastery of the native language as a strategy of control in colonial discourse. The writers studied in this paper display a stereotypical view of the native language as contrasted to English linguistic skills. They maintain the language of the Indians and Africans as either inexistent or inferior to English language and the English speakers' faculty to *master* other languages. To serve the imperialist needs of their text, they also show the imperialists' endeavour to master the language of the people they control so as to facilitate and perpetuate their hegemony.

The writers' ideological appropriation of language is only one aspect through which they show the cultural hegemony of the West over the Orient. They depict the so-called cultural primitivism of the colonised subjects in every conceivable way. For instance, the writers' "*ethnomusical*" interests, to borrow Bennett Zon's term, (2007:5) make them stereotype the native music. E. M. Forster seems to be the most critical of the music of the conquered races, especially the Egyptians'. In Alexandria, his curiosity led him to listen with disgust to Egyptian music. He considers it as "bald bad stuff played on the oadh (a kind of guitar) and silly little drum" (Forster, 1983: 274-275). He carries on saying about the Egyptians that they are "most uninventive and puerile" (Ibid), which is another way of saying that they are not advanced and "inherently more imitative of, or steeped in, nature than more

developed people" (Zon, 2007: 6). This can be explained by their instruments of music, which he regards as very mean. About the Indians, Forster says, "Except in the direction of religion, where I allow them much, these people don't seem to move towards any thing important; there is no art, the literature is racial, and I suspect its values; there is no intellectual interest" (Forster, 1953: 184-185). It follows from this quotation that the Indians are static in their achievements. Notwithstanding their trivial advances in art and literature, the fact remains that they have made no advances to reach universality and the privilege of belonging to a higher civilisation.

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