The global enterprise of English language teaching (ELT) ought to present the possibility of bringing millions of people into the global traffic of meaning. Yet it does not do so because global ELT is paradoxically viewed as a monolingual enterprise. Both the pedagogy that underpins much of this spread and the ways in which the global spread of English has been described and resisted emphasize English as a language that operates only in its own presence. Overlooked are the ways in which English always needs to be seen in the context of other languages, as a language always in translation. Yet if we wish to take global diversity seriously, we would do well to focus on semiodiversity (the diversity of meanings) as much as glossodiversity (the diversity of languages), and to do so by taking up a project of translingual activism as part of ELT. If students are to enter the global traffic of meaning, translation needs to become central to what we do.

Keywords  English; globalization; translation; traffic of meaning; semiodiversity; ELT; pedagogy

The pretensions to self-sufficiency, the refusal to allow the foreign mediate, have secretly nourished numerous linguistic ethnocentrisms, and more seriously, numerous pretensions to the same cultural hegemony that we have been able to observe in relation to Latin, from late antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages and even beyond the Renaissance, in relation to French in the classical era, and in relation to English today.

(Ricoeur, 2006: 4–5)

The traffic of meaning

‘When you translate’, asserts Probal Dasgupta (2005: 42) ‘you are part of the traffic’. And this traffic, this constant coming and going of people, bicycles, rickshaws, cars, trucks, ferries, tuk-tuks, ships, aeroplanes, trains, is a traffic in meaning, a passing to and fro of ideas, concepts, symbols, discourses. For Claire Kramsch (2006: 103) this traffic in meaning is precisely what language teaching should be about, so that language competence should be measured not as the capacity to perform in one language in a specific domain, but rather as ‘the ability
to translate, transpose and critically reflect on social, cultural and historical meanings conveyed by the grammar and lexicon’. The role of the language teacher from this perspective, therefore, is ‘to diversify meanings, point to the meanings not chosen, and bring to light other possible meanings that have been forgotten by history or covered up by politics’. Language teaching is indelibly tied to translation and the diversity of meanings. When we learn a language, we enter the traffic.

The massive global enterprise of English language teaching (ELT) – in other words, the global spread of English language teaching to speakers of languages other than English – ought to present just such a possibility: bringing millions of people into the global traffic of meaning. And yet, it does not. A central problem with the way in which global English is understood by the nations responsible for managing its export is that it is seen, paradoxically, as a monolingual enterprise. Overlooked are the ways in which English always needs to be seen in the context of other languages, or, as I shall argue here, as a language always in translation. While this is profoundly obvious to those in countries where English has arrived as a language among many (see for example, Ramanathan, 2006a), the vast English export industry purveys the language as if it were an entity on its own, as if the main context of its use were only in its own presence. While discussion of English as an international language draws distinctions between different contexts of spread and use, with the fact that the majority of users are now non-native speakers of English frequently reiterated (for example, Kachru, 2005), the implications of this for understanding English as a language always in translation are often disregarded.

This is not to suggest that the use of English always implies a process of translation – the version of translation that has come down to us in the reductive histories of ELT – but rather that English is always a language in translation, a language of translingual use. The central issue here is one of how we understand diversity. The struggles over diversity in the face of the global spread of English tend to be presented in terms of diversity as numerical plurality – multiple languages or multiple Englishes. This focus on glossodiversity at the expense of semiodiversity (Halliday, 2002; Kramsch, 2006) obscures the potential role of language education in the production of diversity. And it is the blindness to the role that translation plays at the heart of ELT that constantly obscures this vision. As V. Ramanathan suggests,

the Applied Linguistics field has not yet grappled with tensions around the politics of translations across spaces, times, ideologies and cultures, and the implications of these not just for writing/texts in the discipline, but for our collective knowledge construction at large.

(Ramanathan, 2006b: 224)

There are two main trajectories that have brought this about. The first has to do with the economic and political agendas that underpin particular aspects of global English pedagogy. The second has to do with various ways in which the global spread of English has been described and resisted. Despite the very different takes on this, they have all tended to posit an English core that does not allow for a more varied vision for the role of English. I shall deal with each of these briefly below.
Translation as pariah

A central strand of twentieth-century ELT ideology as it has been purveyed in the dominant discourses of applied linguistics has been the strange and insistent eschewal of translation. Although translation has always, for very obvious reasons, been part of language teaching, the canon of ELT theory that developed in the twentieth century turned translation into a pariah. As Louis Kelly (1969: 217) notes in his wide-ranging history of language teaching, ‘The mid-twentieth century is probably the only period since the Middle Ages in which translation was relegated to an advanced stage in language learning’. Why should this be? Several different intellectual and ideological concerns brought this about. Theories and practices of language learning and teaching – from the development of audiolingual methodologies based on structuralist and behaviourist accounts of language and psychology, to the development of communicative and task-based approaches based on humanist, cognitivist and neo-structuralist accounts of learning and language – all emphasized the singular importance of using English and only English in the classroom. As Elsa Auerbach (1993) argues, however, while such pedagogical dictates were justified with educational and psychological arguments, they cannot be viewed without also considering the broader political goals they supported: if not a monolingual English-speaking world, then at least a world in which the languages othered by English were downplayed, and English was promoted as a monolingual and separate entity. As Kelly (1969: 407) remarks, ‘[t]hat the expert in language teaching acts with the purity of motive and design expected from a scientist is demonstrably untrue. Discoveries are filtered by social and educational needs, and what suits the circumstances is what is considered proved’.

Meanwhile, as English language teaching became increasingly big business, with vast sums of money to be made through textbook sales, the promotion of an English-only methodology became commercially expedient. Histories of language teaching were written with new, modern and English-only methodologies at the apex of modernity, and traditional approaches that used translation relegated to the dungeons of language teaching history. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of this self-interested historicizing was the construction of ‘grammar-translation’ – that catch-all concept designed to describe and denigrate all forms of teaching and learning that taught grammar or brought other languages into the classroom. This label, as Anthony Howatt (1984: 131) points out, is misleading: ‘Coined by its opponents, it draws attention to two of the less significant features of the approach.’ Quite bizarrely, however, the world was split into two, with the vast majority still mired in unproductive, old-fashioned, premodern, monolithic grammar-translation teaching, while a small, enlightened modern coterie engaged in the principled practices of English-only communicative language teaching. Local practices were denigrated and despised, dismissed as dinosaurs. Native speaker English teachers travelled the world, able to market their monolingual skills above their bilingual counterparts; book publishers set up their stalls at conferences, and sang the benefits of their glossy, international, monolingual products; teacher educators were flown around the world to run seminars, to advise on how to shed outdated uses of other (outmoded) languages, and to teach using only English; and applied linguists colluded, developing theories, writing books, showing how English was the only language the world needed to teach English.
Of course, in spite of these efforts, translation has always nevertheless remained part of ELT in several ways. Hidden behind the focus on functional uses of English, the stress on communication and pragmatics, there remains a host of English language teachers around the world who have learned English as a language in translation, and who still allow these corrupting influences to creep into their classrooms. In their daily practices, the majority of teachers in the world have long used whatever languages in their classes get the job done, and have done so in far richer and more productive ways than their monolingual counterparts. Take, for example, this from a classroom in Sydney, where the students — all speakers of either Cantonese or Putonghua — are discussing with the teacher suitable food for pregnant mothers:

| S1 Eat oranges. Oranges is good, specially the sweet oranges | The class is engaged in an open and relevant discussion in English |
| Yes, egg is good for the baby | T adds more info |
| Bone. Drink bone soup, Gu lou a | Here S1 adds a gloss in Putonghua to explain ‘it’s bone’ |
| bone | T repeats back bone in English |
| Bou do di bone soup. Bou tsung koi zet. | S1 switches to Cantonese: Cook more bone soup. |
| Koi zet jing men dim gong a? | To supplement the calcium. How do you say calcium in English? |
| Calcium | T supplies the English term |

[Adapted from Leung (2005).]

Here we see ‘real communication’ in progress: the students are giving advice on good food for a pregnant mother, drawing on their own cultural and linguistic knowledge. Both the teacher and students are comfortable using the different languages at their disposal (English, Cantonese and Putonghua) to ensure that meanings carry reasonably well across the languages. And there is a good chance that in such interchanges a fair amount of language learning is going on.

None of this is to suggest that we should encourage those deadening practices of bad pedagogy where translation is a punitive exercise, a means to fill an hour of classroom time, a means of showing superior teacher knowledge, or a chance to reduce languages to mere equivalents of each other. But it does suggest that when we think of translation in an uneven world (cf. Radhakrishnan, 2005), we need to consider not only that uneven global linguistic field on which translation has to play, but also that pedagogical field from which it has already been given a red card, sent off, dismissed to scowl on the sidelines. As far as ‘best practice’ is concerned in ELT, translation is history. And as far as having a chance to enter the traffic of meaning through English, the road is blocked.

**Language fortresses, lingua francas and local foci**

Current thinking about the global spread of English has also fallen into the trap of becoming over-obsessed with English as a language unto itself, rather than focusing on
the ways in which English is always a language in translation. Debates over the role of English in Europe are caught between several competing positions. First, is the concern that the spread of English is threatening other European languages: ‘If inaction on language policy in Europe continues, at the national and supranational levels’, Robert Phillipson (2003: 192) warns, ‘we may be heading for an American-English only Europe.’ The perceived threat of English to European languages and cultures may, from this point of view, be countered by safeguarding diversity through the support of other European languages. As Claude Hagège (2006: 37) argues in *Combat pour le Français*, drawing on the work of Phillipson (2005), greater support for French is a crucial part of support for cultural and linguistic diversity more broadly: ‘défendre une culture, c’est aussi défendre la langue dans laquelle elle s’exprime’ [to defend a culture is also to defend the language in which it is expressed]. In the current context, Hagège argues, it is ‘la langue anglaise et la culture américaine qui sont, à l’heure actuelle, les bénéficiaires de la mondialisation’ (105 [the English language and American culture that are at present the beneficiaries of globalization]) and, ‘Il s’agit, en réalité, de prendre la mesure du territoire de l’anglais dans le monde, et singulièrement en Europe, où le milieu anglophone des affaires est à l’origine du processus par lequel le domaine des langues européennes, déjà amputé, est menacé de se réduire plus encore dans l’avenir’ (118 [in reality it is a question of sizing up the territory of English in the world, and particularly in Europe, where the Anglophone context of business is the start of the process by which the domain of European languages, already amputated, is threatened with even greater reduction in the future]).

Second, is a concern that the use of English across Europe is leading to ‘a simplified, pidginized but unstable “Euro-English” that inhibits creativity and expressiveness, whether English is used as a mother tongue or as a foreign language, a language that is spoken with so much imprecision that communication difficulties and breakdowns multiply’ (Phillipson, 2003: 176). From a different point of view, but striking a similar chord, Jennifer Jenkins has also warned that

if a policy of pluricentricity is pursued unchecked, in effect a situation of ‘anything goes’, with each Expanding Circle L1 group developing its own English pronunciation norms, there is a danger that their accents will move further and further apart until a stage is reached where pronunciation presents a serious problem to lingua franca communication.

(Jenkins, 2006: 36)

While for Phillipson the solution lies more in the support for other European languages against the tide of English use, for Jenkins the way to ‘safeguard mutual phonological intelligibility’ is to establish a core of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) pronunciation – or a lexicogrammatical core in the work of Barbara Seidlhofer (2001) – based on the actual negotiated use of non-native speakers of English.

While on one level usefully countering the potential damage wrought by incessant English language use, or reining in the centrifugal forces of divergence, both propositions raise several concerns. On the one hand, if defence against English is to be carried out through a new nationalism (the defence of diversity is the defence of national languages and cultures), we are left only with a model of diversity guaranteed by language fortification. Such a focus on *diversité* rather than the more dynamic
processes of diversalité (a term coined by creolist scholars) lacks an appreciation of the paradox at its heart: To defend diversity through a focus on language fortresses is to reinforce a vision of national languages that have been instrumental in the denial of diversity: ‘La créolité est une annihilation de la fausse universalité, du monolingualisme et de la pureté’ (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiант, 1993: 28 [créolité is an annihilation of false universality, monolingualism and purity]). As Raphaël Confiант argues, ‘la mondialisation créole valorise la “diversalité” c’est-à-dire le mélange, le partage des ancêtres et des identités, le non-cloisonnement des imaginaires’ (2006 [creole globalization valorizes diversalité, that is to say mixing, the sharing of ancestors and identities, the non-partitioning of the imaginary]). Put another way, while an argument for diversity through greater emphasis on European languages other than English may on one level take us beyond the threat of English monolingualism, it may also reinforce the same language ideologies if it does no more than pluralize the object from within the same epistemology. As Selma Sonntag (2003: 25) argues, ‘the willingness to use the language of human rights on the global level to frame local linguistic demands vis-à-vis global English may merely be affirming the global vision projected by American liberal democracy’.

On the other hand, if English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) work focuses always on the core of English, we are left with yet another centripetal model. As Rani Rubdy and Mario Saraceni put it:

In the end, the validity of the EIL/ELF proposal will probably depend upon whether or not it chooses to embrace a polymodel approach to the teaching of English or a monolithic one, whether it leads to the establishing and promoting of a single (or a limited form of) Lingua Franca Core for common use among speakers in the Outer and Expanding Circles, possibly stripped of any cultural influences, or whether it will be flexible enough to manifest the cultural norms of all those who use it along with the rich tapestry of linguistic variation in which they are embedded.

(Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006: 13)

At the heart of these current debates, then, is the question of whether a focus on English as a lingua franca, with its interest in commonalities across different uses of English, represents a pull towards the centre – albeit a new centre waiting to be described, rather than the old centres of inner circle (British or American, and so on) English – or whether it can be seen in terms of English divergence as ‘postcolonial speakers of English creatively negotiate the place of English in their lives’ (Canagarajah, 2006: 200).

The other corner of this triangular debate between different ways of defending diversity has been through a World Englishes (WE) focus. Proponents of this framework have often taken exception to what they claim to be the normativity of an ELF approach. Kachru and Nelson, for example, juxtapose World Englishes with terms such as ‘world English’ (Brutt Griffler, 2002), ‘English as an International Language’ (Jenkins, 2000), and ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ (Seidlhofer, 2001) which ‘idealize a monolithic entity called “English” and neglect the inclusive and plural character of the world-wide phenomenon’ (Kachru and Nelson, 2006: 2). And yet, while the World Englishes perspective has always sought to describe diversity and the centrifugal forces of English spread though local foci on variety, it also, paradoxically,
becomes ensnared in the same frameworks of language diversity that it needs to escape. As Paul Bruthiaux (2003: 161) points out, the descriptive and analytic inconsistency of the concentric circle model gives it little explanatory power, and its use of inconsistent criteria to categorize so-called varieties of English is confounded by a 'primarily nation-based model'. Thus it overlooks difference within regions and ascribes variety based on postcolonial political history: where a nation state was created, so a variety emerged. Ultimately, concludes Bruthiaux (2003: 161), 'the Three Circles model is a twentieth-century construct that has outlived its usefulness'. The World Englishes framework, therefore, while attempting to focus centrally on diversity of Englishes, does so along national lines (for example, Indian, Malaysian, Singaporean Englishes) and thus, like the language fortress defence, reproduces part of the framework it needs to avoid.

While at one level, there may be an important distinction between a WE approach, with its centrifugal focus on local variation, and an ELF approach with its centripetal focus on the development of regional varieties (European and Asian English), at another level, this is a matter only of relative scale. While studies of Indian English, for example, would fall into the first camp, it is also clear that Indian English is more chimerical than this terminology allows. As N. Krishnaswamy and Archana Burde observe 'Like Indian nationalism, “Indian English” is “fundamentally insecure” since the notion “nation-India” is insecure’ (1998: 63). Given the diversity of Indian languages and regions and the need to see India not so much as an imagined community but rather as an unimaginable community, it is unclear why Indian English itself should not be viewed as a lingua franca. And to discuss an entity called South Asian English, which comprises varieties across India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, is to talk in terms of a monolithic lingua franca English. While Kachru and others have long acknowledged the diversity within the supposed entities, this misses the point that the castigation of others for promoting monolithic English rather than diversity has to be done in more complex ways than mere pluralization. Thus, when Braj Kachru (2005: 39) focuses on ‘educated South Asian English’ rather than ‘Broken English’, he is surely open to the same critiques that he levels at the purveyors of ELF. As Arjuna Parakrama (1995: 25 – 6) argues: ‘The smoothing out of struggle within and without language is replicated in the homogenizing of the varieties of English on the basis of “upper-class” forms. Kachru is thus able to theorize on the nature of a monolithic Indian English.’ Similarly, Canagarajah observes that in Kachru’s attempt to systematize the periphery variants, he has to standardize the language himself, leaving out many eccentric, hybrid forms of local Englishes as too unsystematic. In this, the Kachruvian paradigm follows the logic of the prescriptive and elitist tendencies of the center linguists.

(Canagarajah, 1999: 180)

Looked at together, these three ways of approaching diversity in the face of the global spread of English – the linguistic fortress defence of other languages, the lingua franca attempt to describe English as used in negotiated contexts, and the local foci on Englishes that have become nativized in different parts of the world – we see several shared features. All three focus largely on form rather than meaning, and all three posit a core to English that is more or less stable. By assuming that the defence of
diversity can best be carried out by defending national languages, the linguistic fortress position works with a vision of hermetic languages that are inherently tied to national cultures, with diversity lying in the separate cores of language diversity (English, French, Greek, Japanese, and so on). By attempting to describe what is common to communication among non-native speakers of English, the ELF approach aims at the re-creation of a different core, de-centred from the former loci of correctness but re-centred in new canons of intelligible usage. By using a strategy of pluralization, the World Englishes perspective simultaneously posits a core entity that is English while excluding any other possibilities that destabilize this vision of many Englishes. The central concern that the debates between these rival conceptualizations leave uncontested is how we can understand diversity outside those very frameworks that are part of the problem. Neither a defence of national languages and cultures, nor a description of a core of English as a lingua franca, nor even a focus on plural Englishes adequately addresses the questions of a diversity of meanings. All tend to focus on English in its own presence, on English as a language with a core. While each approach provides useful grounds for dealing with English, we are also lacking here a means to provincialize English (cf. Chakrabarty, 2000), to look at English as a language in translation.

Translation in an uneven world

There is neither space nor reason here to address translation in all its necessity and impossibility (cf. Spivak, 2005), so I shall dwell only on some key concerns. Translation as I am interested in it here is concerned not so much with questions of literary translation as with concerns about what R. Radhakrishnan (2005) terms ‘translatability in an uneven world’ (p.12). Translation from this point of view is not so much a method of language teaching or an aspect of comparative literature but rather is a fundamental player on the global stage. As Spivak (1993: 179) remarks, drawing on a discussion with Michele Barrett, ‘the politics of translation takes on a massive life of its own if you see language as the process of meaning-construction’. From this perspective, it is possible to view all language use as a process of translation, thus questioning the assumption that translation is a mapping of items from one code to another. According to George Steiner (1975: 47), ‘inside or between languages, human communication equals translation. A study of translation is a study of language’. That is to say that communication between languages presents not so much the central process of translation but rather a special case: all communication involves translation. This renders translation as not the peripheral area it has been to much of applied linguistics, but rather the key to understanding communication. It also suggests that this boundary we set up between languages, making translation an issue when we speak ‘different languages’ but not when we speak the ‘same language’ is a distinction that is hard to maintain.

For Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 17), the ‘problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition . . . but as a problem of translation, as well’. What Chakrabarty is pointing to here is that we need to consider very seriously that translation produces ‘neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that
successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference’ (p.17). Walter Mignolo (2000: 205) describes Chakrabarty’s position as signalling ‘the death of history and the beginning of translation as a new form of knowledge that displaces the hegemonic and subaltern locations of disciplinary knowledge’. Thus ‘knowledge works as translation and translation works as knowledge, that is trans- rather than interdisciplin ary, undermining disciplinary foundations of knowledge’ (Mignolo, 2000: 208; original emphasis). As one element of what I have elsewhere called transgressive theory (Pennycook, 2007) therefore, translation, like transculturation (rather than the intercultural), makes difference and the need for boundary transgression central. As Ramanathan (2006b: 229) puts it: ‘Translations of texts from other languages make us re-think the assemblage of connectedness that we have assumed as ‘‘natural’’ and ‘‘appropriate’’ in the field, connections that have become heavily sedimented’.

This way of thinking about translation transgresses rather than maintains distinctions between languages (see Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). Translation is not so much a subordinate term to describe a practice between languages or within classrooms but rather a central aspect of social and global life that challenges the very notion of languages and their discrete operations. As Spivak suggests with respect to relations between languages for Indigenous Australians:

Given the rupture between the many languages of Aboriginality and the waves of migration and colonial adventure clustered around the Industrial Revolution narrative, demands for multilingual education here become risible. All we have is bilingualism, bilateral arrangements between idioms understood as essentially or historically private, on the one side, and English on the other, understood as the semiotic as such. This is the political violence of translation as transcoding, the contemporary translation industry about which many of us write. (Spivak, 2005: 241)

Understanding that we are dealing always with theory and translation in an uneven world (Radhakrishnan, 2003), that talk of bilingualism or multilingualism in such contexts is to overlook the vast disparities between languages, is crucial if we are to see how translation in relation to English can be anything other than transcoding.

If we acknowledge the problem of the dominance of English as ‘the semiotic as such’, as well as the problem of talking about bi- and multi-lingualism as if these were the sole answer to issues of diversity, we are left with the question: how else in the face of English can we pursue diversity? In the same way that we need to move beyond a focus on linguistic fortresses, lingua francas and local foci, so we also need to see that a focus on heritage languages, multilingualism or foreign language learning may not take us far enough. As Kramsch (2006) warns, we need to ask what meanings are being borne by languages, what cultural politics underlie the learning and use of different languages. It is not enough to assume that more is better – multilingualism, multilingual language policies, more foreign language education – in simple numerical terms (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). As Radhakrishnan argues:

If colonial modernity at the height of its hubris dreamed of one world, based on ‘dominance without hegemony’, then a post-modern and post-colonial condition
based on the deconstructive truths of a world that is nothing but translation is
indeed well positioned not just to read modernity against its much vaunted
monolingualism, but go well beyond to imagine non binary possibilities regarding
the One and Many (emphasis in original).

(Radhakrishnan, 2005: 21 – 2)

Once again, as with the example of classroom multilingualism above, this flow of
languages in and out of each other is the norm across the world. It is English language
teaching that has sought to prevent this flow (Pennycook, 2005). To take the domain
of hip-hop, for example, it is common to find languages mixed together and used in
complex relations of translation. Whether mixing French, English, Haitian Creole
and Spanish in Montreal (Sarkar and Allen, 2007), Chavacano, Tagalog, Visaya, and
English in Mindanao in the Philippines (Pennycook, 2007), or simply Japanese and
English in Japan, languages are both mixed and dependent on translation for meaning.
Take, for example these lyrics from Japanese D J Tonk (2004) (Move on) where the
English word ‘listen’, written in katakana (rissun), followed by 2 (meaning ‘to’); and
‘our blues moonlight’ (in katakana: buruusu muunraito) is juxtaposed with the
traditional-sounding Japanese (in kanji) ‘under the moonlight’ (tsukiakari no shita).
Here, then, we have the old and the new, English and Japanese, contrasted, mixed
and combined in a way that makes them hard to disentangle.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lyrics</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>リッスン2俺達の</td>
<td>rissun two oretachino</td>
<td>Listen to our blues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ブルースムーンラ</td>
<td>buruusu muunraito</td>
<td>moonlight under the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>イト月明かりの下</td>
<td>tsukiakari no shita</td>
<td>moonlight.</td>
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Conclusion: ELT as translingual activism

Kramsch (2006) points out that while monolingualism should indeed be seen as a
handicap, we should also be wary of an assumption that a language implies an easy
relationship with a culture. Monolingualism, she argues, is the name not only for a
linguistic handicap, but for a dangerously monolithic traffic in meaning. Here, then,
is an argument, following Michael Halliday (2002), that we need to take
semiodiversity as seriously as glossodiversity, the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings
within a language as seriously as a multiplicity of languages (Pennycook, 2004). This argument urges us to question
the epistemologies or linguistic ideologies on which support for diversity may be based. Thus a rights-based approach to support
for linguistic diversity and opposition to the English-Only movement in the USA, as
Sonntag (2003: 25) points out, ‘has not fundamentally altered the American projection of its vision of global English...because a rights-based approach
to promoting linguistic diversity reinforces the dominant liberal democratic
project rather than dismantling it’. If oppositional strategies are conducted from within the same framework as that which they oppose, they run the danger of reproducing those same positions. As I suggested above, this is the trap into which the language fortress, lingua franca and World Englishes frameworks fall. They reproduce precisely those ways of thinking about language that they need to get beyond.

For us as educators, this argument opens up the potential to see our work as contributing to diversity not only in terms of increasing the number of people using languages or the number of languages being used, but also in terms of the breadth of meanings available within a language. This is where the emphasis on translation is crucial. It is one of the great crimes of the global hegemony of communicative language teaching over the last few decades that not only did it promote a monolingual, native-speaker-norm-based, and educationally shallow version of English (or other languages), but it eschewed the complexity and depth of understanding language education as a project of translation. Translation, argues Michael Cronin (2003: 133), plays a crucial role within globalization, since one of its primary functions is ‘to replenish the intertextual resources of a culture’. While the responsibility of the translator is conventionally thought of in terms of giving a fair and accurate representation of a source text, such ‘textual scrupulousness’ only addresses part of the contemporary responsibility of the translator, since there must also be ‘an activist dimension to translation which involves an engagement with the cultural politics of society at national and international levels’ (134).

This notion of activist translation links to Lawrence Venuti’s (1998) translingualism, which aims to disrupt the assimilatory and domesticating tendencies that eradicate difference through translation. Indeed, Venuti’s approach to translation takes the position that to

shake the regime of English, a translator must be strategic both in selecting foreign texts and in developing discourses to translate them. Foreign texts can be chosen to redress patterns of unequal cultural exchange and to restore foreign literatures excluded by the standard dialect, by literary canons, or by ethnic stereotypes.

(Venuti, 1998: 10–11)

It is important to understand translation here neither in terms of the reductive and pejorative role it has been given within language teaching (so-called grammar-translation), nor only as the activity conducted by those who work to translate a text in one language into another. Rather, it is part of a much broader traffic in meaning. If language education can see itself not as a functionalist enterprise always in the service of other agendas (specific purposes) but rather as a practice of translingual activism, the traffic of meanings would be far better served.

The notion of English as a language in translation (ELT) may sit usefully alongside the more common use of ELT since it draws attention to the urgency of dealing with English as always in relation to other languages. There are several dimensions to this view of ELT as translingual activism. First, is a broad vision of the global traffic of meaning. When you translate, you enter the traffic, and with the role
that English now plays in the world, this is a congested highway. In order to unsettle the role that English plays in the world, as language educators we need to bring translation as a broad cultural practice fully into the centre of our practice. Second, therefore, is the reincorporation of translation into ELT practice, the recognition that English is always a language in translation. Here we might start to think in terms of what James Clifford (1997: 39) calls ‘translation terms’ for opening up questions of difference: ‘a word of apparently general application used for comparison in a strategic and contingent way...’ Travel has an inextinguishable taint of location by class, gender, race, and a certain literariness.’ Translation in and out of English in this uneven world needs a focus on such terms which get us some distance and fall apart, concepts which in their supposed commonality and globality may conceal levels of difference that need to be opened up. Finally then, the focus on activism draws attention to the point that this is not a question of methodology, of more efficient language use in the classroom, of revelling in difference and the fascinations of cultural incommensurability; rather, this is a question of unsettling common relations, not only of entering the traffic but of disrupting the traffic. ELT as translingual activism is about increasing the possible meanings available to those we teach.

To take the two terms – translation and activism – as central to the English language teaching enterprise is to contest current pedagogical discourses in a number of ways. It is to disregard the long history of translation eschewal, where the use of languages other than English is denigrated as old-fashioned, as causing interlingual interference, as the strategy of the non-native teacher who knows no better, as indelibly tied to the chalk-and-talk methodologies that focus on grammar. It is to oppose the many interests and complicities that have supported the use of English and only English in classrooms, where English has been seen as a language that operates only in its own presence. It is to reintroduce translation in all its complexity into English language teaching, to open up and explore the many possible meanings that can start to flow in and out of languages in relation to English. In its focus on activism, it is to see this as political action, as a way of confronting the possible threats to diversity posed by English. It is to do so not through the defence of other language fortresses, or a focus on a new core of English or a plurality of Englishes, but rather through a focus on the traffic of meaning. Translingual activism for a language always in translation such as English presents many challenges but also many possibilities for the English language teacher.

Notes

1 A reference to Kachru’s 3-circle model, where the expanding circle refers to all those countries where English is learned and used as a ‘foreign’ (rather than a ‘second’ or ‘native’) language.

2 This is a form of discursive disruption in relation to the overly stable acronyms of the ELT world. I have similarly proposed (Pennycook, 2001) that Languages other than English (LOTE) might be replaced by LOBE, languages othered by English, or that the ‘F’ in TEFL might be better considered as ‘feral’ rather than foreign (Pennycook, 2004): Teaching English as a Feral Language.
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