Colonial legacy and its discontents: English in post-colonial contexts

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One of the defining features of globalization is the increasingly complex and multifaceted interactions of localism and globalism. The post-colonial contexts present us with a vibrant site where local linguistic forms – inflected by the nexus of activities taking place elsewhere in time and space – are constantly transforming in response to asymmetric exchanges, pluralized histories, power plays, and battles over polysemous signs. The transformation makes available a semiotic space where a repertoire of identities evolves in the interanimation of the colonial–global and of the indigenous-local. This paper will explore how ideological legacies of English colonialism in post-colonial contexts are transformed in communicative practices that allow the emergence of new identities, which are neither colonial–global, nor necessarily indigenous–local. Indeed the linguistic politics of post-colonial identity is, demonstrably, a continuous process of identification constituted through resistance and reconstruction, in a bid to subvert the discursive effects of colonization. Given this situation, the present paper will focus on English and on the ways in which its local transformation has introduced hybridizations of cultural identities. Specifically, this paper raises questions – and sets up possible scenarios of sociolinguistic analyses – related to how, for instance, post-colonial identities are re-shaped, renegotiated, and re-analyzed under pressures of globalization; particularly, as English dominates the “linguascape” of post-colonial contexts – to extend Appadurai’s (1996) metaphor.

Drawing on contemporary linguistic practices in post-colonial South and Southeast Asia and in parts of anglophone Africa, I will present available data on various linguistic processes of indigenization as evidence of disruptions in the historical structure of center–periphery, as well as of transformations taking place today in global alignments of language and power. The most noteworthy exponents of post-colonial identity are visible in at least three dimensions of creative language use: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and literary. These dimensions, I will argue, reveal how local cultural grammars displace standard linguistic grammars of the colonial masters, producing new, hybrid, post-colonial linguistic identities.