

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Vera Lúcia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva

— UFMG —

Perhaps the commonest charge made against English teachers is that, by teaching an "imperialistic language", they lead students to worship the United States and to a lesser extent, England.

Some Brazilian teachers start their first class for beginners by asking them to make a list of words and expressions in English. Since nowadays it is almost impossible to find a single person in Brazil who does not know any English, the class is always a success. At the end of the class the teacher can easily prove to his students that they are actually "false beginners", that they know lots of English words and expressions and that they do use them in their daily communication. Nevertheless, the students are not aware of the great amount of foreign words they read, listen to or utter every day. The teacher can make their list grow and proudly start his own show. There is no better process than maieutic to get the wanted results. The students are expected to answer a lot of questions such as:

What's the name of your toothpaste?

Which shampoo do you prefer?

Do you wear T-shirts and Jeans?

What kind of shoes do you wear?, etc

The students are then induced, through that logical sequence of questions, to realize that the English language is

present in their lives from the time they are awoken by a Westclox\* alarm-clock made in Brazil till the moment he goes to bed and turns off his General Electric lamp

When the students' FM/AM Electronic Digital Clock Radio sounds early in the morning they can press the snooze and sleep some minutes longer. Then they get up and brush their teeth with Colgate, Close up, Kolynos or Phillips. Next, it is time to put on their clothes. They can wear hang-ten socks, All Star tennis shoes, Sail Sider, Snoopy footwear, USTOP Colorado or Samello Docksidies. They slip into indigo blue jeans and put on one of their T-shirts with unknown English sentences printed on.

After dressing themselves with Master, Stormy, OP (Ocean Pacific)\*\*, Company, Golden Cup, Hollywood Sportline, Pat's (the must of jeans), Jinglers, Seiki Fashion, Topper Summer Line, Topper Indigo Blue, Santista Cotton Crill, New Style, Strike, Raylane, Fitness, Sam Way, Top plus, Triumph International, Folly Dolly, Maxi Pull, Five Stars or Sanny they head for the kitchen which has been comfortably installed by Kitchens and equipped with the wonderful tweeny device which makes garbage disappear.

It is time for breakfast. They press the top of the

---

\* All the underlined words in this text are commonly employed in Portuguese.

\*\* Ocean Pacific is the name of a shop in Belo Horizonte. It is hard to understand why Ocean Pacific instead of Pacific Ocean.

Aladdin Pump-A-Drink and drink their coffee with waffles or cream-craker biscuits or even chips.

The next step is to take the Sansonite bag or one from the High Bulk Filament Collection made of nylon and verify if all their objects, including Bic pens, Paper Mate or Parker Vector are packed in.

Before leaving the house, they close the Duradoor doors of the closet, the living and the hall. They go to school by car which can be a Chevy, Caravan, Dodge Dart, Escort or Hatch. In their school there is a cafeteria where they can drink Coca-Cola and eat a sandwich: hot-dog, cheese-burger, egg-burger, hamburger, etc.

On weekends they usually go to a Steak House or to a Self-Service restaurant. When going shopping their favorite spots are the Shopping Centers where foreign products, considered the best by the great majority of the population, can easily be found.

The quality of a party is usually measured by means of the foreign whisky available. National whisky is despised and we do not know a single brand with a Brazilian name. The great dilemma is always to detect whether that Passport (Johnnie Walker, Long John, etc) was bottled in Brazil or not.

This story can be endlessly enlarged. When the class finishes, students and teacher may go home equally rewarded. The teacher feels he was able to motivate his students to learn English by pointing out the importance of the language. He awoke in his students the desire to study English in order to:

1. discover the meaning of the words they have been unconsciously using;
2. have the opportunity to increase their vocabulary;
3. form whole sentences, and finally

4. communicate through such "glorious, attractive and important language".

As the students realize that they know some English, they feel it will not be difficult to learn it completely.

The readers of this paper may probably say that this story is not new. They have already listened to it before and some may also add that they have been employing such a device for a long time.

Despite the general acknowledgement of the persuasive effect on the students, some doubts remain as to whether it functions as a motivating device or as an alienating mechanism. Some questions can be raised for us to think:

- What goals can we reach with such activities?
- What consequences may such a class bring?
- What ideology might the teacher be unconsciously revealing?
- Do the students know WHY so many English words are spoken all over the country?

It would be worth discussing with our students the reasons for such an invasion of English into Portuguese and consequently the cultural imperialism in our country.

According to Paulo Freire, the oppressed identify themselves with the oppressor feeling thus an irresistible attraction towards the dominator. Feeling inferior in relation to the oppressor, the oppressed start despising their own native language and customs and eagerly want to adopt the foreign language.

"A basic condition for the success of cultural invasion is the conviction of the invaded of their intrinsic inferiority. As there is nothing that does not contain its contrary, to the

there exists for him an imaginary reality and not his own objective reality. He lives through the vision of another country. Russia or the U.S. lives, but not Chile, Peru, Guatemala or Argentina."<sup>2</sup>

Jean Morrisset says that all the countries, including his, which is Canada, undergo a strong pressure from the cultural production made in the U.S.A., from videogames to Evangelic Churches, not to say the sex industry like Playboy magazine, for instance. He points out that the only shield these countries could use to defend themselves is the shield of their own identity and the strength of their own creativity.<sup>3</sup>

As Morrisset's article stresses, everybody in Brazil wants to learn English and I share his worry by saying that it is also important to provide opportunities for other languages. Morrisset asks why such an important country like Brazil considers the English language as its only linguistic alternative. I myself am not a xenophobe. I am not against the study of any foreign language. My concern has to do with the fact that our educational system disregards the other languages and promotes almost exclusively the study of English. Other languages would enlarge our cultural background, bring new sources of information and provide different cosmovisions as well.

Morrisset feels astonished to see that it is almost impossible to find a single shirt or blouse, or even a button in Brazil without their having something written in English.

As far as I could observe, the majority of people who wear clothes with English sentences printed on them cannot speak English. It seems that there is a strong desire to speak the language and thus identify themselves with the American people. As they cannot speak English they wear it. There is an anthropophagic relationship between Brazilians and the English

language. Our language, our culture, our economy are being devoured by the dominating English language which metonymically represents the United States. On the other hand the Brazilian people are destroying the English language when our schools graduate lots of "English Teachers" every year who are unable to utter a single word in English but who are ready to accept jobs as English teachers.

Going back to the point of identification with the dominator, I dare say that there are some persons who strongly desire to see our country invaded by our "American brothers". Such persons think that it would be the solution for our political and economical problems. The United States has been seen as the rescuing hero since World War II and also as the "Paradise Lost" where a host of Brazilian workers would like to live.

This tendency to identify oneself with the dominator is highly encouraged by mass media and a critical study of these means of communication would attain one of our aims as educator which is TO MAKE PEOPLE RECOGNIZE THEMSELVES AND BEHAVE FREELY.

"When a human being tries to imitate another, he is no longer himself. Likewise the servile imitation of other cultures produces an alienated society or object-society."<sup>4</sup>

Another point which should deserve our attention is the fact that English is a dominating language learned and spoken by a dominating class in Brazil. If a research is made it will probably be found that the people who speak English in Brazil belong to the upper social classes. The poor have no access to the learning of any foreign language. The higher classes hold the access to every "knowledge" and English helps them to do so.

A foreign language is also used to ridicule those belonging to inferior classes. One of my students once reported to me an amazing fact. She works for a catering firm as a waitress. All the waitresses who work with her are university students. During one of the parties she was working at, two Brazilian girls talked to her in English in order to make fun of her. Although she had understood everything, her inferior status prevented her from answering anything, which made the two girls burst into laughter.

For the dominant classes, the fact of speaking English seems to reaffirm their higher position in society. They are highly identified with the dominator as they explore the poor by getting money through the labor of underpaid workers; they are the landowners; they are the ones who control science and religion; they consider themselves Very Important People.

Brazilian newspapers and magazines are full of English words and expressions. Many of them have already been incorporated into our lexicon. But are all of them really necessary? Do they not have correspondent words in Portuguese?

English is commonly found in comic strips and cartoons in newspapers. Taking for granted that newspapers are read by all the social classes I would like to ask if those bilingual pieces of work are understood by their readers and whether they are working as unconscious instruments of cultural domination or not.

I would like to produce some examples just to illustrate my concern.

EXAMPLE 1

Now sem rumo

LOR



in Estado de Minas, August 8, 1985.

Lor's comic strip, "Now sem Rumo" (Wandering ship) presents a pun with the word NOW which is a phonological homonym for NAU (a kind of sailing vessel) in Portuguese. Lor criticizes the present political moment in Brazil (NOW) through the ship metaphor which is generally employed by humorists and political columnists in Brazil.

"The experience of time is a natural kind of experience that is understood almost entirely in metaphorical terms (via the spatialization of TIME and the TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT...)"<sup>5</sup>

Since the last years of Figueiredo's government, Brazilian political problems have been visualized as a ship sailing on troubled waters. It is also hoped by the Brazilian population that this situation, like a trip, will be transitory. The future, we believe, will be different. "NOW" is just a part of the Brazilian travel towards the safe harbor of the future, which will be the solution to all political and economical problems.

Working on the level of the two languages, we can see the fusing of the two words "NOW" and "NAU" into mingling



metaphors.

NOW is TIME. TIME is a moving object. This moving object is a ship (NAU or NAVE\* which is the synonym that appears in the first speech of the comic strip).

NOW is the present political moment, it is a ship sailing on troubled waters. Time is passing, the ship is moving, but it is difficult to cope with all the problems, the darkness inside the ship (a escuridão dentro da nave).

The ship is dark because NOW it is night and night stands for the unknown. The Brazilian government are in darkness, they are looking for solutions in the same way as the ship full of darkness is sailing across troubled waters.

EXAMPLE 2



in Folha de São Paulo, July 16, 1985.

Çiça is perhaps the only woman humorist who deals with political subjects. She is always criticizing our political and economical situation.

\* Just to illustrate, it would be interesting to note that that kind of sailing vessel (NAU) was the means of transportation used to carry Brazilian Gold to Portugal. Though this may sound rather far-fetched, I dare say that NAU has always meant problems for Brazil, since its discovery in 1500!!!

In this comic strip, specifically, she talks about the amount of money Brazil owes to foreign banks, especially American ones. There is a hidden character who speaks a mixture of Portuguese and English. The expression Oh Yeah?, in the second picture shows us that the character is American. The statement "Se acordo good pra vocês, pra nós péssimo business" (If the agreement is good for you, it is very bad business for us) is a clear reference to the unforgiven statement by Juracy Magalhães \*: "O que é bom para os Estados Unidos é bom para o Brazil" (What is good for the United States is good for Brazil).

In fact, Ciça tries to show the opposite. What is good for Brazil is generally bad for the United States.\*\*

It is also interesting to observe how Ciça tries to implode the imperialistic language by fitting its vocabulary into Portuguese structure. The readers may understand this comic strip because the meaning of the English words can be inferred from the context.

---

\* Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs during the government of General Castelo Branco.

\*\* A good up-to-date example could be the Brazilian exportation of shoes which has been facing restrictions from the American government. Brazilian newspapers of November 17, 1985 talk about a law recently voted by American senators limiting the importation of shoes. As a great amount of shoes produced in Brazil are exported to the United States, that law will directly affect the Brazilian economy. As everybody knows exportation is the solution to pay our debts.



increased by the interrogation mark in the last picture. Urbano's empty balloon indicates he cannot answer the tourist because they do not speak the same language. Urbano's last speech, however, may induce the reader to think that the tourist was actually speaking German.

I dare say that only persons with some knowledge of English would understand the story. Perhaps, the only goal achieved by Baretta was one which I am sure he had not aimed at: to be laughed at because of his stupid mistakes.

It is worth noticing that while Ciça's misuse of the language is a conscious process, Baretta's is not. While she uses a mixture of Portuguese and English, he tries to use perfect English although unsuccessfully.

EXAMPLE 4

MILYÖB

---

O Ministro Aluizio Poivre diz que aceita sempre com o maior bom humor as críticas à sua — tão peculiar! — filosofia cultural porque é, todos sabem, um homem extraordinariamente



in Jornal do Brasil, October 20, 1985.

Millôr Fernandes is always making fun of our Minister of Culture, Aluizio Pimenta. He says the minister is broadminded, making a pun with the Portuguese word BROA (a kind of maize cake) and BROAdminded. The Minister has been severely criticized by Millôr, but it seems he went too far with his criticism.

According to Aluizio Pimenta the word BROA is just a metaphor for Brazilian regional food. He wants the Brazilian people to value our native food, instead of adopting hot-dogs, Coca-Cola, etc. Some people disagree with the idea that food is also culture and attack the Minister.

But it is really odd to see Millôr writing in English, in a Brazilian newspaper, to talk about Brazilian culture. Millôr is a very paradoxical scholar\*. At the same time he criticizes the imperialism he stuffs his works with English words. He has produced lots of cartoons and the English language is present in many of them. Does it not sound like identification with the dominator? As an artist who intends to be popular, is he not being hermetic? Is he not hiding from his public the content of his humor? Is he not limiting the access to his work and also ridiculing those readers who do not understand English?

Our discussion was limited to examples taken from newspapers and magazines but cultural imperialism can be observed in other areas.

A - Almost all the songs broadcast every day by our radios are American or British. Besides the foreign songs we can find Brazilian ones presenting a mixture of English and Portuguese.

Examples: 1. "Eu sou free, sempre free  
eu sou free demais"<sup>6</sup>

---

\* Millôr Fernandes is a humorist, a playwright, and a famous translator.

extent that the invaded recognize themselves as "inferior" they will necessarily recognize the superiority of the invaders and take on their values. The more advanced the invasion, with the alienation of the being and the culture of the invaded, the more the latter will want to look like the invaders: walk, dress, and talk like them."<sup>1</sup>

What is the most effective means of preventing this kind of class from being, however unintentionally, instrumental in increasing the amount of alienation in Brazilian students? Or, to put the question more constructively, how can the teacher carry out his traditional mission of informing and educating in such a way that the English class will tend to reduce alienation rather than increase it? The question is not simple in itself but the teachers should try to lead their students to "reading" reality critically. The first English class can be the very first opportunity for the students to think and discover that they have been manipulated as puppets by foreign policies. They can realize that mass media is spreading the English language not as an instrument for them to be in contact with "knowledge" but as a means of political domination.

In such a discussion, the students may discover that our industry is actually not ours and that whenever a toothpaste is bought, royalty is paid to foreign companies. They may also discover that some products, mainly clothes, are really Brazilian although labelled by foreign names in order to impose themselves on the market. As everybody knows, the Brazilian people reject their own products and overestimate every imported product. Such behavior is easily understood if one goes back to Paulo Freire's thoughts.

"The alienated being does not look at reality using his own criteria, but through the eyes of others. For this reason

"Sou free" is a phonological homonym for "sofri" (I suffered).

2. "eu quero passar um weekend com você"<sup>7</sup>

Some Brazilian artists change their names adopting American names in order to achieve success. Some of them not only sing but compose songs in English, selling lots of records.

B - Some years ago there was an ad on TV totally spoken in English.

"The Jeans story"

(Introducing the Johnny-Mary family)

Many years ago, in the old past, all the people used cowboy jeans. Now we present the Johnny-Mary collection. From Buffalo to Travolta. Johnny-Mary Jeans. Yesterday - Today - Every day."

"Johnny-Mary" is a shop in Belo Horizonte.

C - Whoever has never heard, during informal chats, expressions such as "Good-bye!", "Shut up", "Ok", "Let's go", "Estou sêm "money" (I have no money), "I love you", etc?

By the way, some days ago I could watch on TV some people discussing the different effects of saying "Eu te amo" and "I love you". They had gotten to the conclusion that it is much more romantic and easier to say "I love you" than "Eu te amo".

D - Whole dialogues in English can be heard in the Soap-Operas and this has aroused in a manicure I know the deepest desire to study English. She has told me she wants to learn English in order to understand everything around her, but she

pities herself by saying she has no money.

Our fragmented reality is so interlaced with American culture that I fear it will be impossible to live well adapted in this country within a few years without knowing English. Language has always been an instrument of domination and our people are gradually losing their own identity and assimilating the American model.

As Paulo Freire says "the alienated, insecure, frustrated man is more form than content; he sees things more on the surface than on the inside"<sup>8</sup>.

As a conclusion I urge all teachers to help their students to engage themselves in reality, abandoning any naïve conscience of the world. It is necessary to guide students into a critical "reading" of the world so that they can have a real engagement in reality, which has been continuously manaced by cultural alienation.



NOTES

<sup>1</sup> FREIRE, Paulo. Pedagogia do Oprimido. Rio de Janeiro, Editora Paz e Terra, 1975, p. 179: - translation into English by Thomas LaBorie Burns: "Uma condição básica ao êxito da invasão cultural é o convencimento por parte dos invadidos de sua inferioridade intrínseca. Como não há nada que não tenha seu contrário, na medida em que os invadidos vão reconhecendo-se "inferiores", necessariamente irão reconhecendo a superioridade dos invasores. Os valores destes passam a ser a pauta dos invadidos. Quanto mais se acentua a invasão, alienando o ser da cultura e o ser dos invadidos, mais estes quererão parecer com aqueles: andar como aqueles, vestir à sua maneira, falar a seu modo."

<sup>2</sup> Id. *ibid.* p. 35. "O ser alienado não olha para a realidade com critério pessoal, mas com olhos alheios, por isso vive uma realidade imaginária e não a sua própria realidade objetiva. Vive através do outro país. Vive-se Rússia ou E.U., mas não se vive Chile, Peru, Guatemala ou Argentina."

<sup>3</sup> MORRISSET, Jean. Yes, we speak English, Jornal do Brasil, September 22, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> FREIRE, Paulo, *opus cit.* "Quando o ser humano pretende imitar a outrem, já não é ele mesmo. Assim também uma sociedade servil de outras culturas produz uma sociedade alienada ou sociedade-objeto."

<sup>5</sup> LAKOFF, George and Mark Johnson, The metaphors we live by. Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> TRAVASSOS, Patrícia, and Ruban. Eu sou free.

<sup>7</sup> MESQUITA, Evandro. Weekend.

<sup>8</sup> FREIRE, Paulo. Educação e Mudança, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Paz e Terra, 1981, p. 25 - translation into English by Thomas LaBorie Burns: "O homem alienado, inseguro e frustrado, fica mais na forma que no conteúdo, vê as coisas mais na superfície que em seu interior."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FREIRE, Paulo. Pedagogia do Oprimido. Rio de Janeiro, Editora Paz e Terra, 1975.

MORRISSET, Jean. Yes, we speak English, *Jornal do Brasil*, September 22, 1985.

LAKOFF, George and Mark Johnson, The metaphors we live by, Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 1980.

FREIRE, Paulo. Educação e Mudança, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Paz e Terra, 1981.