

## Asian Englishes: Some Reflections

This issue of *Asiatic* has a thematic focus: Asian Englishes. English has penetrated Asian societies deeply since colonial times and especially in the postcolonial period, during which English has evolved from a colonial language to a global language. Even as early as 1982, J.R. Rickford had the following to say about the phenomenal growth of English language worldwide:

The sun sets regularly on the Union Jack these days, but never on the English language. It was spread by British colonialists, got a boost from American GPs, and it was cemented by the multinational corporation. Today, like it or curse it, English is the closest thing to a lingua franca around the globe. Roughly 700 million speak it – an increase of 40% in the last 20 years and a total that represents more than a seventh of the world's population. (42)

But Rickford's estimate has now become obsolete. In 2008, Bolton projected the figure of English language speakers at 812 million in South, Southeast and East Asia alone, and the guest editors of this issue suggest that by a reasonable estimate there would be about a billion speakers/users of the English language in Asia at present. Literature written in the English language has also developed in strides in many Asian countries since Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), an enlightened humanitarian reformist and Asia's first Renaissance figure, started writing in English in the 1830s. In fact, one could now name many leading writers in the English language who are either native Asians or of Asian origin but are now living elsewhere in the world – a tradition that has developed exponentially since Sake Dean Mohamed (1759-1851) published his *The Travels of Dean Mohamed* in 1794 and writers such as Taru Dutt (1856-77), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and R.K. Narayan ventured into expressing their creative sensibility in what was then largely a foreign language.

This prevalence of English in the daily life of people as well as in the creative sphere has correspondingly resulted in an increasing appropriation and nativisation of the language. Thus, we continue to see the rise of different varieties of English in different Asian countries, which are sometimes dubbed fondly after their national setting or regional idiosyncrasies – some examples being Banglish, Hinglish, Manglish, Singlish – to reflect the various influences of native languages on this imported, acquired and grafted tongue.

To comprehend these trends better, we decided to devote an issue of *Asiatic* to this phenomenon. We wanted to see how English operates in these Asian societies; how it has been and continues to be modified as the language comes into contact with the local languages, or how a bilingual individual acquires English and uses it in his/her daily life.

Accordingly, on behalf of the Editorial Committee, I invited two linguists from the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia – Dr. Ridwan Wahid and Dr. Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie – to act as guest editors and help me edit the issue. Both Dr. Ridwan and Dr. Maskanah graciously took up the invitation and have since done their utmost to make the issue a success. We prepared an announcement stating the objectives as well as our terms and conditions and invited scholars from all over the world to contribute articles to the issue for possible publication. To make the articles relevant and contemporary, we encouraged potential contributors to highlight issues and/or use data from the year 2000 onwards.

We received a healthy response to our call, and after the due process of preliminary screening and anonymous double vetting we have decided to publish seven articles in this issue. One observation that emerges from a cursory read of the articles is that English is not developing uniformly in the Asian continent; it has found stronger roots in some countries than in others. To use Kachru's terminology, some of the Asian countries belong to the Expanding Circle in English language usage while others belong to the Outer Circle. Thus, there is no surprise that the articles in the issue largely deal with the state of English in countries such as India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines – countries formerly colonised by either Britain or America – because it is in these countries that English is emerging or has emerged as the lingua franca or as the "other tongue." Though it may seem ironic that we designate the issue as a special issue on Asian Englishes when there is no reference to Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia and many other countries in the articles, this is of course more of a reflection of the state of English in Asia rather than a limitation of scope in the issue.

In fact, my own previous research in Asian literature confirms this uneven growth of English in the continent – a phenomenon which is expected given the vastness of the continent and its diverse histories. I have published two volumes of short stories in English by Asian writers, *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories* (2010) and *Twenty-Two: New Asian Short Stories* (2016). Both the volumes were open to writers from all over Asia, as well as Asians currently living in diaspora, and the response in both instances were overwhelming. However, as the final products will show, both the volumes are dominated by writers from a handful of countries – most of them the same countries that feature predominantly in the articles in this issue.

In spite of this uneven growth of the language, Tom McArthur is of the view that English is likely to emerge as an Asian language in the future and as the Asian lingua franca, since English continues to expand globally, "in the air, by sea, in the media, in telecommunications," and has become the "world's lingua franca." This may well be true, because as the world gets smaller, we Asians will need to develop a bridge language to interact with one another

across our national borders. This bridge language could well be English rather than Mandarin or Hindi, the two largest Asian languages, precisely because English is the language of technology, media, international politics and commerce, and also because English has a broader and stronger presence throughout the continent than any of the local languages.

In addition to these seven articles on Asian Englishes, the issue also has six other articles in the General Section focusing on the different aspects/traditions of Asian literature. The first of these is by Rahmah Ahmad Osman, in which she investigates the poetic theories of Vladimir Braginsky and Muhammad Haji Salleh for a better understanding of the classical Malay literary framework. The second article is by Angus Whitehead, in which he seeks to identify a key source for the Singapore poet Arthur Yap's early and rarely discussed poem "news." Whitehead argues that Yap was inspired by Steve Windwood's lyrics to Blind Faith's rock song "Had to Cry" in writing the poem, and that he did so against the backdrop of Singapore's hostile response to the hippy movement during the period. The next article is by Michelle O'Brien, in which she explores the intersections that develop as Canada and Singapore redefine the terms of their productive raciality through their respective multicultural/multiracial forms in order to remain globally competitive; she takes as a close referent Singaporean-Canadian writer Lydia Kwa's novel *Pulse* (2010).

The fourth article in the section focuses on Chinese-American writer Anchee Min's novel *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000), which was based on the life of Jiang Qing, the last wife of Mao Zedong. In this article, Emily Lau Kui Ming explores how Min combines history and fiction to delve into the psychological depths of her protagonist and creates a powerful tale of passion, betrayal and survival. Lau employs the feminist perspective to frame the discussion. The remaining two articles in the section are on Indian writers: Sara Aboobacker, a South Indian Muslim woman writer, and Gaiutra Bahadur, a journalist and critic who lives in the US. In the article on Aboobacker, the authors – Asyhath, Raihanah and Ruzy – examine how the female characters in Aboobacker's fiction experience multiple identities as Muslim women and as minorities in South India; while their identities are shaped partly by their religious traditions, like Muslim women around the world, they are also subjected to the oppressions experienced by minority women in a multicultural society like India. The final article by Prasad and Jha focuses on Gaiutra Bahadur's recently published non-fiction narrative, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013). The authors adopt the theoretical conceptualisation of Susan Koshy's term "neo-diaspora" to investigate Bahadur's portrayal of indentured Indian women in Guyana from 1838 to 1917: how, despite remaining fettered and embattled, these women contributed to family making and negotiated creolised change for cultural reproduction conducive to a distinct diasporic formation.

The issue also has sixteen book reviews encompassing works of poetry, fiction and criticism, published in Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia, Singapore and the Caribbean. These include Dennis Haskell's 2015 collection of poetry *Ahead of Us*, Tishani Doshi's *The Adulterous Citizen*, and three books published by Writer's Workshop, a literary publisher in Kolkata, India founded in 1958 by the renowned Indian poet P. Lal. Finally, there is an obituary on the famous Bengali-Indian writer-activist Mahasweta Devi, who was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh on January 14, 1926 and passed away on July 28, 2016.

To conclude, I would like to thank all those who have helped me to put the issue together: Dr. Ridwan Wahid, Dr. Maskanah Mohd. Lotfie, Dr. Somdatta Mandal, Dr. Susan Philip, Dr. Aishah Ahmad and Quratulain Shirazi. Without their active help and generous cooperation, it would be quite impossible to bring out the issue in its present form and on time. Thanks are also due to all members of the editorial board as well as those anonymous reviewers who, through their sincere efforts and academic excellence, continue to ensure the overall quality of the journal.

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