

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:
IDENTIFICATION AND REALPOLITIK

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*No man fully capable of his own
language ever masters another .
--John Tanner, M.I.R.C.*

If we examine the recent history of the teaching of English--and perhaps French, German and Russian--the most obvious development that distinguishes the vehicles of acquisition of these languages from those of earlier periods is that Foreign Language instruction has become a veritable industry, private institutes and bi-national centers in metastasis across the globe, programs and methods franchised, distributed and sold much like any other mass produced product to a middle class market, or to those who aspire to middle class status, the success of distribution determined by the capacity of the market to pay for the service, and by the degree of identity gratification the buyer believes he will acquire. In this sense the acquisition of a foreign language functions on the level of imagination in much the same way as the ac-

quisition of a sports car, a pair of blue jeans or a leather jacket, status symbols which stand for wealth translated into the terms of sexual desire. The immense commercial success of English language Rock and Roll in non-English speaking nations can be attributed to the combination of its inherent sexual content conveyed in rhythm, and the association of the English language with money and power, the electric guitar producing the giddy effects of a motorcycle ride. On such a basis we can explain the automatic memorization of endless song lyrics and melodies by those who have never studied English as a foreign language, and who may not have finished elementary school, the words sung with flawless diction yet with no specific idea of their meaning. But this does not really matter, for the words themselves do not contradict the message of the song. This acquisition is a question of pseudo identification with power; it is exactly this element that leads to its marketability.¹

Other forms of acquisition require some degree of internalization of the foreign language, the student himself in the position of the Strasbourg goose although the violence of the act remains covert. There is no question in my mind that the acquisition of a foreign language is an introjection that can be described in Freudian or Gestalt terms, sometimes the forced acceptance of and sometimes a false identification with the foreign, the alien. The successful student makes a smooth acquiescence to the imperial language, access to which

has been well greased by the media, a sort of linguistic spreading of the legs on the part of the comprador bourgeoisie. Applied Linguists and Language Instructors wish to repress the fact that wars are fought over questions of language and national identity. The success or failure of foreign language acquisition depends on the extent that the personality of the learner is debilitated or undercut in its sense of self or organic identity. The acquisition of a foreign language ultimately reflects on how the learner feels as a member of a specific people, of belonging, especially under the circumstances under which foreign language instruction is pushed. The Algebra of Need, which determines the consumption of foreign culture, eviscerates the native culture. The foreign language replicates its forms in the space left by the undermined native culture.² Sometimes the native culture fights back, the symptoms of which are usually grouped under the titles *Interference* or *Pidginization*, or are diagnosed as problems in methodology.³

It is commonly asked in the literature of Applied Linguistics to second and foreign language acquisition why pre-adolescents rapidly pick up a second language, specifically verbal fluency without trace of accent, and why adult learners have greater difficulties with the accent. The significance of these difficulties cannot be underestimated. The process of acquiring English at an intensive English language institute, which

is normally part of a University center in the United States, is accompanied by abnormal degrees of anguish, and it is in this anguish that the process of second language acquisition is illuminated, several cases of which I will discuss below. The adult learner is inhibited by a form of identification with his culture that plays havoc with verbal fluency in the second or foreign language. Yet it is not the native language that is the cause of the "interference," the usual term for the "errors" in pronunciation, syntax and choice of vocabulary items in cases where cognates are available, but the interfering element is exactly the foreign one even under ideal circumstances in which the learner's attitude to the alien culture is inviting. The alien language is the invader, the intruder attempting to take hold in the identity of the learner, and the native identity may respond much like our biological bodies in relation to a transplant. What is called interference is an attempt to kill off the invader through travesty, and what is called accent is the revenge of the native culture on the foreign one, its hostility passive, but ever the more effective for that. When students invite correction of their pronunciation, they are inviting their teacher to a game in which the teacher cannot possibly win. The result is always frustration on the teacher's part, and vindication on the part of the native culture, and only teachers who believe in some form of White Man's Burden participate in such rituals as the isolated correction of errors.

The payoff for the student in this game is the revenge of the masochist in psychological terms, of the colonialized in political terms. The Japanese who study at such institutes in the United States, as members of a stable culture vis-à-vis the American, refer to the American as the foreigner rather than recognize themselves as foreigners in the United States. They are of course correct. To reverse the usual phonological proposition, unless one is an American the distinction between /l/ and /r/ is truly irrelevant. His identification rejects the foreign body; if there is no change in identification the attempt to learn the foreign language will fail. However, a change in identification is only possible if the initial identification is weak or considered flawed; in other words, the acquisition of a foreign language is made successful to the extent that the learner feels, always at a subliminal level, that there are aspects to be despised in his own culture. If the learner is conscious of the humiliation of his culture vis-à-vis the imperial one, he has the choice of rebellion through interference, or vicarious identification. And on such a basis we can explain the incredible penetration of the alien, specifically American culture and language, and its dynamics, in our times in the Third World.

The adolescent learner who attempts to acquire an alien language can be distinguished from the pre-adolescent and adult in that it is the particular

business of the adolescent to handle a crisis in identity, and for this reason becomes the transmitter of the alien culture. Perhaps in a phase of age related rebellion against his parents as representatives of cultural and language norms, the adolescent is channeled into the acquisition of foreign identity traits with or without language per se, for the traits themselves will be incomprehensible until they come to substitute the native one. When the traits are subsumed into the native culture, the graft ultimately becomes more important than the root: Coca-cola for *guaranã*, hamburgers for *pastéis*, rock for *samba*. If we examine the history of Brazilian popular music, we observe in the sixties translations of American rock which attempted to preserve the meaning of the words. This phase was succeeded by several tendencies, the direct importation of American rock without the mediation of translation, the creation of rock in English by Brazilians, which theoretically could be consumed in the American market, the development of fusion forms which nowadays competes with anachronistic American rock forms written by Brazilians in Portuguese, and only distinguishable from the American ones by the fact that they are in Portuguese and are anachronistic in terms of American Culture. The resulting dislocation gives rise to Brazilian punk which can be experienced as true to Brazilian reality without a sense of contradiction. More difficult is a composerlike Arrigo Barnabé, who is mediated by the culture and techniques of the New Viennese

School, an identity correlate of easy accessibility to the Brazilian intellectual for its Weinmar overtones. It is probably correct to say that the only real Weinmar intellectuals to be encountered in the world today were born as Latin Americans.

The Latin American graduate student sent by his government or state university for a Master's or Doctoral degree at an American university with prior language training in the United States is faced with a most uncomfortable double bind in relation to the acquisition of English, and American culture. He normally has a highly developed critical sense of the failings on his society, yet is fairly clear in his rejection of American solutions to these problems. He cannot fail to take his degree, for this would represent a waste of resources with its accompanying guilt as a symptom of privilege, as well as personal career failure. Guilt is also engendered merely by about the efficacy of an American degree, the status the degree implies, doubly potent for the culture's valuation of titles, and the glamour of the foreign. The student suspects quite rightly that he just might be a traitor, that perhaps he is selling out. The initial phase of language training is highly problematic, the student extremely sensitive to American ethnocentricity, jingoism in the form of Manifest Destiny or White Man's Burden, and the superficial glamour of technology, specifically in the American's uncritical acceptance of it. The American's typical blindness to the

interrelation of his affluence to Third World poverty is galling. What is usually analyzed as a problem in adaptation is nothing more than the bitterness of servants asked to imitate their masters in order to get on. The situation proposes to the student that he be Jane Eyre, or Becky Sharp, Uncle Tom or Figaro.

Imitation is itself necessary in order to acquire the language and to survive in the culture for the purposes of obtaining the degree. However, it is not always easy to do as the Romans do when in Rome. If, in acquiring the imperial language, the process resumes itself on the level of imitation as a way of avoiding identification--although imitation is part of the process of identification--the language itself is never mastered. The product of the bind is acute despondancy. Again this is usually written down as a failure in methodology. All the substitution drills and dialogue memorization cannot remedy what is fundamentally a rejection of the culture. Not to reject the culture is hazardous to the student's sense of self. In practice then, the Latin American graduate student takes refuge in his culture's concept of *class*, with its connotation of group identity, as a student, as a Latin-American, as an intellectual, a meaning of the term *class* non-existent for the American, for whom the term is defined in its economic or generational aspects. In fact the Latin-American concept of *class* abolishes social distinctions that might be present at home. Group solidarity is vastly preferable to alienation

or schizophrenia. The American instructor at the intensive English language institute usually puts down the resulting Pan-American manifestations of nationalism as "Birds of a Feather Flock Together" in order to explain the resistance, the lack of integration of the foreign student body in the American student body, and bitterness on both sides is palpable.

More than any other group, Latin American graduate students resent such tools as the TOEFL for placement, seeing in it its ultimate truth as a form of triage for the disaffected, the strange, the alien, the non-conformist, the helpless. It is no accident that European speakers of European languages do better on the exam than Third World speakers of the same language. Yet no other group strives to do so well on the exam. Less guilt is produced in studying English for the purposes of passing an exam than in the implied threat of ideological castration in the assumption of American language and culture. Curricula at intensive English language institutes have been geared to the exam and to "survival skills" in response to this psychological heat. Thus there is an attempt on both sides to see English language instruction as purely instrumental, and it is true that most Latin American graduate students on LASPAU or Fulbright programs do get their degrees and return to their countries, neither failures nor part of the brain drain. They manage to preserve a sense of exclusive identity apart from vicarious identification. They master

English to the extent necessary to obtain their degrees, no more, and rely on their tutors and advisors to correct diction and grammar in their term papers. Out of psychological necessity their accents remain abominable. Advisors are pleased to help out because enrollments of American graduate students are dropping. It is all very convenient. Many "problems in adaptation" work themselves out when the "class" is broken up and the students, having "passed" the TOEFL, are shipped off to different universities scattered across the country. Graduate programs are instrumental in content. The curricula based on grammar exercises and readings from *Time Magazine* and *Reader's Digest* encountered at home at bi-national centers or university based intensive English language institutes, the ideological parochialism, the tone of right wing anti-communism reproduced in romantic wonder or bewilderment but always with great self-satisfaction does not endear itself to those who understand that success in the United States ultimately depends on conformity.

The Iranian students who so vociferously demonstrated in favor of their government during the period in which the employees of the American embassy in Teheran were held hostage were giving clear indication of the identity conflicts involved in the acquisition of a foreign language when that foreign language comes to stand for all that the native culture is not. In this case the contradictions in identification were exacerbated by the rejectionist ideology of the government of

the Ayatollah Khomeini which was explicitly and honestly anti-American. When the Shah was overthrown there was an abrupt and violent stop to the transference of American culture in its economic and social relations to Iranian soil, and true reaction set in. Where would this leave the tens of thousands of Iranian students living in the United States? I use the word "living" because many of these students were not particularly interested in their academic programs, the younger generation of families forming in colonies sharing certain features with earlier immigrant colonies, the Student visa a pretext for remaining in the United States, the sooner the degree completed, the sooner the students would be forced to return to Iran. Iranian students were unusually represented in Community college enrollments, having obtained entrance under open admissions policies, policies which cynically imply academic opportunity to all, yet, in the last analysis, have the function of bolstering sagging enrollments. In this peculiar case, not acquiring English up to functional level for University classwork became a form of admission to American society, but in a fashion so peripheral that the question of identity could be treated as vicariously as possible in an attempt to wait the problem out.

Identity as an Iranian was reinforced through the phantasy of politico-in-exile as long as the Shah held the throne. The contradiction of this stance was evident: if the Shah represented the Americanization of Iranian society with its huge grafting of technology,

technocrats, and English teachers, the United States itself is the ultimate source of the graft. To be against the Shah and to live in the United States where the pressures of Americanization would undoubtedly be greater would leave no other outcome for the Iranian student but linguistic failure in order that the phantasy be maintained.⁴ This is not strange if we consider that English language training had become a necessity for economic advancement, and in Iran under the Shah this was not just a question of access to scientific literature, but the spoken language itself became obligatory. The Iranian student was divided against himself in much the same way as an American movie star millionaire of the thirties insisted on the purity of the working class while making every effort to remove himself from it, or like captains of industry of an earlier generation, described so well by D.H. Lawrence, who attempted to sustain Christian values of equality under an economic structure which would not allow for such.⁵ The Iranian students hedged their bets--although by 1975 I believe most knew that the Shah would fall--and then, when the shah was removed found themselves in a vacuum.

Under the circumstances of occupation--and there were tens of thousands of Americans in Iran for the tens of thousands of Iranians in the United States--it made good sense for the Ayatollah to attempt to return to the 14th century as a method of shoring up Iranian identity. Where would this leave the Iranian student who was in the wrong place at the wrong time? The

Ayatollah himself knew, as Hemmingway knew, that France is a much less problematic country for expatriates. The French do not demand assimilation the way the American does. What is more, assimilation is more difficult, perhaps impossible: France has never been a nation that pays lip service to the benefits of immigration. The Shah's policy to recreate a Persian mythos of grandeur prior to the invasion of Alexander the Great would only attract those Iranians already mediated by the West in its classical Greek form, a very small minority to say the least, and even more artificial than Mussolini's attempts to recreate the Roman empire. At the point when the Ayatollah *revealed* the contradiction, available to all but the Shah himself and the State Department, the Iranian student was left with the following choices: to return to Iran, to abandon the pretext of Iranian identity, or to see himself as a sort of Fifth Column. To return to Iran in immediate response to the revolution was chosen in isolated cases; for the most part such a choice would have exposed the hypocrisy of the original, untenable position. To attempt assimilation against a culture which could no longer admit denigration due to the Shah's fall--as he was considered the problem, not the status of the culture--was now impossible, and only hysterical demonstrations could overcome the pain of loss of identity, and the incapacity to take responsibility for having given it away. For those Iranians who remain in the United States, American identity is only available

to their children, and they themselves will be as marginalized as most immigrants to the United States have been.⁶

For the American high school and college student of the 60's and 70's, there was virtually no glamour in studying a foreign language, nor was there financial incentive. It was as if he understood that the envious world was attempting to imitate him. Why bother imitating the French or Germans? Subliminally, the collaboration of Vichy government with the Germans during World War II and the anglophobia of Charles de Gaulle damaged the popularity of French in the United States, which was only partially reversed by Sartre, Genet and Camus in the late 40's and 50's. German is still recovering from the association of Nazism with the great figures of German romantic literature and philosophy, an association propagated by the Nazis themselves. Languages like Hebrew or Hungarian were left for that small percentage of students who were ethnic nationalists. Of course there are vogues in language study, and like most vogues date the student if the vogue turns into a passion, not left behind like last year's culottes. The idealization of Chinese society by leftists, and Japanese by technocrats has led to a mini-boom as there been for Russian in the fifties. In the late 60's and early 70's, Che Guevara did wonders for Spanish enrollments, but wasn't this a Guevara who had been written earlier by Conrad, Kipling and Stevenson? No one went out of his way to learn Argentine dialect. The Chinese mini-boom was hampered by

the death of Lin Piao, instructors from Taiwan, a Fu-Manchu stereotype left over from the 30's that the Nationalists inadvertently reinforced, and an orthography that demands mandarin sensibilities. Chinese studies were promoted by the first visits of American tourists in the footsteps of Richard Nixon sold to the American public as Marco Polo by *Time Magazine*.

But on the whole foreign language enrollments declined. Who studied languages? Those who planned on becoming language teachers until the bottom of the market fell out on behalf of "curricular reform," the elimination of required language courses in the name of relevance, and student autonomy to make up his own program. Undergraduates had simply stopped taking language courses. The effect was a glut of Ph.D.'s in the area of foreign language and culture studies. Those that persisted were in some way the disaffected, the strange, in rebellion against some aspect of the provincialism of American culture. Those who become language teachers, albeit unemployed, at some point have made a decision, not always consciously, that a foreign culture was more relevant than one's own, French novels more interesting than American or English, Russian morphology more beautiful, Japanese more expressive, at least the persistent ones come to think so. Those who master a foreign language are passionately in love with the culture in such a way that the culture is idealized and correspondingly, in direct proportion to the idealization of the foreign

culture, the native culture is held in contempt.⁷ Although this process might represent a broadness of mind and a healthy critical attitude towards one's own culture, especially so among Americans, for the Third World this same alienation represents a form of conformism; that this process takes place on a mass scale indicates not a critical attitude, but rather a sense of inferiority and synthetic production of personality as compensation. Two identities oppose each other in ways well described by Frantz Fanon.

As for the American professor of a foreign language, one always notes certain eccentricities in the attempt to recreate himself within the image of the foreign culture, the use of a beret or other hints of national costume or habit, the smoking of imported cigarettes with their suggestive odor, and obsession with wine and cheese.⁸ On a more profound level, we become acolytes: Committed students of French become children of Pascal, clones of Camus, or at least a character from one of his novels. German students are young Werther, if they haven't quite understood the novel, and if not Herman Hesse himself, certainly Steppenwolf listening to Buxtehude or Bach. Students of Polish, usually descendants of Poles, may find the Pope too distant for identification as a national symbol--the Poles themselves don't seem to have any difficulty with this--but can always identify themselves with Lech Walesa. Solidarity furnishes not necessarily the motivation to learn Polish,

but certainly the glamour, a principal ingredient, as well as the transference of identity without contradictions coming to the fore, especially if one's father works in the local Chevy plant. The student of Spanish who starts out with Che Guevara but who ends up with Garcia Lorca or Quijote himself does not know that the romance of Che is not easily transformed into the spirit of the *Catedrático*, whose ethos holds sway over Spanish Departments, until it is too late. God forbid the reality of the culture does not turn out to be as sold. The American idealist who chooses to master Portuguese finds he must learn the peculiar forms of Brazilian double think, which is only accomplished through the most painful of introjections. He finds out that the Girl from Ipanema, as crooned by Frank Sinatra, does not see him on the beach because he can't afford to pay for her shopping spree in Miami.

NOTES:

- 1) One might ask why Japanese is not one bit as commercially successful as a language as English is. After all, the Japanese have as much money as the Americans. Yet it is a good deal more difficult to sell Japanese. They are still represented as figures of fun, or as grinds. Their traditional stereotype works against vicarious adoption of Japanese identity. The Japanese repression of sexuality usually releases itself in

guignol as was most clearly illustrated in the most successful of Japanese films in recent years, *The Realm of the Senses*, not the sort to capture the popular imagination although the content was explicitly sexual. On the other hand, western mystifications of Japanese society, such as *Shogun*, did more for enrollments in Japanese classes in American Universities than all the micro processors and video equipment exported from Japan last year. Ideologically, *Shogun* is really *Madame Butterfly*, but for the fact that Pinkerton stays, albeit as a virtual prisoner. It is only in this sense that the value of Japanese culture and language has moved up on the stock market of national identities in the last eighty years.

- 2) The Algebra of Need is the model William S. Burroughs uses to explain addiction to junk in *Naked Lunch*. "The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client." (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1978) pp. xxxix. The process of foreign language acquisition is similar.
- 3) When the student attempts to memorize huge lists of vocabulary items glossed in his native language, he is attempting to subordinate the imperial language to the native one. The effect is to impose total paralysis on

the process of acquisition. Pedagogically disastrous, the technique is psychologically productive. The student affects to take on the foreign or imperial language while frustrating or blocking any capacity to use it, and the opposition of the imperial culture is thus liquidated.

- 4) More than any other group Iranians were assiduous makers of vocabulary lists, insisting on translation in order to be sure of meaning. That which cannot be translated does not exist. That which can be translated can then be forgotten.
- 5) Lawrence, D.H., *Women in Love* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980) pp. 216-222.
- 6) This is much the same as the dynamic of the Schearl family in Henry Roth's autobiographical novel *Call it Sleep* (New York: Avon Books, 1976): The Father's violence caused by the humiliation that comes from abandoning cultural identity, and the psychological and economic incapacity to assume an American one, the solution of assimilation left to the native born, who must reject the paternal culture. The dynamic is not just represented in the novel's plot: Roth used Standard English to represent the use of Yiddish, which stands in bleak contrast to the characters' dialects.

- 7) How well this was portrayed in the recent film *Breaking Away*!
- 8) Wine and cheese parties may not be specific to language departments but to American universities in general. This may be a question of frequency.