

James T. Hong

# The Suspicious Archive, Part II: Every Word Is a Prejudice

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## A Language that Was Spoken on the Moon


If, according to Martin Heidegger and his former student Hans-Georg Gadamer, the being that is understood is language, then it would seem that today it is English. It has become the de facto international language, and for any citizen to participate in today's world, the mastering of English is a social necessity. According to the promoters of English language learning, the lack of English education even constitutes a form of suffering:

English has also become the lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English. Poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruellest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance.<sup>1</sup>

Heidegger had conceptualized the notion of “idle talk” a few decades before the end of World War II. The United States was still then in the process of usurping the British Empire's role as a superpower, and communication technologies had not yet reached today's heights of omnipresence. After the end of the war, the United States, with some participation from its allies, dictated the conditions under which a postwar world would be organized, but English had not quite yet become the international standard.<sup>2</sup> Now that it is, world events, wars, and crimes against humanity are not acknowledged unless they can be described in English. The disturbing title of Edward Behr's 1978 correspondent's memoir, which has become a refrain for many Western reporters, bears this out: *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?*<sup>3</sup> Despite some Western exceptions, credible sources must be in English. So-called “independent verification” is not simply the interpretation-translation into English, it is also a magical process of *consecration*. For example, victims' testimonies to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission are translated into English before consideration.<sup>4</sup> In the international news media, for some foreign stories, CNN even quotes independent, unverified, and youthful bloggers, if they can speak English.<sup>5</sup> Non-English, non-Western news sources are more likely to be framed as dubious.

For fake news to exist, there must be a “real news.” A lot of news, or what counts as news in Taiwan, for instance, is a weak kind of fake news,

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because Taiwanese news stories are frequently too trivial even to be considered news (e.g., a new restaurant forgot to include free napkins). In these trivial cases, truth or falsity does not even matter. But the “fake” in fake news has a metaphysical component. What type of metaphysics is a criterion for distinguishing fake from real news? For most people, only another story or collection of stories can prove that a particular story is factually wrong (unless one actually witnessed the news-making event). There is no way for a regular reader to go above and beyond any particular news story to adjudicate its truth value from God’s point of view, so she can only arbitrate between competing stories filtered through her own prejudices and biases. Furthermore, something is usually off about any news story – a detail, a nuance, the choice of words, implicit and explicit prejudices.

By definition, the news is supposed to be a reporting of something noteworthy that has happened or is currently occurring. Here the presumed theory of truth is the correspondence theory: a news item is true because its referential content corresponds to a state of affairs that actually occurred in the recent past or obtains now. The news ostensibly reports

facts. But the correspondence theory of truth, popular with philosophers for centuries, is problematic. What exactly is the mysterious relationship between mental beliefs or news stories and physical objects in the real world? How do our true beliefs map onto and/or mirror the external world? Can the news portray moral truth? (It probably aspires to.) Do moral facts exist? (Presumably no.)

Consider this *Guardian* headline: “Trump anti-China tweet gives Rex Tillerson a fresh wall to climb.”<sup>6</sup> What makes this headline true? Does it correspond to a *fact* somewhere in the world which consists of some relationship between a Donald Trump tweet, Rex Tillerson, and some newly baked wall? Are these objects (a tweet, Tillerson, and a wall) arranged in the world like a sentence which can then be mirrored as a headline? Obviously, there is no literal wall that the US Secretary of State needs to climb, and we accept that Trump wrote an “anti-China” tweet because of what we have already gleaned from the news about Trump’s (previously) hostile attitude toward China. And without a clear context, his tweet could be interpreted in different ways.<sup>7</sup> The “reality” that makes Trump’s tweet and the *Guardian*’s headline true cannot be separated from the semantic and cultural rules



“Das Haus des Seins”

that determine these very truth conditions. According to the late American pragmatist Richard Rorty, “nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and ... there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.”<sup>8</sup>

The coherence theory of truth replaces the isomorphism between language and the world with “coherence” among propositions or beliefs. So following this theory, the news is true when its referential content coheres with a view of the world, of the past, of language, and with that of other news. Taken to an extreme, following this theory of truth, a news item could be considered true, even if its propositional content referred to a state of affairs that does not actually obtain. A story could be false according to the correspondence theory, but still be real news. (The *New York Times*’ stories about Saddam Hussein’s WMD come to mind.) A story is true because it is useful and it works – in society, for the pundits, and/or for the government. This sounds suspiciously like a pragmatic theory of truth, and it meshes nicely with a Nietzschean vision:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding ... the obligation to use the customary metaphors, or, to put it in moral terms, the obligation to lie in accordance with firmly established convention, to lie *en masse* and in a style that is binding for all.<sup>9</sup>

### The American Way

Claiming the mantle of pragmatism from the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), Rorty summarized Dewey’s and the pragmatist position by asking: “What can philosophy do for American democracy?”<sup>10</sup> This question turns critical philosophical inquiry into a political defense, a nationalist agenda, while also begging the question, as his simply entitled essay “The priority of democracy to philosophy” makes clear.<sup>11</sup> According to Rorty, we should no longer ask “What is Man?” but rather “What sort of world can we prepare for our great-grandchildren?”<sup>12</sup> This “world” is clearly an all-embracing concept and includes not just the physical world, with its dwindling resources and warming temperatures, but also a world of

culture, art, religion, and ideology. A will to remembrance and of being remembered gives Americans and other hangers-on yet another reason to promote English as the medium of legacy, history, and the archives. English as the common language would provide a convenient linguistic and ideological bond to one’s children and their children and so on, and it makes sense as a basic, unquestioned, American aspiration. Hillary Clinton reportedly claimed that “I don’t want my grandchildren to live in a world dominated by the Chinese.”<sup>13</sup> Assuming that Clinton is not a white supremacist, we can at least conclude that she did not want a language such as Chinese with its concomitant worldview to replace the hegemony of English.<sup>14</sup>

I claim very simply and crudely that nothing is really true, that nothing really matters, unless or until it is in English. This could be called a form of “imperialist linguistic idealism,” and it goes hand in hand with the implicit, globalist assumption that nature’s preferred way of being represented is in English – scientific or otherwise. If the world in which we all live is the same, and languages are not incommensurable, then one language could be used to describe the entire world, and the world is indeed made smaller. It can then be archived, *wikified* even. English descriptions of social reality become persuasive as soon as people become aware of them.<sup>15</sup> As formulated in 1961 by the literary critic I. A. Richards, “An important consideration here is that English, through its assimilations, has become not only the representative of contemporary English-speaking thought and feeling but a vehicle of the entire developing human tradition.”<sup>16</sup>

For Heidegger and Gadamer, “language is the house of being” which discloses the world to us.<sup>17</sup> Heidegger further claims that “man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of the man.”<sup>18</sup> The linguist Edward Sapir followed the same train of thought when he wrote in 1933: “Language is heuristic ... in the much more far-reaching sense that its forms predetermine for us certain modes of observation and interpretation.”<sup>19</sup> The reification of language presupposes the existence of people who actually use language, and if a people already exist, then the power relations between those people also exist, which will presumably be reflected in their language. Since English is now the world language of business, culture, diplomacy, airports, pop music, advertising, and scientific thought, transnational power relations themselves will also be reflected in the international use of English. Furthermore, since stylistic quality is unique to each language,

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native English speakers often act as gatekeepers to the field of publishing and scientific research.

Even critics of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis must admit that the international domination of the English language carries definite political, ideological, and cultural weight. In many developing countries, English is the *prestige* language. Considering the use of a dominant language, Frantz Fanon wrote, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."<sup>20</sup>

Minimally, we should be aware that the English language as promoted around the world is not ideologically neutral. Regarding the use of English in South Africa, Njabulo S. Ndebele eloquently writes:

There are many reasons why it [English] cannot be considered an innocent language. The problems of society will also be the problems of the predominant language of that society, since it is the carrier of a range of social perceptions, attitudes, and goals. Through it, the speakers absorb entrenched attitudes. In this regard, the guilt of English then must be recognised and appreciated before its continued use can be advocated.<sup>21</sup>

A world in which English is not the global or dominant language is now difficult to imagine,

and for many Americans, even more difficult to stomach. What would replace it? Chinese or Spanish? Conspicuously, the Old Testament presents multilingualism as the curse of Babel (Genesis 11). In *Blade Runner* (1982), for instance, the lingua franca has been replaced by an internationalized gibberish called "cityspeak." However, the language of science (epitomized by Dr. Eldon Tyrell) and presumably also of the "off-world colonies" is still American English.

What has this to do with archives? What about the *Archives nationales* in France, the National Archives of Japan, or any other archive that is not in English? The working languages of the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands are English and, anachronistically, French (which is probably useful for indicting former dictators in Africa, a favorite target of the ICC).<sup>22</sup> The United Nations claims a number of official languages, but is, unsurprisingly, dominated by English.<sup>23</sup> Whether in diplomacy, literary theory, entertainment, or scientific research, international consensus must today be made within the realm of the English language. To garner international awareness or scrutiny, any interpretation of an archival body needs to (eventually) be in the English language and thus made, possibly, true. Resistance only results in obscurity.

Apologists for the world domination of English like to point out that a language in and of itself does not have any power or intentions. Languages are only invested with power by the

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## 2016 Human Rights Report

Promoting human rights and democratic governance is a core element of U.S. foreign policy. These values form an essential foundation of stable, secure, and functioning societies. Standing up for human rights and democracy is not just a moral imperative but is in the best interests of the United States in making the world more stable and secure. The 2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (The Human Rights Reports) demonstrate the United States' unwavering commitment to advancing liberty, human dignity, and global prosperity.

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people who use and promote them. By the same token, low-brow American bumper stickers and T-shirts claim that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” which is both literally and trivially true. A language cannot dominate, only a person can. Holding the English language up to some kind of ethical mirror does betray a number of prejudices, particularly when comparing linguistic conflict to a war, but like the gun, English *is* a weapon of the mind. Winston Churchill put it nicely in 1943: “[The promotion of the English language] offers far better prizes than taking away people’s provinces or lands or grinding them down in exploitation. The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.”<sup>24</sup>

In the language of American pragmatism, which dispenses with philosophical mind/body talk, Rorty elaborated the goal: “To say that it [a given organism] is a language user is just to say that pairing off the marks and noises it makes with those we make will prove a useful tactic in predicting and controlling its future behavior.”<sup>25</sup>

Another apologist response is to deem any critique of English domination a conspiracy theory. Even if English as a language is itself innocent, and it is really the promoters and users of English acting in collusion while harboring self-serving intentions, is this not the very definition of a conspiracy? As Nigel Farage put it, “Our real friends in the world speak English.”<sup>26</sup> It is the English language promoters themselves, especially those outside the native English-speaking world, who are conspiring to reproduce and promote its status. From the hermeneutically suspicious point of view,

The English language and English language teaching are hegemonic if they uphold the values of dominant groups, and if the pre-eminence of English is legitimated as being a “common sense” social fact, thus concealing whose interests are being served by the dominant ideology and dominant professional practice [of teaching and promoting English].<sup>27</sup>

### Overcoming English

Assuming the linguistically dominated have freedom and agency, the issue is whether they willingly choose this form of domination or have been duped or coerced into acquiescing. According to Pierre Bourdieu, “The distinctiveness of symbolic domination lies precisely in the fact that it assumes, of those who submit to it, an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint.”<sup>28</sup> In Taiwan and South Korea, English language instruction is mandatory for elementary school students, and a certain

minimal proficiency is required for advancement. In Japan, English will become a mandatory elementary school subject in 2020.<sup>29</sup> Some schools in China are also beginning to require a minimal command of English. These East Asian governments recognize that the ability of their citizens to negotiate or debate fluently in English is not only (possibly) beneficial to the students themselves but also essential for promoting their own national interests in the American world order. For the children and their parents, the learning of the English as a second (or third or even fourth) language is certainly not a product of free choice, but one of pragmatic complicity.

According to Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s metaphysics, the course of Western history inevitably leads to a species of technocratic nihilism, exemplified by the pragmatic, American view of technological mastery and capitalist, planetary domination. Stuck in our current predicament, this nihilism can only be overcome within the conceptual language of this very nihilism. Similarly, Marx thought that capitalism could be overcome within the stages of late capitalism as the “negation of the negation.” So perhaps too, the domination of English can only be overcome within this very domination of English as the world language.

Notably, the language of English is often conflated with the language of morality and, most frequently, human rights as a mask of its own users’ conceited and usually nationalistic, sometimes xenophobic, intentions. English is also deliberately associated with progress, prosperity, modernity, etc. However, all statements to moral *universality* made by any particular government are by default suspect, even if that state’s particular actions might have done some good in some way according to some biased interpretation. In the fittingly titled essay “In praise of cultural imperialism?” David Rothkopf claims that

It is in the economic and political interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable. These are not idle aspirations. English is linking the world.<sup>30</sup>

For older monolingual people, language is a linguistic penitentiary, for it is highly unlikely they will take the time or have the motivation to become sufficiently fluent in another language.

How does one resist, if is one trapped within the prison-house that is English? How do prisoners protest? They fast, bang on the walls, smear it with their own excrement, revolt, riot, try to escape. One can fast by not using English or, even better, by saying nothing. One can also embrace the ineffable, the untranslatable, and the incommensurable. English can also be used as language of opposition, as a critique of itself, its assumptions, its users, its attendant ideologies, and its dominance. The world can be made bigger again, if we, at the very least, use different words and diverse concepts.

English variants (or “World Englishes”), such as in India, Singapore, and the Philippines, have also expanded the possibilities for English as a critical tool of discourse. Local variants become purer transactions of communication with less ideological baggage from the English-speaking origin. English can also be used as a mobilizing force against the very promoters of its linguistic hegemony – “using one’s own language against him” or “fighting fire with fire.”<sup>31</sup> During the early years of the British Raj, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote that “there is no hope for India until the Bengali and the Panjabi understand and influence each other, and can bring their joint influence to bear upon the Englishman. This can

be done only through the medium of English.”<sup>32</sup>

For Robert Phillipson, who has devoted much of his career to the issue of English language domination, the whole edifice of English language teaching rests on a few basic fallacies. The first two fallacies are: 1) English is best taught monolingually; and 2) Native speakers are the ideal type of English teachers.<sup>33</sup> Bilingualism and diglossia are frowned upon, as English teachers assume that the use of other languages in the classroom or when studying will reduce the effectiveness of learning English. Monolingualism was also a clear expression of power relations within the colonial period. As Phillipson puts it, “The ethos of monolingualism [in the classroom] implies the rejection of the experiences of other languages, meaning the exclusion of the child’s most intense existential experiences.”<sup>34</sup>

While some literature concerning English language pedagogy has warned against the overreliance on native English speakers, East Asian language schools overwhelmingly prefer teachers who conform to Western and East Asian stereotypes. In Taiwan, the ideal English teacher is white (regardless of her country of origin), so perfectly fluent Asian Americans and Southeast Asians are discriminated against when applying



for English teaching jobs. White English teachers in Taiwan are well aware of this, and yet, for the most part, make no effort to change or address it, while a steady stream of young, inexperienced teachers continues to preserve and participate in this inefficient and openly racist system. As the director of a chain of worldwide English language schools put it: "Once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad, now we are sending English teachers."<sup>35</sup>

It is by no means obvious that a native speaker of English will necessarily make a good teacher. Many such teachers, again here in East Asia, are unqualified even in the language of English, and many have been known pedophiles, alcoholics, sex tourists, criminals on the run, drug dealers, morons, and dangerous idiots.<sup>36</sup> If the native speaker is monolingual, as most are, he or she will most certainly have little to no insight into the local cultural and linguistic issues with learning English. The teaching qualification of most of these teachers is merely an accident of birth. Moreover, the physical presence of these teachers is not even necessary, as technology and international media outlets like the BBC and CNN are already regularly providing model native speakers of English. The vast number of unqualified, temporary teachers of English from the West must serve as an affront to the skilled educators who have devoted their lives to the profession.

So what about the domination of Mandarin Chinese (*Putonghua*) in China? Isn't it a hegemonic language whose promotion by the Chinese government is responsible for the slow but steady death of numerous local dialects? My response is that Chinese is not the world language, and because of resistance and racism, especially from Western countries, it probably never will be. To the US government, even a Chinese language processing computer is a weapon.<sup>37</sup> Only in a truly multilingual and multipolar world will a language like Mandarin Chinese, most likely, have its place among many.

### The Argument to the Stick

What about competing interpretations of a text, an archive, or, say, a military conflict? How do we adjudicate between them? One hopes that the ideals of scholarship and Habermasian *communicative rationality* win the day, and that eventually the most rational and well-defended argument will become the most convincing. As a postmodernist, Rorty noted the problems with this kind of ideal when applied to ethical decision-making: "For everything turns on who counts as a fellow human being, as a rational agent in the only relevant sense – the sense in which rational agency is synonymous with membership in *our* moral community."<sup>38</sup>

Remember, according to Rorty, it is not useful to ask foundational questions like "What is a human being?" and the reeducation or liberal redemption of obstinate adults is pointless and thus a waste of time. The power of reason alone cannot overcome the baser instincts and sentiments. The only universality is perhaps a Buddhist one: suffering and the cause of suffering. The pragmatic questions are: How can we reduce human suffering when it suits us? And how can we gain from suffering and its infliction?

As mentioned at the beginning of Part 1 of this essay, archives can be considered fragmentary repositories of the past, and as such, when interpreted well, they can function like myths that possibly teach us something about ourselves. Hopefully, there is a moral to the story. For religious or optimistic hermeneuticists like Paul Ricoeur, the ultimate goal of hermeneutics is not only fidelity to the text, but also apparently to find "in the hidden intentions of [the text] instructions on how to behave in the world, ethically and politically," i.e., "to make the world a better place."<sup>39</sup>

From a morally progressive standpoint, the public is prone to making unethical choices and supporting intolerant positions, such as warmongering and the death penalty. Rorty admitted that the death penalty had never been abolished by popular demand. It was the educated classes that decided capital punishment was intolerable. Popular referendums and elections bear this out. A decision abolishing the death penalty always comes from the top.<sup>40</sup> And what about the Syrian refugee crisis? What would a referendum decide? Hungary's 2016 referendum on refugees can be considered a model.

In a pragmatist society, can we democratically determine the essence of humanity? Can we stage a popular referendum that finally answers the philosophical question: "What is a human being?" For Rorty, whatever it is that makes us humans is not our ability to *know*, and we have no principal duty to knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Should we just accept this? Morality cannot be decided by polls. At some point, voting ends, and force begins, because force is the most no-nonsense language.

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Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (London: Routledge, 2003), 50, 49. See also Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (London: Atheneum Press Ltd, 2000), 452–53.

40  
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41  
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