

## performing english: an autoethnography of a postcolonial first language

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Look at this body, this brown and bearded body, this somewhat good-looking body, this nomadic body that seeks to belong 'here' even as it betrays an always shifting past and present. Look at this somewhat pretentious body, clothed in these various layers of privilege and occupying these various positions. Look at this somewhat treacherous body, always revealing or hiding multiple positions that may offend you just when you may be somewhat comfortable getting to know this body.

Look at how this body pretends its name matters. It demands to be known by its recently-acquired and recently-legalized full name: hari stephen kumar. It pretends that its name might signal something to you before it arrives, some clue or warning that this body carries traces of unspeakably unsatisfying subaltern itineraries, as Spivak might say. Feel how this body evades questioning of origins, feel how this body dances so quickly to routes instead of roots, as Hall might say. Move with this body, if you will, following Conquergood and de Certeau, as it seeks an always moving co-performance of nomads enacting tactical subversions within and against strategic spaces, always leaving and arriving simultaneously.

When it does arrive, either on the phone or in person, listen and feel how this body speaks such good English with you. It pretends that its performance of English rivals or surpasses the performance of 'native' speakers. Indeed, this body is somewhat arrogant in its pretensions and its privileged positions. This body has a Master's degree in science and a previous life as an engineer; this body is currently finishing a Master's degree in Communication; and this body is now a doctoral candidate in English, where it is preparing for a lifetime of teaching English professionally in the Academy. This body has tasted the English of so-called 'native' speakers and is not impressed by their performances. In a world of englishes, as Canagarajah and others have said, this body seeks to trouble English natives.

Some people say to this body—"wow, you don't have an accent!"

This body used to say: "Thanks!"

If you are speaking 'standard American' english, this body now says: "But I do have an accent—yours!" This body is now saying: What accent did you expect me to have before I opened my mouth?

Some people say to this body—"wow, your English is so good!"

This body used to say: "Thanks!"

This body now says, without qualifications: "Thanks... and so is yours!"

This body is now saying: English is my first language.

Why does this body make such a claim? Why does this particular, marked, postcolonial body stake such a colonizing claim on a colonial language that has already claimed the worlds this body has lived and felt? Why does this body insist on colonizing itself with American English and thereby betraying its ethnic mother tongue—that crucial third rail of multiculturalism?

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Here is my uncle. And here I am, maybe 12 or 13 years old. We are in Yemen, where my uncle is working as a secretary in a factory. He has just finished telling me a story about when he joined the Indian Army, some years after his sister married my father. In his story he was a supply clerk for the Army, and he told me about this other supply clerk who gave him a hard time about his bad English. My uncle has just finished telling me his clever response: *Naa avankitta sonne*, "Why English? English is not my mother tongue. It may be your mother tongue, but not mine!" My uncle is grinning at me as he then says the following word, relishing it, drawing it out, loudly and clearly and slowly saying: "Bastard."

Do you get it? I didn't get it, my uncle had to explain to me that by saying English "may be your mother tongue but not mine", my uncle had insinuated that the other supply clerk may be an illegitimate child of an English father—the product of a colonial rape. To be Indian and to desire to speak English, in my uncle's view, was to be illegitimate. So here is my uncle now, as I tell you this, as I tell you that I claim English as my first language, because I wonder if he would call me a bastard—you know?

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So here is my mother. I am not in this scene, as this is happening before I was born and shortly after my mother married my father. She has just been called “an illiterate woman” by my grandfather, my father’s father, her father-in-law. She is in shock, I imagine. At least that’s how she sometimes tells the story to me. She has a Master’s degree in Economics, while my father did not finish engineering school. But she does not speak English—she studied in Tamil. She is from Kerala, her parents moved to Madras before she was born, so she describes herself as “born and brought up” in Madras. Her parents speak Malayalam, but my mother speaks Tamil, has fallen in love with Tamil, is a Tamil fanatic, writes exquisitely patriotic Tamil poetry, has participated in student protests against Hindi when the Indian government moved to establish English and Hindi as its two official languages in the 1960s. She has done all this but at this moment, in this scene, here, she is called “illiterate” by her new father-in-law.

I am in this scene some years later, as a young boy, maybe 4 or 5 years old. Here is my mother again, we are in a small town in North India, where my father is working at a factory. I am trying to read the English newspaper. My mother is trying to get me to say “banana”—but I keep saying “banananana”. Suddenly my mother starts crying. I am confused. She stumbles over the word “banana” herself as she teaches me how to write it first, and then to say it. She is teaching me English as the first language I learn to read and write. She wants me to read the English newspaper to my grandfather next time we visit. She tells me that my grandfather would be proud. I don’t question until many years later just who she hoped my grandfather would be proud of. I wonder if she is crying in this scene because she is aching to teach me the wonderful Tamil word for ‘banana’—a word that involves slippery pronunciation for children to learn and hence a word that leads to unspeakable cuteness to be enjoyed by parents.

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So here is my grandfather. I am not in this scene, and, strictly speaking, neither is my grandfather, because this is a letter from him to me. Well, it is actually a letter written to my father, one of my grandfather’s monthly missives. My parents and I are living in Yemen, where my father found a job that helped him escape India’s unemployment crisis in the 1980s, but my grandfather still sends us letters by Airmail. The letters arrive on blue paper, words flowing across the page from a firm hand writing with a fountain pen. It’s in English—the command and tone unmistakably British, the presence and authority unmistakably my grandfather’s. My grandfather has retired from a lifetime of working as a clerk at a British company’s office in Madras, but he still writes eloquently in British standard English. It was his ticket to employment with the British in the early 1920s, before India’s Independence, when he left his village in rural South India to go to Madras seeking a job. In his letters he always tells me the same thing: to read well at school and to write well to him.

And here I am, about 16 years old. We are sitting in my grandfather’s house. I have come home from wandering around Madras, and I have brought home a newspaper. My grandfather is a voracious reader but has cataracts and reads with great difficulty. I sit next to him and tell him: “Thatha, paper padikkata?” His face lights up, he gestures to me and leans back, closes his tired eyes. I start reading, word by word, slowly. The Tamil newspaper is hard for me to read, as I have just begun learning to read and write Tamil, picking it up from reading signs on buses and shop windows. But my grandfather loves it when I read Tamil to him. He whispers help for me when I run into difficult words—I cannot read beyond a third-grade vocabulary. He smiles when I finish and says, in English, “Tamil is a divine language.”

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So here is my school in Yemen. It is an international school—it was built through a USAID program in the 1970s and is now owned by the group of families that own the factory where my father works. It is a school built to teach a Western curriculum, but it is a school located in a small mountain town, far from the country’s capital city. There are very few foreigners in this town. The school is privately owned and expensive, making it accessible only to those parents who are in the upper echelons of the small town’s society. This means those in high-ranking Army positions, or those who own prosperous businesses. Most of the student bodies in this school are Yemeni children from these upper classes—and the few foreign children of the foreign workers like my father, who work in factories owned by some of the Yemeni children’s parents. Half of the curriculum is taught in Arabic: History (Middle-Eastern), Geography, Social Studies, Religion (Islam), and Language (Arabic). The other half is taught in English:

Math, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and English. Half of the teachers are Arabic-speaking bodies from around the world, mostly from Egypt and Sudan and the Gulf states. The other half are English-speaking bodies from around the world, mostly from Europe, Australia, India, and America. All the Indian teachers taught the sciences. There was the occasional European or Australian body that would teach a science subject for a year or two, but the long-term Biology teacher was Indian, as was his wife who taught Physics. All the bodies that taught English were American. Few of them stayed longer than a year, none of them stayed longer than two years.

Here I am, about 10 years old. I am being kicked down the hallway by Arabic-speaking bullies, who are taunting me in Arabic for, among many other things, being a pagan idol worshipper. I understand their words and taunts because they have also been teaching me Arabic, hoping, among many other things, to convert me to Islam.

And here I am again, about 14 years old, in those same hallways. The Test of English as a Foreign Language is coming up—we all have to take the exam in order to graduate from this elite international school. We also have to take the SATs—but students for whom English is a Foreign Language are exempt from having to do well on the Verbal portion of the SATs. I have been preparing to do well on the SAT Verbal, having taken the TOEFL twice already and having scored inordinately high both times. So here I am, about to take the TOEFL for the third time, with two of the bullies who had tormented me before. They have asked me to tutor them in English as they prepare to take the TOEFL for the first time. So here they are, two light brown bodies striving to learn English from a dark brown body in a hallway around the corner from a room filled with internationally privileged white bodies.

This is the longest time I have talked with these two bodies, and one of them suddenly asks me why I don't have an Indian accent. I shrug, which reminds the other one of a joke involving an Indian couple who are supposedly at a party when the man is asked how old he is. The brown Yemeni body in front of me pretends to have a thick Indian accent as he performs the joke's punchline: "Oh, I am dirty, and my wife is dirty too!" They laugh, and when I don't laugh along, the other brown Yemeni body says, loudly, to explain the point to me: "Thirty! And Thirty Two!"

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So here I am in college, in India, in Madras. I have just arrived here from Arizona, where I spent two years as an undergrad based on my high SATs. I was visiting home, in Yemen, for vacation when civil war broke out in Yemen, so my family and I have relocated as refugees to our native land of India, but we don't have a home here. I am about 16 years old and I am trying to live with my grandparents. I am afraid of being hazed in college in India, so I have been learning Tamil to fit in better. I have memorized the lines from a popular song in a recent Tamil movie, a ground-breaking rap-style number involving several slang words meant to evoke slumlife. Here I am in college, now, surrounded by several other Indian students all of whom speak Tamil, and here I am performing the song:

*... hey sarayam kavvadu/thundubeedi vavalu/kudusa/kuprathotti pakkathille tea kadda ...*

Everyone is laughing at the spectacle of a brown upper-middle-class foreigner from America rapping about the streets of Madras. When I am done, someone asks me a question in English. I reply in Tamil. Someone else asks me again in English. Suddenly worried that my Tamil isn't good enough, I reply again, carefully enunciating my Tamil. They laugh, and a Tamil-speaking brown body says, "Hey, machan, you are speaking Tamil like a villager da—be cool mama, we speak English da!"

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So here I am in graduate school the second time around. Claudio is here too, but this is happening almost two years ago, when Claudio and I were invited to speak to students in a writing class. Claudio asks me to go first, and so I speak about public speaking—I start with an Indian accent, and then I switch halfway through to an American accent. I am making a point about how the body is always already speaking, before we even say any words, and how particular bodies carry expectations of accents. Claudio speaks after me—he starts by saying that his English is bad and he tells students not to expect that he is going to switch his accent to good English like me, because he can't. I am ashamed of my flaunting of privileged English, here in a New England rife with colonial white privilege.

Later I apologize to Claudio—he tells me it’s no big deal, but Claudio is like that, a retired thug who is quick to embrace everyone in that big hug of his. His English is Bad, he says, but his friend Marcelo chimes in to add that Claudio’s Portuguese is even worse.

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And here I am in graduate school the first time around. It is sometime in 1998, and I am in a room with about 80 other Indian graduate students. We have just had our first elections to establish Boston University’s first Indian Graduate Student Association. BU has a vibrant Indian Student Association, but the graduate students at BU are from India, while the Indian undergraduate students at BU are Indian-Americans, born and brought up in America. The Indian graduate students have a derogatory name for the Indian undergraduates: ABCD: American-Born-Confused-Desi. Indian graduate students have been amused by the antics of Indian undergraduates who have been trying to stage cultural performances pretending to be Indian. So a group of Indian graduate students decided to form an association reflecting the experiences of Indian expatriates. We needed to elect a board of officers—I was asked to run for Treasurer against one of the main organizers of the association. Here is the room, the results are being announced. Some 70 votes were cast for Treasurer—I get 3 of them. The only other candidate, the winner, in the heat of the moment, makes a wisecrack about me wanting to be an ABCD more than ABCDs want to be Indian. At least, that is what I think he said—he was speaking in Hindi, a language I barely know. I feel ashamed and I leave as soon as I can escape.

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Some people say to this body—“wow, your English is so good!”

This body used to say: “Thanks!”

This body now says, without qualifications: “Thanks... and so is yours!”

This body is now saying: English is my first language. It is the language I first learned to read and write. It is the only language in which I am fluent enough to use it in order to trouble the language itself, as Bryant Alexander describes, “engaging in performances (written and embodied) that seek to transform the social and cultural conditions under which I live and labor” (2005, p. 433).

Why does this particular, marked, postcolonial body turn around and lay hold of the colonial language that continues to ravish the worlds this body has lived and felt? Why does this body insist on all-too-willingly taking American English into its mouth only to trouble the illusion of some original and stable ethnic mother tongue—that crucial third rail of multiculturalism?

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Here is our daughter Eliana. She is five months old. Alexis is holding her, while my mother coos and fusses all over Eliana. My mother is relishing seeing her granddaughter for the first time. She is saying many sweet things in Tamil—none of which Alexis understands and many of which go over my head. My mother turns to me and says, in Tamil, to teach Eliana Tamil. I tell her, in Tamil, that it would be like the blind leading the blind. At least, that is what I want to tell her, but I don’t know the words well enough, so I stumble and say something else, something awkwardly worded about us being more comfortable teaching Eliana English. I am too afraid of my mother to tell her that English is my first language. My mother responds, in rapid English, that Tamil is my mother tongue and therefore I should teach Eliana Tamil. Alexis and I smile and don’t say anything—I want to tell my mother that Eliana’s mother has a tongue too, but is it my place to do so?

And here is Eliana, squealing loudly, with a wide toothless grin, reminding all of us that she has her own tongue.