

Conceptualizing the Role of English Literacy during Colonial and Post-Colonial Times: A Brief Survey

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Abstract

Languages play a fundamental role in disseminating social, political and cultural beliefs. Besides serving as a means of othering, language also provides a base for social, economic and political discourse. It may also be considered as a realm “of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language” (Ashcroft et al. 283). Language is too often associated with power and this implies that it “...refers to the control of knowledge and to the prestige a language acquires as a result of its use in certain important domains” (Kachru 2). The seminal work of many distinguished scholars has portrayed English at far extremes on a continuum using dead and novel metaphors, from a means to civilization to an aid that voices their concern. Therefore, this study presents a comparative analysis of the select writings of the colonial and post-colonial era and examines the roles associated with English literacy during these times.

Key words: Colonial, Post colonial, Conceptual metaphor, Mapping of English, Metaphoric expressions.

Introduction

The history of the development of the English language highlights the fact that it has evolved from a tribal language to a global one. In its native land, English struggled to gain recognition as a language for use in both the church and scholarship. Later as England began to establish colonies in various parts of the world, English also started to spread its influence.

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The academies or schools meant to provide English education in the colonized regions did it so rigorously to ensure that its significance was not diminished. Gradually it became the global power, more so by perpetuating the deepest veneration associated with those who learn this language as the definition of literacy keeps changing its ambit and keeps evolving.

It not only involves the acquisition of textual knowledge but also encompasses the identification of social and cultural influences, allowing for social mobility. Its prestige and supremacy increase day by day because over a period of time it has colonized the mind of people. Though English education creates social inequalities and divide, its significance has been deepening in non- native countries especially in developing ones. Scholars and critics like Ngugi and Nemade have propagated the notion of preserving their cultural heritage by producing scholarly works in their native languages, thus challenging the concept of internationalism. However, this perspective has been debated and luminaries like Tagore and Roy have necessitated its acquisition for the progress of the nation.

Languages play a fundamental role in disseminating social, political and cultural beliefs. In other words, a language influences one's thought process. In one of the articles in *The Hindu* by Jha, it is stated that certain phrases are standardized in our society without ever being challenged. He cites examples of phrases like 'falling on deaf ear', 'paralyzed economy', 'mute leadership to exhibit how negativity is reflected in a language by referring to disabled people. He further states that "these terms, many of them used by the people without giving a second thought on their possible implications, reduce the discourse of disability to a narrative giving an impression of the disabled being in an unwanted, undesirable or powerless state" (ibid). Language is too often associated with power and this implies that it "...refers to the control of knowledge and to the prestige a language acquires as a result of its use in certain important domains" (Kachru 2).

One of the major agents of a language that helps to conceive a thought is a metaphor. Metaphors play a significant role in conceptualizing a belief (Lakoff and Johnson 3-6). The present work intends to analyse the representation of multifarious roles of English language as depicted in the minutes of Macaulay, a letter by Roy to Lord Amherst, essays *The Language of African Literature* by Ngugi and *English and the African Writer* by Achebe. The purpose is to carry a comparative study of the select writings of the colonial and post-colonial era and look for the roles associated with English in these times. As stated by Ashcroft et al.:

One of the most subtle demonstrations of the power of language is the means by which it provides, through the function of naming, a technique for knowing a colonized place or people...To name reality is therefore to exert power over it, simply because the dominant language becomes the way in which it is known...There are several responses to this dominance of the imperial language, but two present themselves immediately in the decolonizing process-rejection or subversion. (283)

Thus, this work also aims to investigate the status of English as asserted by the colonizer and that affirmed by the colonized, and study the continuum of functions that range from instigating rationality, voicing the concerns of the Others to meeting the needs of the world of capitalism in the colonial and post-colonial eras. This study is carried out by mapping expressions of metaphors as derived and identified after reading the selected texts.

Literature Review

With the work Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors cannot be just seen as a literary device, but as a vehicle of thought. They emphasize the fact that metaphors form conceptual structures in human minds. Study of metaphors can be traced back to Aristotle who used this term to explain meaning transfer. However, this field of study is not confined to linguistics only. Its study has become quite interdisciplinary nowadays because it holds the view that people conceive the principles of the world through concepts with which they are more familiar, and this is then reflected in metaphoric linguistic structures. Metaphors are fundamentally formulated to express complexities associated with a concept. Mapping it helps to understand the mechanism of conceptual metaphors. According to Kovesces, it is a conceptual correspondence between constituent elements of the source and the target domain (4).

There is abundant evidence of research that has established the fact that metaphors or the metaphorical linguistic expressions used in varied discourse like educational, medicinal, political, media, social etc. (Flowerdew; Krennmayr; Musoff; Semino; Cameroon). The investigation of these discourses has demonstrated that metaphors have ideological functions. The seminal work of Cameron explored the patterns of metaphors that are used in reconciliation talk. Diaz-Peralta in her article on *Metaphor and Ideology: Conceptual Structure and Conceptual Content in Spanish Political Discourse* has analysed opinion articles to conclude that how the authors of those articles make use of metaphors “to express moral judgements on the actions and the decisions of the conservative centre-right people, which governs Spain with an overall majority”

(128), thereby indicating that metaphors shape thought process of people. Thus, Wolf and Polzenhagen has rightly stated that “...texts, are, strictly speaking, never unideological; representation is always from a particular point of view” (249).

Keeping in view the ample number of such works, this study has attempted to analyse the status of the English language through lexical representation in terms of metaphoricity from the lens of those situated in colonial periphery. It targets to establish a comparison between the natures of linguistic expressions used in the select works and explore the underlying semantic shift through these expressions in between the two periods- colonialism and post colonialism. This work also highlights how the lexical choices used in the select essays assert a nexus between metaphor and ideology, which has necessitated the literacy and use of English (especially by the colonized nations)

Research Questions

This paper deliberates on research questions like:

- a) What is the practice of representing the status of English language in select writings?
- b) Is there any significant difference in conceptualising beliefs about it in colonial and post-colonial times in some of the nations?
- c) Do the metaphorical expressions in these writings reflect upon the changing function of English in due course of time?
- d) If there is any such shift, what and how are these devised in those writings?

Thus, this paper uses Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to ascertain perspectives on the English language in the seminal works of colonial and post-colonial scholars.

Methodology

In order to exhibit the conceptualization of the status of English language in colonial and post-colonial periods, linguistic evidence is obtained in the form of metaphoric mappings out of which metaphors are created which serve as representations for these mappings. A comparative study of these mappings is done to ascertain the mappings which have remained, disappeared and created in the due course of time. The data is obtained from various scholarly articles on the use/abuse of English language. They are selected for the present study because these academic works hardly use figurative device like metaphors to beautify their work, rather the metaphoric

expressions in these works may be taken as normative in nature. Thus, the data of this work shows the roles associated with English in the periods undertaken here.

Data Collection

The selected essays were given a close reading. These were read to look for the lexical choice employed in the selected work. After noting down the lexical choices made in each essay (the number of expressions found is indicated within square brackets), representation of following metaphors of English language were found to be evident:

- English is a universal currency.
- English is a ticket to higher realms.
- English is a repository of divine knowledge.
- English is an apostle of civilization.
- Oriental languages are diseased.
- English is a home for all.
- English is a weapon

Findings and Discussion

Macaulay's minutes on Indian Education

Nandy's book the *Intimate Enemy* develops an argumentative distinction between two important genres of colonialism. The first type of literature is explicit in nature focusing entirely on conquest of territories while the other is deceptive and more implicit in nature aiming at the colonization of mind. What comes as a surprise is the fact that the second class of literature was founded by liberals, rationalists and modernists who reasoned out that colonization was a "messianic harbinger of civilization to the uncivilized world" (Gandhi 15). Macaulay's minutes on education serves as one of the finest examples of this type of colonial literature. In the minutes on Indian Education by Macaulay, he demeans everything Indian, thus celebrating the elitism of English and promoting English Education in India. Linguistic expressions used to map the above-mentioned metaphors are as follows

English is a ticket to higher realms

Promotion, valuable, means, superiority, vehicle, rising, diffuse, greatest, authorize, vested rights, prospect, high dignity, progressive, respect, abolish, govern, strength, responsibility. [18]

English is a universal currency

Estimate, value, utility, universal, all, paltry, profitable, compensate, redress, compensation, saved the cost, bounties, premium, loss, purchasers, pays, expense, profit, bribe [19]

English is an apostle of civilization

Introduction, endanger, proprietor, patronize, ignorant, barbarous, civilized community, lying legend, create, barren [11]

English is a repository of divine knowledge

Gratis, tolerant, purify, honourable appellation, learned native, information, mysteries, ritual, instructed, employed, proficiency, educate, wisest nations, noblest, teach systems, sound philosophy, true history, reason, morality, confession [20]

Oriental languages are diseased

Healthy, preserve the health, blemish, starve, taste purified, noxious, digest the law, inflicted, nursed, injury, dead, fragility [12]

English is a home for all

Fashion, adorn, lavish, comfort, building, furnishes, confine, well furnished, pleasant, decent living, abandon, nest [13]

English is a weapon [00]

No linguistic expression was found to map this metaphor. Thus, Macaulay's minutes of 1835 serves as an example of west's colonization of pedagogy and scholarship where the entire oriental knowledge and languages that carry them have been disqualified from the body of knowledge proper.

Ngugi's The Language of African Literature

Ngugi portrays the African realities as a product of two contending forces: One being an imperialist tradition and the other one a resistance tradition. Both of these traditions that are "mutually opposed forces" exist in colonial as well as post-colonial period. A post-colonial theorist, Ngugi, here assess the role of language in creating colonial ideology. The purpose of language in colony is to reshape the way the colonized understand themselves and their relationship to their nation. The central idea is that the colonizer by imposing their language controls and reshapes the subjectivity and mind of the colonized. Thus, the metaphor English is a weapon is frequently used in this paper. The above metaphor is mapped through words like: biggest weapon, wielded, unleashed, bomb, annihilate, defiance, struggle, armed with Bible, soul

prisoner, triumph, victory, confront, threat, save, rescue, kill, incurably, fallen victims, clashes, conflict, resistance, forces, enforced, police boots, defence, blow, fighting, patriotic, reactionary, prey [30]

However, this metaphor is used to depict how for the colonizer English is a weapon to hegemonize the colonized. Ngugi's oeuvre presents a challenge to the universal validity of western civilization, its values and knowledge. Much in the vein of Foucault, he equates western epistemology and pedagogy with the "economic domination and political hegemony of colonialism" (Foucault 54). The essay tries to dispel and dismantle the very notion of 'humanism' and western rationality which according to him is both racist and imperialist in nature. Ngugi's reassertion for African languages and literature is in fact a refutation of the claims made in Macaulay's infamous minutes that considered a single shelf of 'good' European library more worthy than the entire "oriental literary production". Ngugi unmask the colonial ideology and shows to the readers how it works in a subtle manner by creating false notions. The west propagates its ideology by creating and asserting certain notions which Ngugi exposes by using the following metaphor: "Oriental language is diseased - cure, Death wish, decadent, injecting, heal, solution, despair, despondency" (07).

The metaphor Oriental language is diseased is assimilated in African culture by the West. Ngugi asserts that "...the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb" (3) and this leads to "despair, despondency and collective death-wish" (3) amongst the oppressed. Hence, for them imperialism serves as a remedy for the diseased. Ngugi much like Spivak describes in detail the seductive nature of colonial campaign. This notion is depicted through the following metaphors:

English is an apostle of civilization is mapped through words like renaissance, life, barbarism, slow footed intelligence, downright stupidity, flag-waving, wasteland [07]

English is a repository of divine knowledge- desecration, fascinates the soul, intelligence, magic formula, anointed, servile worship, purity, a gowned clergy, journalistic laureates [09]

English is a ticket to higher realms- prize, prestige, applause, honoured, elevation, rewarded [06]

English is a universal currency- credit card, international [02]

English is a home for all- [00]

It is mentioned in this paper that some of the writers of the same continent kept asserting that "...renaissance of African cultures lay in the languages of Europe" (Ngugi 5).

Chinua Achebe's English and the African writer

Some of the scholars writing in colonial and post-colonial times like Roy and Achebe take and accept English as an unsolicited gift with gratitude. The essays authored by them reveal the ambivalent, and love-hate relationship between colonizer and the colonized. The need of the west for the east is transparent and clear but it is difficult to analyse and understand the inverse desire of the colonized. The colonizer is hated and is yet venerated passionately by the same colonized, something eloquently phrased by Nandy as the, 'intimate enmity' of the colonial condition. Achebe's paper English and the African Writer gives insight into his choice to use English as medium of expression in both his critical and literary expressions. The select metaphors are mapped as:

English is a universal currency- profitable, price, value, exchange, useful, enterprise, due, by-products, give, nationwide, package deal, compounded, bought, sold, trade, worldwide, pay, international exchange, share, flourish [20]

To gain acceptance worldwide, the linguistic choice employed by Achebe maps the metaphor English is a universal currency frequently.

Oriental language is diseased- sterility, handicaps, painfully, hunch [04]

English is a weapon –tool [01]

*English is a repository of divine knowledge-*quest, ineligible, congregation of educated [03]

*English is a ticket to higher realms-*prospect, leads nowhere, doomed, lack of foresight [04]

*English is an apostle of civilization-*create, introduce [02]

English is a weapon- capture, tension, trial [03]

English is a home for all [00]

Roy's A Letter to Lord Amherst on English Education

The representation of metaphoric expressions selected for this work that is stated below depicts the mapping of the metaphors deployed in Roy's address to Lord Amherst regarding the status of English education and funds devoted by the Government in England for the education of Indian masses.

English is a universal currency- beneficial, measures, benefit, utility, owe [05]

Oriental language is diseased- [00]

English is a weapon – [00]

English is a repository of divine knowledge- blessing, enlightened, stream of intelligence, gentlemen of talents, instruct, dawn of knowledge, speculative men, diligent, imaginary learning, ignorance, darkness, talents, learning, solemn duty, improvement, real knowledge, divine essence [17]

English is a ticket to higher realms- progress [01]

English is an apostle of civilization- rising generation [01]

English is a home for all -furnished [01]

As Roy was an educational and a social reformer, he mapped the importance of English much through the metaphor *English is a repository of divine knowledge*.

Conclusion

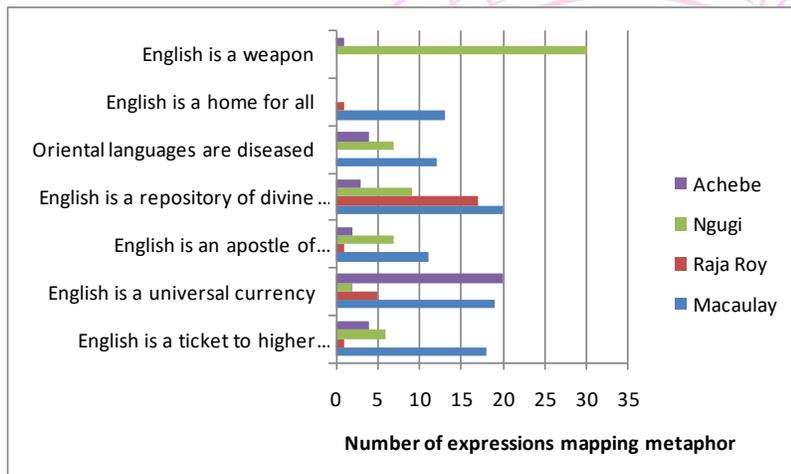


Fig 1: Number of expressions mapping metaphor in select essays

Fig.1 depicts that in colonial times, the metaphor *English is a repository of divine knowledge* was considered to be conceptualized in the select writings, while in the post-colonial times, metaphors *English is a universal currency* and *English is a weapon* were structured in those writings. The metaphor *English is a repository of divine knowledge* exhibited a declining trend which means English is no more conceived as the only language that carries knowledge. The metaphor *English is a home for all* lost its meaning in the post-colonial times while English is a weapon was a new avenue that built perception through the writings in post-colonial times. Ngugi’s essay powerfully advocates for the linguistic decolonization. Presenting an anti-imperialistic view on the language debate he concludes that the use of colonizer’s language by

the colonized "... is like separating mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies" (28). This assertion may be seen as a response to Macaulay's hope to create a class of colonised who are Indian by blood but has English taste, and this perception is in stark contrast to the views presented by Ngugi who metaphorically puts it forward through a series of linguistic expressions. Spivak in her essay *The Burden of English* too subverts the notion of 'burden' as created by the colonial West. She puts the idea of Kipling's White man's burden upside down where she expands the metaphor of burden as one being carried by the colonized which she defines as 'a singular load to carry' (134). Highlighting the ambiguities of national independence, writers like Ngugi and Spivak insist that "the colonial aftermath does not yield the end of colonialism." (Gandhi 7) which very rightly resonates with what Said says, "[Colonisation is a] fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results" (207). Thus, metaphoric expressions identified in Ngugi's influential work present English as a burden on the colonized, both in the colonial and post-colonial period. The perception that the language of the colonized is childlike or childish is based on the logic of colonial 'civilizing mission' which has often been shown as a project concerned with bringing "the colonized to maturity" (Cesaire). Ngugi states in the introductory chapter of *Decolonizing the Mind* that the "African realities have for too long been seen in terms of tribe" (1) and this notion is spread by western media to avert people from the fact that imperialism still inflicts problems in Africa. Being governed by this perception, Achebe employs the binaries of national/ethnic literatures, central/tributaries while categorising literatures written in western/non-western languages.

Unlike Spivak and Ngugi, who much like Foucault, consider the relation between the center (west) and the margin (non-western countries) to be a parasitic one, Achebe and Roy take the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as symbiotic in nature. The post-colonial mapping of the status of English has guided linguists and critics to assert that if English is used as a weapon by the colonizer, it has the potential to challenge the power play and be a voice of resistance against the canon too. Bhatt in his article on *Expert Discourses, Local Practices, and Hybridity: The Case of Indian Englishes* says that "The more linguistic capital the postcolonial English speakers possess by virtue of creating their own intellectual and cultural property, the more they are able to exploit the system of differences to their advantage, thus threatening the

structure of the symbolic power relations (29). He pointed out the fact that in the post-colonial world, it is more about appropriating English with one's values and interest. Further, citing example of Vivekanand, who used English to perpetuate the truth about Vedanta to the world, Bhatt makes a significant point that English is "a tool of verbal expression of native-indigenous histories, ideologies, cultures, and current practices." (34) Canagarajah in his scholarly article says that the process of colonization has dominated the local knowledge without acknowledging its richness in various resources which very well resonates in Ngugi's work. This brings forth their belief that English has been used as a weapon against the colonized. However, the Sri Lankan linguist also makes a valid point here that English itself can be used by locals to reclaim what it has lost in the name of colonization. The linguist, like the post-colonial writer Achebe, supports the proliferation of English literacy by stating that "In fact, the residue left after the looting by the global is increasingly hard to recover. Rather than proceeding further into local communities to recover local knowledge, paradoxically, we have to sometimes burrow deeper into the global to extricate recycled bits of the local" (10), thereby deepening the relevance of English for the betterment of self.

Further the post-colonial view of English as universal currency finds its implication both at the local and global level. Luk, through a case study of EIL (English as international language) classroom in Hongkong asserts that when English is taught in a way that the classroom interaction facilitates projection and representation of the self, it helps the learners "...to participate in intercultural and interethnic communications which are a distinct part of global interactions" (265). Hence, the post-colonial writings have perpetuated that the literacy in English provides avenues to negotiate local perspectives in response to the linguistic and ideological challenges, thereby debunking the metaphors *English is a ticket to higher realms*, *English is a repository of divine knowledge*, *English is an apostle of civilization*, *Oriental languages are diseased*, *English is a home for all*.

Thus, this diachronic study has traced the trajectory of English language through colonial to post-colonial times and the findings suggested that the select essays have depicted English at far extremes on a continuum using dead and novel metaphors, from a means to civilization to an aid that voices their concern. This finding contests the claims made by various critics to do away

with English language and has called for growing need for English literacy in order to assert identity of oneself and propagate their social, political and cultural beliefs.

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