

UNORTHODOX REFLECTIONS ON ENGLISH (LINGUISTICS) IN SWITZERLAND

Adrian PABLÉ

The University of Hong Kong

apable@hku.hk

Abstract

The present article constitutes a critique of orthodox linguistics based on language-philosophical reflections. Taking the ‘Pan Swiss English Project’ as a typical example of how linguists at Swiss universities approach the topic of English in Switzerland (Pablé, 2013), I will argue that the results and conclusions drawn from this kind of research tell us little *per se*; the reason for this being that linguists assume their view about the world and the languages that inhabit it to be in no need of further explanations or justifications – in other words, they do not regard their own philosophy of language and linguistics as determining the kind of research questions asked. Instead linguists working on Lingua Franca English, and more generally on World Englishes, are busy collecting ‘data’ as a means of ascertaining whether a newly discovered variety of English ‘out there’ exists or not. This article introduces the reader to a non-mainstream approach within linguistics called *integrationism* or *integrational linguistics* (Harris, 1996; 1998) that advocates a semiology that makes a belief in ‘languages’, ‘dialects’, ‘varieties’ as *first-order realia* redundant. Integrationists believe that an integrational semiological theory is preferable to any mainstream semiological theories presently on offer because only the former is in accord with our everyday lay linguistic (i.e. communicational) experience.

Key-words: Pan Swiss English, Varieties of English, English as a lingua franca, ontology of languages, surrogationalism, integrational linguistics, teaching linguistics at university, teaching English in Switzerland.

1. INTRODUCTION

Roy Harris, Professor of General Linguistics at Oxford, once wrote that “the intellectual biases built into an academic discipline are most clearly revealed by considering [...] what questions pertaining to the phenomena falling within its domain cannot be raised within the theoretical framework it provides” (1990: 153). For Harris, linguistics certainly qualifies as such an intellectually biased discipline. What, then, are the questions that cannot be raised within academic linguistics? One might already object at this point that all the relevant questions have been, or are being, asked by linguists, and (at least some) relevant answers given. Take English linguistics, for example: the historically well-established notion that the English language is only *one* has been discarded as mythical and replaced by a more legitimate object of study in sociolinguistics, namely that of *Englishes*. The use of the plural is important here, as the name directs our attention to a matter of taxonomy: the forms of

English used outside the mother country are not subordinate varieties – mere ‘dialects’ and ‘creoles’, or even ‘corrupt English’ – they are all *Englishes* on a par with British English. The case is somewhat comparable to a recent scientific study that concluded that the Australian dingo (*canis lupus dingo*), formerly classified as a subspecies of the grey wolf, actually belongs to a separate species distinct from both dogs and wolves. Analogously, Bahamian English, Hong Kong English and St. Helena English are distinct from British English in classificatory terms. As the dingo, originally a native dog of Asia, developed into a separate species on Australian soil, so did the English dialects brought by the settlers turn into something new – not a new species but an independent variety – a new English. In fact, a case could be made for dialectology – in particular its *Varieties of English* offshoot – espousing a language philosophy that takes its inspiration from the biological sciences. Both disciplines entertain an ambiguous relationship with lay nomenclatures: both the linguist and the biologist rely on them, while at the same time regarding them as unreliable: thus it was once believed that whales are fish (cf. German *Walfisch*), while slow-worms are considered by many to be snakes; the Australian dingo, in turn, is commonly called *Australian dog* or *Australian wolf*, though apparently it is neither of the two. These are language-philosophical questions, i.e. they concern the ‘world as it was/is’ and its relationship to language, and more specifically to words in their function as *names*, general and proper. The theoretical framework within which dialectology and its sociolinguistic offshoots operate allows one to raise questions pertaining to the phenomenon of ‘languages’, ‘varieties’, ‘dialects’, ‘registers’, etc: after all, this was the *raison d'être* of the discipline in the first place. The phenomenon itself was never in question.

The list of names denoting distinct varieties of English (both past and present) is constantly growing, with disagreements over certain classifications dividing the scholarly community: is African-American Vernacular English a dialect, a creole or a distinct language? Was Middle English a creole or creoloid? Is there Euro-English? No-one within the academic linguistic community, however, would ever dream of asking more fundamental questions, e.g. whether ‘languages’ exist, and hence whether ‘English’ exists. This is a very different matter from asking whether AAVE is ‘a language’, the idea being that if it isn’t, then it must be something else – but ‘something’ that can be pinned down nevertheless. In fact, among most linguists it would be seen as a mark of irrationality to ask for evidence that, say, English exists. The argument rests on the common sense notion that in order to communicate, we need to communicate ‘in a language’. The focus, within the *World Englishes* paradigm, is on the shared codes making this ‘thing’ we call communication possible in the first place. Communication presupposes languages, the reasoning goes, and not vice versa. Roy Harris’ charge that academic linguistics is intellectually biased can thus

easily be dismissed by the orthodox linguist, who after all is devoted to studying real phenomena, i.e. languages, whose existence non-linguists (i.e. lay people) have known about long before the advent of linguistics as an academic discipline. If it is accepted that verbal communication has to be done in a language (e.g. 'English'), then it makes sense to assume that the language-names used in lay discourse refer to something real. If the name *English* does not refer to the ontological reality 'English', what use are words in their functions as names? If words functioning as names of things stand for the things they denote, then language-names, one would expect, signify what they stand for, and hence languages must be ontologically real. Furthermore, the word *English* must be a word belonging to a language (i.e. 'English'), or else how could the word function as a name at all for (monolingual) communicational purposes?

Arguably, one could make the point that it is unlikely that there are conventional names for natural languages that, upon closer inspection, turn out not to exist. Imagine a linguist declaring the following: 'Up to now linguists believed that the Walla-Walla speak Walla-Wallish (or Walla-Wallian), but it turns out that there is no such language'. If indeed the ordinary language-name *Walla-Wallish* has been used to denote more than merely an imagined language spoken by an imagined community, then there must be a people, the Walla-Walla, who say of themselves (or of whom others say) that they speak this language, i.e. the latter is distinctly different from other languages identified by a different name, irrespective of whether Walla-Wallish is believed by some to be merely a 'dialect' of another language. Language-names have 'real' referents in precisely this sense. To state this, however, is not to imply that reality is in need of scientific verification by a language expert. There is no going beyond lay linguistics as far as language-names are concerned.

2. INTEGRATING LANGUAGES

What many language scientists seem to forget, and others prefer to ignore, is the fact that any theory of language and communication rests on semiological assumptions. The assumption consists in considering signs as either determinate or indeterminate. Present-day sociolinguists often pay lip service to the notion of *indeterminacy*, but their own research would hardly make sense if that was really what they believe in. They are, like most other orthodox linguists, heirs to a sign theory developed in Ancient Greece that treats signs as determinate. For the linguist, there is no other way of conceiving of signs other than as either determinate or partly indeterminate (the latter being the more fashionable view these days), which is why determinacy as such is never questioned. In this way, certain questions simply never arise and, as a consequence, certain answers are never forthcoming, either. Roy Harris, on the other hand, developed an 'integrational' theory of the sign (Harris, 1996), which treats

signs as *radically indeterminate* while also accounting for why signs have traditionally been regarded as determinate in both lay discourse and academic discourse. If signs are indeterminate in both form and meaning, as the integrational linguist claims, a different theory of reference follows as a logical consequence – one where there is no stable (i.e. context-independent) relationship between name and what the name stands for (Pablé, 2009). Metalinguistic terms thus become context-dependent like any other words: *English* means what someone makes it mean in the given circumstances, i.e. how someone *integrates* the sign created in the here-and-now with one's past experience and in anticipation of one's future experience. A sign can only be a sign if it is integrated by a sign-maker, or else it is not a sign. In an integrational semiology signs are the products of first-order communicational activities: they do not have the status of signs prior to communication, which means that they do not belong to any previously established fixed-code (i.e. a language) having an independent ontological status. From an integrational point of view, therefore, it is a mistake to believe that the world is populated with languages, dialects, linguistic varieties, etc. (Orman, 2013), and that language-names (functioning as objective labels) identify them either correctly or incorrectly. The integrationist does not deny that there are differences between what is commonly called 'English' and what is commonly called 'Japanese'. In this sense, it would be wrong to assume that integrationists regard the label 'English' as a pure linguistic construction having no affinity with the real world. What the integrationist holds is that *signs are not shared* because every individual has got their own unique communicational experience. If a sign is assigned the status of a sign belonging to a language system (e.g. 'the word *English* is an English word'), this is meaningful insofar as the assignment pertains to a communicational act defined by three human parameters, namely factors of a macrosocial, circumstantial and biomechanical kind (Harris, 1998). To claim that, say, 'Hong Kong English' is an independent variety of English is like claiming that the dingo is a distinct species within the wolf family (*canis lupus*). The linguist working within the *World Englishes* paradigm considers both claims to be either correct or incorrect (depending on the most recent scientific research), as the language of science is a mirror-image of reality. What this means is that scientific English, unlike ordinary English, is in constant need of correcting in order to satisfy (be accurate with) language-independent states of affair. Language-names as used in linguistics are no exceptions to that. The integrational linguist, on the other hand, takes the two aforementioned claims to be attempts to *integrate* certain (historically grown) discourses and practices macrosocially, adding that the language-philosophical beliefs sustaining these claims are mythical assumptions about how language ought to work – assumptions that Roy Harris termed the 'Language Myth' (Harris, 1981).

3. ONTOLOGICAL MUDDLES

Scholars working in the domain of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) have embarked on a search for varieties of English, hoping to discover new – albeit already named – varieties, similar to Columbus, who, setting out to discover the East Indies, was also assuming he would naturally discover what the language spoken in the new land, i.e. Indian, was like. It was hardly expected that the *indios* would speak any known European language. Columbus, however, may have expected the peoples of the Indies, once subjugated, to become speakers of Spanish: perhaps he and his crew were already imagining this new variety, calling it ‘Indian Spanish’, while still at sea. So, based on our lay experience that every people has got its own language (first language) and makes the language of others its own (i.e. second and third languages), wouldn’t one expect to find that present-day Germans speak *German English* and the Chinese *Chinese English*? What would the main criteria be for deciding whether these varieties exist or don’t exist? Accent or pronunciation, along with specific grammatical patterns, seem likely candidates: what marks the *spoken* English of Germans as distinct from other European Englishes is, first of all, a German accent – one would expect. But non-native accent alone cannot function as a valid criterion in a linguistics interested in describing linguistic systems: independent varieties have got their own identity because they vary on all levels of linguistic analysis (phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, discourse, etc.) – and it is only by combining the specificities found at the various levels that one variety can be distinguished from another. Thus a research project entitled ‘The Chinglish Accent’ would hardly be acceptable (i.e. fundable) within an academic context, as non-native pronunciation, intonation and stress patterns easily lend themselves to imitation and mockery, as any skilled comedian will attest. Foreign (and ‘rustic’) pronunciations of English may be a legitimate subject in folklore studies, e.g. as part of stock characters’ theatrical performances, but have no place in a *scientific* linguistics (which is ‘lay-oriented’ only to a certain point). That such is the attitude among academic linguists transpired when 15 years ago three British Professors of English, all teaching at Swiss universities, launched a project on ‘the linguistics of English in Switzerland’ (Trudgill, Watts and Allerton, 2000), whose aim it was to find out whether an endonormative variety of English (later called ‘Pan Swiss English’) was in the process of developing, and whose characteristics were, as one researcher put it, morphological, syntactic and lexical – but not phonological (Rosenberger, 2009: 130). Swiss Germans may have a ‘Swiss German’ accent when speaking English, while Swiss French and Swiss Italians have a ‘French’ and ‘Italian’ one, but that was not what the linguists were after in this large-scale project: *Pan Swiss English* was to be a variety shared by all Helvetians, and hence focussing on Swiss people’s pronunciation would only hinder the discovery of what might turn out to be a new Swiss linguistic identity. The Swiss National Science Foundation

supported the project (which resulted in the completion of three doctoral theses): the 'Pan Swiss English' hypothesis, it must have been decided, was scientifically sound (though perhaps in the end not tenable) as well as politically correct in some crucial aspects (while socio-politically challenging in others). What more could one expect from *a linguistics of English in Switzerland* geared towards the twenty-first century?

Once you entertain the idea that 'Euro English' and 'Pan Swiss English' might exist (see e.g. Mollin, 2006 and Rosenberger, 2009), it is already clear what kinds of questions you are going to tackle as a researcher working in academia. Thus one presenter at a Swiss postgraduate conference pondered the question whether Swiss English might be a 'pidgin' (Dröschel, 2003), as indeed the English spoken and written by Swiss nationals (and used as a means of intranational communication) could be considered a simplified non-native variety influenced in its grammar by various underlying 'substrate' languages. That the term *pidgin* is commonly used in connection with varieties spoken in (former) colonial settings, or for purposes of trade and commerce, does not seem to prevent researchers from applying the term to any contexts of multilingual contact: in other words, a 'pidgin' is much more than only what the established discourse in an academic discipline allows it to be. It is not that the term 'pidgin' as used in the aforementioned conference paper is to be understood as an ordinary language term: the question whether Swiss English is a 'pidgin' was, *nota bene*, asked in scientific English – not in ordinary English. The issue here – dating back to hundreds of years of philosophical debate – is ultimately about how words in their function as names relate to the things they stand for. In connection with a related term, another linguist, Manfred Görlach (1986: 330), already noted that some scholars had misused (or, as he put it, 'idiosyncratically redefined') the term *creole* when they suggested that Middle English was one: underlying such a claim there is Görlach's belief that there is something that a creole 'really' is, which makes it possible to say that certain 'things' are not creoles. In other words, Görlach is implying that some scholars attached their own idea to the word *creole*, i.e. what the word means no longer refers to the thing but to an idea in an individual's mind. Roy Harris recently described this kind of dilemma arising from holding a *surrogational* thesis of how words have meaning, termed respectively "reocentrism" and "psychocentrism", in relation to Charles Darwin and his discussion of the term *species* (Harris, 2009). When present-day historians and sociologists debate whether the events surrounding the 2014 student protests in Hong Kong could rightly be termed a 'revolution', they are implicitly subscribing to the very same surrogational fallacy about language: political-ideological questions thus receive impartial scientific answers. All of these concerns stem from certain expectations about how the language of science, and science communication more broadly, have to work. Thus, according to the surrogational thesis, there must be a correct answer to the question whether

or not Swiss English is a ‘pidgin’. No linguist – not even the most constructionist of sociolinguists – would be satisfied with the explanation that what a pidgin is will depend on how the respective word is defined in a certain language, just as the majority of historians will not accept the structuralist linguistic thesis according to which *revolutions* are not things but only words belonging to a certain language system (here: English).

Mercedes Durham, another linguist pondering the existence of a Pan Swiss ELF variety, concluded that its ‘existence’ only manifests itself with respect to the variable use of the future tense (2014: 154), insofar as the Swiss medical students of German, French and Italian linguistic backgrounds, whose email correspondence formed the corpus underlying the study, “rather than adopting the native patterns, [...] shared their own set of patterns, different from native ones, but identical across the three groups”. Durham concludes: “Switzerland has not yet reached a stage where a fully separate, pan-Swiss lingua franca exists”. She also speculates (2014: 156) that in Switzerland the *going to* future might be completely replaced by the *will* future one day, adding that “it will be up to language teachers to decide whether this distinction is worth preserving or whether ELF simply does not need two similar variants”. Durham’s open prediction is a good example of the language attitude typical of the sociolinguist, whose general sympathies lie with descriptivism (especially as regards native varieties), who, however, cannot dismiss prescriptivism altogether when it comes to foreign language teaching. In other words, teachers of English are still the experts, but in a globalized Switzerland, where English is now *de facto* the first foreign language used, the native English teacher ideology (native speakers prescribe what is correct) is being questioned by the socially committed linguist: thus, introducing the *going to* future to Swiss learners of English might not be necessary after all – because, as shown in the sociolinguistic research, Swiss users of English don’t resort to it. The question never asked in this kind of study, however, is: does one have to be a speaker of *some variety*, as one chooses among several forms expressing futurity (*will, shall, going to, present simple*) when writing an email in English? As the linguist would be quick to respond, it is not really a question of ‘choice’: Swiss English is not a ‘performance register’ or a ‘stylised dialect’; if it exists, it exists as a natural variety whose speakers share a mental grammar and its variable rules. Whatever the individual person thinks he/she is doing is not necessarily what he/she is ‘really’ doing. You thought you spoke English? Well, yes and no. It turns out that you speak ‘European English’. If you’re Swiss, moreover, you are naturally inclined towards political independence, and hence it is more befitting that you’re a speaker of ‘Swiss English’. A non-native speaker saying or writing *I know him since three years* is making two grammatical mistakes; if the mistakes are made on a regular basis by the speakers of the non-native group (how many of them?), this is said to be evidence that a distinct mental grammar has developed in the heads

of these speakers. The mistake is 'really' not a mistake any more, as the new variety of English is now declared (by the linguist) to be independent of the old variety of English. If asked about individual freedom and free will, the linguists will always defend their position explaining that their job is to describe the varieties that communities of speakers share, i.e. the abstract system. And they will add that to claim that a person is a speaker of some variety is merely to make a statement on one particular level of ontological reality. Like this, every academic with an interest in language and/or communication can have their cake *and* eat it.

4. EDUCATION AND THE 'LANGUAGE MYTH'

Given their commitment to a surrogational thesis of how metalinguistic words mean, linguists do not rest content, i.e. do not see it as their job, to merely collect and systematise lay metalinguistic discourse about 'languages', 'dialects', 'slang', etc.; they are driven by the idea that *qua* language experts it falls upon them to restore taxonomic order to a world epistemologically corrupted by lay linguistics. For example, whenever a lay person asserts that some groups of people only speak 'slang' with no grammar, implying that they don't really speak 'a language', as some lay people seem to believe (Bauer & Trudgill, 1998), the linguist who happens to be present will want to offer therapeutic assistance. At the tertiary educational level, introductory courses to linguistics can fulfil precisely this function, namely of being lessons in linguistic therapy for novices. Courses in integrational linguistics also have a therapeutic purpose, albeit a very different one, i.e. restoring the students' confidence in their own personal linguistic experience.

Students of English linguistics are being served the same account over and over again: they are lectured about the 'history of English' and the diversification of the language into its varieties over time and the internal and external processes that led to this multitude of *Englishes* (including ELF varieties of English). The orthodoxy keeps a tight grip on the curricula making sure no heresies or irrational theories are being told to students: by all means, there are plenty of 'unorthodox' courses on offer within the orthodoxy: one may only think of all those fields and approaches labelled 'critical' that today's students of linguistics encounter during their studies (e.g. *Critical Discourse Analysis*, *Critical Applied Linguistics*, *Critical Ethnography*), but none of these really abandon the idea that fixed-codes ('languages') constitute first-order communicational realia – and if they do so they are not backed up by a robust alternative semiological theory. To the best of my knowledge, integrational linguistics is the only linguistics insisting on the *radical indeterminacy of the sign* and acting consistently on the consequences arising from this theoretical position. Why not introduce students of English to this brand of 'critical' linguistics? I have written elsewhere on my experience of teaching Harris and integrationism at tertiary educational

level (in the English departments of Lausanne and Hong Kong) and some of its empowering effects (Pablé, 2012): it remains to be seen whether lecturers might not one day grow tired of teaching English phonology, English syntax, etc. as if these fields of knowledge existed in a discursive vacuum, i.e. as if there were facts ‘out there’ about the phonological and syntactic rules of English (or Englishes), which in turn warrants the assumption that languages have ‘histories’ – that is, without raising questions pertinent to the philosophy (and history) of linguistics. Ceasing to believe in the convenient myth that linguistics is a *science* might be a first step in the right direction. A ‘demythologized’ linguistics, as envisaged by Roy Harris, does not mean that we should stop teaching mainstream courses in linguistics: it means putting the discipline into its proper philosophical and historical context and by doing so raising students’ awareness that there are alternative (and incompatible) epistemologies and that not all academic linguists agree on the fundamentals of language and communication.

I doubt whether linguists working in the English departments of Switzerland presently have anything incisive to say about English in Switzerland: the Pan Swiss English project, at any rate, was an intellectual dead end from the onset, but it combined linguistic relativism with the kind of empirical realism that science foundations, like the SNSF, seize on in order to grant money to the (underprivileged) humanities disciplines. The Swiss universities of teacher education, in turn, have made a great song and dance about the introduction and implementation of *Early English* at primary school level, which also meant that the Swiss primary school teacher who had so far taught our children (*magister helveticus communis*) was going to be replaced by a new and more able species, the teacher certified in the English language (*magister helveticus anglicus*). Could it be that the latter will be the one introducing our children to ‘Swiss English’, thus helping our nation to make English our own? I must confess that I haven’t seen much of the egalitarian spirit characterizing the descriptive approach to ELF varieties of English in the teaching and testing of Early English at Swiss primary schools, which is characterised by a highly normative linguistic attitude: for example, the latest pedagogical theory seems to demand that forgetting to write the period at the end of the sentence in the English (or French) test be counted as a full mistake each time (how many primary school pupils does it take for turning this mistake into a feature of Swiss English?).

5. CONCLUSION

These days ‘applied’ research projects in linguistics reign supreme. The ‘Early English’ project is a perfect example of how empirically-minded linguists can be kept busy – and whole teams of postgraduate students recruited. The ‘Pan Swiss English’ project is another such example: as long as empirical ‘data’ is involved, there is the wrong expectation that concrete results will follow and that the money invested in such projects is well spent.

However, why language – and languages – should be ‘given’ in the first place is a question never tackled. As far as I know, no-one has ever presented irrefutable proof of the existence of an abstract linguistic system or a mental grammar. I do not think that seeking funding for a research project intended to provide the necessary proof would be a step in the right direction. The fundamental questions for linguists to ask are language-philosophical questions and they need to have a lay-orientation.

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