The Politics of Global English

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I. Introduction: Global English Pro and Con

English has been a global language for several centuries, spreading around the world in tandem with the British imperial adventure from the sixteenth century onward. Yet during the colonial period, English existed in a fraught relation to the local languages spoken around it. Often forbidden to read or even speak their native language in colonial schools, would-be writers in colonized countries were faced with a stark choice: to adopt the imperial language or to reject it outright—the choice underlying the famous debate in the 1970s between Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe and Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Ngugi rejected English as a viable language for an African writer and instead championed indigenous languages, regarding his own language of Gikuyu as the only authentic means to render his people’s experiences. In marked contrast, in his essay “The African Writer and the English Language,” Achebe declared that despite its many negative effects, colonialism did at least bring disparate peoples together, and “it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least it gave them a tongue, for sighing.” Achebe asserted his sovereign right to adopt English as the best means to reach a broad public, and he insisted that African writers need not lose their identity while writing in the colonizer’s language, arguing instead that they should remake English on their own terms:

[M]y answer to the question “Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?” is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: “Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?” I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange
will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. (Achebe 82)

Admirable in their different ways, both Ngugi’s and Achebe’s positions were difficult to carry through in practice. It didn’t escape the proponents of indigenous languages that Achebe’s stirring call for an Africanized English was expressed in something rather close to “the Queen’s English” as it might be spoken at Oxford. His famous novel Things Fall Apart is linguistically conservative, written in a lucid standard English flavored with occasional use of Ibo terms—carefully defined by Achebe in a glossary, so that no reader would actually need to know any Ibo vocabulary to read his book. From his Yeatsian title onward, Achebe seemed to his critics not to be remaking English but to be selling out to the former colonists’ language and the culture.

Other writers did go farther in writing creolized Englishes, but their prose ran the risk of looking merely exotic, taken seriously only by a relatively small number of readers. In his essay, directly after issuing his call for a refashioned English, Achebe praises the work of his countryman Amos Tutuola, a speaker and writer of creolized English who had never had the benefit of an elite colonial education: “A good instinct has turned his apparent limitation in language into a weapon of great strength,” Achebe says, “a half-strange dialect that serves him perfectly in the evocation of his bizarre world. His last book, and to my mind, his finest, is proof enough that one can make even an imperfectly learned second language do amazing things” (82). Yet the work that Achebe praises, The Feather Woman of the Jungle, remains little read outside Nigeria (if even there); even Tutuola’s best-known work, The Palm-wine Drinkard, wasn’t able to garner anything approaching the worldwide audience of Achebe’s more decorous prose. Conversely, though, Achebe’s sympathizers couldn’t help noticing that Ngugi himself issued his stirring defense of Gikuyu in his English-language book Decolonising the Mind, tacitly accepting Achebe’s point that a global language provides the best means to reach a global audience—or even a wide audience within a multilingual country such as Kenya or Nigeria.

Today, the stark choices faced by writers of the colonial era are breaking down, or opening up, as global English continues to expand its reach, no longer under the colonial banner but thanks to the advance of American economic imperialism and the seductive pleasures of American movies, television shows, and popular music. What is happen-