

Prologue

The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious, and it cannot fail to have been already noticed, at least here and there, by others. Yet I have not found attention paid to it specifically.

(Austin, 1962:1)

Often our English teachers give us a story to read, and then they will ask us to report on what we think the reading was about. However, for us, using a language is not only about interpreting other peoples' ideas, but also about producing our own ideas! When learning and using English, we want to leave behind that level of interpreting the ideas of others or reporting what other people said. That level is only practice. We need to go beyond the idea of only practising and acquiring skills. We need to start expressing what we think and what we feel in English.

What we need exactly is to be ourselves in this other language!

(Braulio and Freda, offering their views on the use of English)

To establish one's identity in respect to the language one speaks is important. However, at the moment, I do not know what type of English I speak. I have never been in England or in the United States or any other English speaking country. So I do not have any reason to say that I speak a specific type of English. Sometimes I think that I have created my own style, with my own peculiar errors. So far, these mistakes have been tolerated, but I know that it will not be like that all the time. I am also aware that I have not adopted a native speaker accent. To sum up, I have a Mexican accent. English is mine from the very moment I put it into practice and I am able to establish communication. But when I say that the English language is mine, I do not mean to say that I want to take the culture that comes with it.

(Raimunda's views on speaking English with an accent)

We talk in English a lot and ... when we don't have anything better to do, you know ... just hanging around, just talking. In the middle of a conversation, then we realise that we need a word in English. Sometimes we look it up in the dictionary; we were really surprised that we found *cabeza de chorlito* in English. It is 'scatterbrain'. We use it a lot now ... Well, with 'donkey' it was different, we used it so much in Spanish, and of course we didn't need to use the dictionary. It is perfect for *burro*. When somebody does not understand something in the class, that's a donkey. Or when someone is slow, that's also a donkey. It is a joke. It is just between us. It started one day when we did not have anything better to do ... and now it is so common among us.

(Freda, talking about the way she and her clique use some English words)

The above are some observations that students at the *Centro de Idiomas* (Language Centre) at the state university in Oaxaca have made about their pursuit of learning, using and teaching English as an additional language. How can we understand the concerns of these students? What do Braulio and Freda mean by wishing 'to be ourselves in this other language?' What is the range of social and cultural issues that would support Raimunda's desire not to give up her Mexican identity as she pursues the learning of English? What is the importance of Freda's desire to play with this other language?

Their questions and observations provide ethnographic texture to the concerns of applied linguistics and cultural anthropology concerning the relations between language, agency, identity, culture and social context. Folded into their comments are questions about the discursive properties of Standard English and English language instruction. These students want to know who controls how they perform languages; when they can play with them, especially if these are languages that are not theirs *per se*; and how, as young Oaxacans, can they locate themselves in these social and cultural dynamics and issues. These are not questions solely concerning the language learning realities of Oaxacan students. With the dominant role that English plays in the contemporary globalised political economy of the existing postcolonial world, students and educators from Sri Lanka (Canagarajah, 2006a) to East Los Angeles are confronting the same questions (Pennycook, 2007).

In dealing with these issues, the students in Oaxaca are composing forms of linguistic activities that we refer to as *performing English with a postcolonial accent*. For us, the postcolonial condition represents the political, social and

cultural realities of what constitutes the everyday lives of the actors entangled in the 'whirlwind of globalisation' (Castells, 2000a). How these students learn, appropriate, modify, and redefine their use of English as a series of multilingual social and cultural performances is what we mean by a *postcolonial accent*.

We argue that the *Centro* represents a contact zone in which the students confront the demands of Standard English through various forms of language play in both Spanish and English (Canagarajah, 2004; Pratt, 1991). They use their cliques as safe houses where they can play with both languages. Within these safe houses, these students are constructing various language learning cultures as they play with their own styles of language creativity. For us, learning cultures involves two coexisting domains: the social and cognitive dynamics of language learning, and the overall social and cultural context of that learning. Through an ethnographic analysis of the linguistic, social and cultural activities of these students at the *Centro*, we can illustrate how their performances provide them with the means to explore various identity locations that give them space to move beyond the hegemony of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2005).

How do we plan to address the questions and issues we have raised above? First, we will provide a brief description of the setting of this research and our methods.

The Ethnography of the *Centro de Idiomas*

The *Centro de Idiomas* is the language teacher training centre for the *Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca* (UABJO), the state university of Oaxaca. The state of Oaxaca is located in the Southwest region of Mexico and has a population of over 3.2 million people. The state of Oaxaca is noted for its ethnic diversity, stunning ecological variety and extreme poverty in the countryside. The university is located in the city of Oaxaca which has a population of close to half a million, and is the political, commercial and communication centre of the state. The city is noted for its colonial architecture, ethnic and social diversity and culinary excellence. Oaxaca is also a city that has many of the problems associated with urbanisation in Mexico: shortage of housing, limited employment possibilities for those in the popular classes, traffic congestion, and almost daily political protests. In terms of European colonialism, the peoples of the Americas could be said to be the first postcolonial societies. Mexico's history of dependency on the United States, and Oaxaca's history of internal colonialism, can be seen as social formations in which the social actors continue to navigate the hegemonic terrains of postcolonialism (Gutmann, 2002).

We have been working over the last four years on an ethnographic representation of the cultural and language activities of students and teachers at the *Centro de Idiomas*. We have collected various life histories of students and professors and conducted a census survey of over four hundred students and faculty. We have also carried out numerous interviews with the students on a wide range of issues dealing with language learning and use and the various investments that students have made in pursuing their goals. We have had lengthy conversations with students on how they have formed their own learning cultures and how these learning cultures provide them with safe houses for their pursuit of English. We also have collected observational data on student social life and their styles of participation in their classrooms. We have presented these ethnographic data bases in their various narrative styles throughout the text. We contend that the strongest method for knowledge formation is through the narrativisation of the actions and behaviours of the social actors being represented (Bial, 2004). We are not doing an ethnography of speech, communication or language *per se*. We are doing an ethnography of the social and cultural context of the performances of these students' language practices. Our data, therefore, gathered in the form of interviews, observation notes, speech transcripts, protocols, etc., is woven together in a narrative form with the purpose to illustrate and interpret the context within which these actions take place. This mode of presentation also allows us to show how these students perceive and interpret that context and their location within it. See the appendix for an expanded explanation of our methods.

To illustrate and represent these performances we have divided the book into three main parts. Part I (Chapter One and Two) sets the framework and context in which we are basing our analysis and reflections. Part II contains the ethnographic narratives which are clustered into three themes. Chapter Three and Four focus on students, either individually or within their social groups, and Chapter Five presents these students trying out new roles as language users. Part III concludes by putting together the contents of the two previous parts. What follows is a brief description of each chapter.

The first chapter, titled *The Premise: Performing English with a postcolonial accent* tells the story of the intellectual journey we took in order to understand how these young Oaxacan students were performing English with a postcolonial accent. In this journey we moved from the local perspective of the *Centro de Idiomas* to the globalised postcolonial world of multiculturalism and interculturalism. This involved visiting the discursive locations in applied linguistics and cultural anthropology that address the interrelationships between language, culture,

identity and agency. These relations include the deconstruction of native-speakerism, understanding the social invention and disinvention of the language regimes, and recognising the performative dynamics of language practices. The resulting challenge of this journey was to use ethnography in order to account for these processes in the everyday language performances of these students.

The second chapter is titled '*I'm very proud I didn't have to pay to get into the Centro: The social and economic context for performing English with a postcolonial accent in Oaxaca.*' To set the stage for these performances of English with a postcolonial accent, we discuss the overall socio-cultural and economic context that the students at the *Centro* deal with. To do this, we provide the stories of two students: the first one is about how Claribel was able to get into the *Centro* without paying a *mordida* (bribe); the second story is about how Alberto had to use some *palanca* (influence) to pay someone to get into the *Centro*. From these two stories we explore the following questions: what do these two stories tell us about the complex social and economic dynamics of language education in Mexico and Oaxaca? What do these stories tell us about the structure of the university and the *Centro*? And what do these stories tell us about how students perform their social life at the *Centro*? Moreover, in this chapter we decided to include a brief guest essay narrating the social movement that sprouted in 2006 in Oaxaca. In some way or another, some of the students in this study became involved in it.

The third chapter is titled '*They think that because you speak another language you have changed!*' *Ethnographic portraits of how students perform at the Centro de Idiomas English.* In it we are able to show how the students at the *Centro* are being themselves in this 'other' language. We represent a diversity of learning styles and performances that these students have created for dealing with English. To do this we present ethnographic portraits of the everyday lives of the students in order to represent how, in performing English, they are actively pursuing cultural capital, constructing new identity locations and using their own personal agency. In these portraits we introduce six students from the *Centro* and tell their stories: how Nour has navigated the social locations of gender, ethnicity and social class in the process of learning English; how Facundo found the *Centro de Idiomas* a safe house in terms of his sexuality and social class; how Jorge found the *Centro* to be a theatre for the performance of his politics; how Elena is shifting her class position from the *cantina* to the classroom through the pursuit of linguistic capital; how César is redefining his indigenous ethnic identity (Chinanteco) through the way he performs English and how Yolanda is using her indigenous ethnic identity (Trique) to make a claim on English userhood.

In the fourth chapter, *Exorcising the ghost of the native speaker in the contact zone: The use of safe houses in the construction of learning cultures*, we illustrate how many students like Raimunda are redefining their own identities as Mexicans as they construct and participate in their bilingual speech communities. We show how the *Centro de Idiomas* has become a contact zone for learning English, as well as a place where students can construct their learning cultures and find safe houses that shelter their identity constructions. We discuss how students use their network of friends (cliques), social spaces, and interactions both in, as well as out of, the classroom as safe houses for building up their learning cultures. We also explore how these students' performances of English give them access to the user rights of English and establish relationships of affinity, that is, interculturalism, with other non-native speakers of English.

In the fifth chapter titled *'It is not about the accent, it is about having the confidence to say what you want': Moving between language learning and language use*, we explore how the students at the *Centro de Idiomas*, through performing English with a postcolonial accent, are able to move from their learning cultures to cultures of English language use. This involves a discussion of how a particular group of students at the *Centro* wanted to play a role in the decision making process of the curriculum; the story of a group of students and a faculty member at the *Centro* who created their own poems in English and then how those poems were used to teach English; the narrative of a young teacher who has just left the university and is facing the challenge of teaching undergraduate students; and the story of Ervin, who has found that his English can not only give him satisfaction and money but also misfortunes.

The sixth chapter, *Towards a politics of language affinity*, is the conclusion of our study. In this chapter we connect our conceptual view of applied linguistics and cultural anthropology to the journey of the students as they have been performing English with a postcolonial accent in the multicultural and multilingual context of Oaxaca and Mexico. From these connections we develop our model of the politics of language affinity expressed in how these students wanted to be themselves in these language performances; in seeking the validation of their performance in terms of communicative success; and in their search for modes of contact with other users of English in the postcolonial world in which we live. We argue that their quest is based upon their claim of language userhood and their rejection of the assertions of language ownership. As a means to summarise what we present, we offer suggestions on what our findings imply for language learning and teaching.

It is now time to enter the theatre of these student performances.