

## The 2010 Churchill Lecture

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Churchill Lecture 2010: "Communication and Otherness: bridging the cultural divide"

This lecture explores the challenges and opportunities available to us to think creatively, sympathetically, openly and to act inventively to bridge the cultural boundaries that hold us back from engaging with Otherness productively and to find ways to democratise our intercultural exchanges through the English speaking Union.

Dr Caroline Hatcher

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## INTRODUCTION

When many people think of Churchill, they think of a war-time prime minister who made difficult war decisions on how the UK, and by implication, Australia, as a Commonwealth

country, would conduct ourselves in a time of war. He is remembered for leading us out of one of the most brutal periods of our history. However, out of the ashes of that assault on our humanity, Churchill emerged as a man of letters who represented a commitment to the ideals of freedom and the significance of change and diversity in allowing any great people to blossom and flower at their best.

The most significant international recognition of Churchill's contribution to our capacity for high ideals and beauty, and clarity of expression of thought came when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953 for his "mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values" (Nobel Prize Citation). He was honoured by his contemporaries, and one of them, UK Daily Telegraph journalist, JH Plumb, praised Churchill for his capacity for writing with "narrative power, ..fine judgment of war and politics, and even more because it reflect(ed) a tradition of what Englishmen in the hey-day of the Empire thought and felt about their country's past" .

In receiving his award, Churchill put his purpose so eloquently when he said: Let us therefore confront the clatter and rigidity we see around us with tolerance, variety and calm. (Nobel prize speech).

However, while praise for Churchill's work is often captured in terms of the beauty, even poetical quality of his ideas, Churchill remained a communicator to the core. In his own words: "Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people" (Churchill).

And so, as one university academic who has spent years seeking to understand the complexities and the essence of communication in its many intercultural forms, I stand before you greatly honoured and humbled to deliver this 2010 Churchill Lecture to encourage you to continue the honourable work so ably captured in his History of the English Speaking Peoples. Churchill laboured to pay tribute to the ideals of freedom and courage (which he called the "first of all human qualities"), and he maintained his commitment to effective communication throughout his

life. Churchill put it so simply: “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak: courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen” (Churchill).

Churchill was, above all, a respector of diversity and always the first to recognise that addressing “English-speaking peoples in no way implies any sense of restriction to use his words to the Preface of the book. Indeed, he argued that they achieve their best when they “preserve, nourish and develop” the institutions conceived in Britain and let flower as he said, “in their own ways” 9 (p. viii). These personal commitments are embodied through his personal mission to support the English Speaking Union who is hosting this event tonight.

Thus, this lecture tonight is about the not politics of war but instead, the politics of peace.

As a communication focus has formed the basis of my identity as an academic over a period of thirty years, I am drawn to the power and influence of language itself in shaping how we think. So, the word “Union” in our association holds special interest for me.

Western philosophical thought naturally leads us to a binary way of expressing ourselves, so it leads us to comparing , for example, night/day; weak/strong; same /different; self/other; and union/not union. The idea of binary opposites is a natural structural device that our English language uses to help us make sense of the world. With his typical imaginative tour de force, Churchill suggested the ideal and the word “union” in The English speaking Union to emphasise the importance of “the bringing together of many parts/of differences” rather than of “sameness” as a source of freedom, vision and enduring nourishment for a culture.

## OTHERNESS AND DIFFERENCE

Let’s explore this idea of Otherness and of difference for a few moments. It wasn’t until the eighteenth century that the awakening of the Enlightenment and of humanism brought us awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural and spiritual values of other cultures. Our sense of the meaning of the idea of Otherness was born in seeing our selves, not as central to what it is to be human, but also by closing a period of our history based on the idea of the lack of civilisation and of the idea of “wildness” of the Other (Kapunscinki) .

A new language and vocabulary started to emerge from the late eighteenth century where Goethe dreamed of the emergence of a world literature and concepts such as “world government” and “citizen of the world” arose. Even though the word “savage” was still in use at that time, it was supplemented with the adjective “noble” to create, for example, our reference to our indigenous forefathers here in Australia as “noble savages”.

Our strivings to understand Others further led to the great anthropological studies where researchers such as Malinowski and Margaret Mead studied Other Melanesian tribes, those of the Pacific and Africa and gradually, later, closer to home, those of the Chicago School who studied homeless people, professional groups and the like in the early twentieth century. What they learned was that to understand Other was to come to understand Self better too.

The final major shift and recognition that offered a way to understand Otherness came when philosophers, such as Emmanuel Levinas identified that the Other was not a mass of people but rather that the Other is always an individual and interpersonally knowable.

Growing up in the years when mass society was forming in Europe in the totalitarian systems of communism and fascism, he was witness to the tragic results of the anonymity and indifference to others. Of course, the most terrible symbol of this remains the Holocaust. He argued that if we see the Other as an individual we can care more. “Individually we are wiser and better, less inscrutable. Becoming part of a group can change the same quiet friendly individual in to a devil” (Kapusinski, p. 36).

It is with sensitivity to these dangers that we need to observe and react to our world carefully. In a world in which, at the press of a key, we can communicate with those across the world, there is a reduced sense of isolation and indeed, in Australia at the moment, even a sense of “closing in” as we endlessly debate what to do with the ◆boats◆! Time and space collapse and the question of cultural identity becomes increasingly complex. It is understandable that we feel these concerns.

As British cultural theorist, Stuart Hall (1996), suggests:

Our “identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render “outside”. In a so-called all inclusive and connected world, it is hard to imagine how diverse cultural identities can be maintained despite claims by cultural theorists like Ien Ang that even the culture of the Other is absorbed, reworked, made over and made one’s own.

As a simple illustration of the reasonableness of Ang’s argument, I ask you to reflect on what your favourite food is. For a number of people in the room, it might be Chinese or Thai. Many Australians have simply reworked this cultural commodity to “make it their own”.

But perhaps one way to draw attention to the challenges of “difference” and Otherness, I could look in the mirror at (my)Self and difference. Here I would like to draw on my own experience as a sojourner in Japan some years ago where I had the incredible experience of working beside generous Japanese academic colleagues who shared their understandings and fears about globalisation with me.

Simultaneously, I experienced what it is like to be silenced by a lack of access to the power of the Japanese language, which can be acquired, like all languages, through years of painstaking and intensive training. As an Australian whose first language is English, I am used to being able to take the easy path, using English with ease and expecting that English will be used in most cultural settings. I’m sure many of you have travelled widely with ease because of the dominance of English as an international language.

As well as experiencing a sense of inadequacy as a non-native Japanese speaker, as a sojourner, I also “re-experienced” my own culture. Hearing about one’s culture from others, through images that sustain the domestic and international narratives, is also illuminating and raises one’s consciousness about the ways culture gets reified and frozen through stereotyping. One example is the surprise I often was faced with when it was noted that I did not speak like Paul Hogan and when the broad vowels of “good-day” did not roll easily from my lips. I am sure many of you have experienced a similar reaction!

It is easy to see that understanding Other beyond stereotyping is a challenging process for everyone.

Yesterday I returned from China where I attended the Pacifica and Asian communication association conference. We were addressed by the vice President of the university and founding father of the association who both mounted impassioned pleas for Eastern academics to “make a difference” in the world by articulating clearly the differences in communication styles between Western and Eastern communicators.

But what are the implications of our heightened sense of the Other?

I'd like to draw here on the jazz metaphor to think about how cultures have the potential to grow and change, an idea so ably captured in Churchill's history of the English Speaking Peoples. For the jazz musician, improvisation is a seductive, almost hypnotic experience. Members of a jazz group start together with some fixed melody and rhythm, and then, one by one or together, are free to experiment and explore the possibilities to create a beautiful new composition.

After some exploration, they always return to the base melody, a signal to the rest of the group that it is someone else's turn. The English language has similar possibilities of improvisation and the rules to help us understand each other. Language is emergent and opportunistic and represents the on-going development of a culture rather than a static and fixed form.

Let me illustrate:

In a delightful book, entitled *Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders and What they Mean*, Michael Erard reports that until someone invents a pill that makes people say only what they intend to, the average normal English speaker will continue to make as many as seven to twenty-two slips of the tongue a day and will have two to four moments each day where finding the right word or name takes embarrassingly too much time.(p. 243).

Aside: You may be surprised to learn that there are linguists who make a life-time study of such practices.

Thus, the English native language speaker as well as those becoming proficient in the language too have the capacity and tendency for disfluency and linguists have identified that if you are interesting in what you have to say, the slips and blunders are not noticed and not important.

Here we see the opportunity for tolerance and openness to the diversity of English language use alongside opportunities to enjoy the richness of language at its most potent and polished forms in English literature and speech.

These experiences and ideas have made me think about the resources of language, including the grammar, vocabulary and patterns of thinking and feeling that both open up and close down the possibilities for genuine communication.

This has led me to two questions that I would like to pose and my reflections on some possible responses:

Is the English language, as a medium for international communication, capable of accommodating the diverse ways that we think, feel and speak?

Is this a recipe for homogenising communicative interaction and robbing us of the cultural diversity so admired by Churchill?

The cards may be stacked against diversity. I was particularly reminded of this when listening to the concerns raised by non-native English speakers in various forums. For example, in 2001, the French Attaché, speaking in French at the Japanese Association for English Language Teaching Conference near Tokyo, made an impassioned plea to halt the drive towards the complete dominance of English as the medium of creation and collaboration. He argued that cultural diversity will be lost without some pressures to counter-balance the dominant position of English. While this rivalry between England and France is legendary, the French Attaché's call to maintain other international recognised languages, alongside English, seems wise.

European languages such as Spanish and Asian languages from the economic power houses of China and Japan, with their vast, prosperous and widespread overseas populations, could make similar claims. The calls of my colleagues at the conference in China I mentioned earlier reminded again that this issue is an on-going challenge despite the seemingly inevitable march of

English as the global international language.

In our enthusiasm for English, we must be careful to not repeat the mistakes of our colonial past, and not to substitute a form of “linguistic imperialism” in its place. Churchill himself, in his rousing speech in 1940, “House of Many Mansions” concluded:

“The day will come when the joybells will ring again throughout Europe, and when victorious nations, masters not only of their foes but also of themselves, will plan and build in justice, in tradition, and in freedom, a house of many mansions where there will be room for all.”

Of course, this diversity may cause some problems for communication, but the pay-offs for maintaining diversity through a healthy respect for the different ways in which we encode messages, depending on our cultural background, are important to remember.

The very explicit vocabularies of the English language, when used by Western cultures, may be adequate as expressions of autonomy, egalitarianism, and self-esteem for example.

However, the language and logic of English may not so readily translate when Eastern expressions of the values of harmony, collectivism and face concerns are required. In their need for indirectness to maintain the values of harmony, Eastern communicators, using English, may seem, from a Western communication perspective, as indecisive, prone to avoidance, and inconsistent.

Similarly, Westerners may be seen by their Eastern counterparts, as too direct, aggressive and unaccommodating.

One example raised by my Asian colleagues this week was the use of touch to communicate affection. One Chinese colleague talked of having to deal with hugs offered to indicate friendship when she lived in the United states and one professor commented on “kissing” as a far from universal form of affection.

Problems of a similar order arise when speakers of the Romantic languages, such as French and Spanish, communicate with their English speaking counterparts whom they feel are far too task oriented and not careful enough about relationships.

The outcome of using English universally may be the eroding of cultural meaning and the weakening of communicative competence for us all.

For example, the challenge of the quality of communicative competence has been recognised in Singapore where, after years of compulsory classroom bilingual learning (both Chinese and English), the government has moved to reconsider its policy, to allow students to concentrate on building their language competence in one chosen language.

While the uniform development of the international language of English may make business more efficient, it does not necessarily make our thinking more inventive or our interactions more democratic.

Alder (1991), a researcher on group communication found that the task performance of culturally diverse groups was either very effective or very ineffective while monocultural groups were closely centred on average effectiveness. She concluded that cultural diversity could lead to superior performance when the group was managed well. This suggests to me that having to think hard about a problem from a variety of perspectives, including using language to define the problem itself, has the potential to produce better answers. Accounting for differences can potentially offer more options.

The challenge ahead for us is to ensure that what counts as knowledge and the ways in which that is communicated are the products of intercultural negotiation and not monocultural domination.

In practical terms, I'm not suggesting that we can manage to work together without the tools of a sophisticated international language mechanism, but I am arguing that one international language, such as English, can act as a coloniser, as certainly as an invasion can.

The emergence of increased inter-cultural communication, via the English language, can be enriched or stifled by the growing pressure to speak in one way, through one set of cultural frameworks, and with one accent and vocabulary. It is all up to us to use this resource wisely.

However, as with all resource ownership, for those whose first language is English, there is a special responsibility. We need to create in our society, something approaching what democracy theorist Jurgen Habermas has called the “ideal speech situation” where the opportunities to speak and be heard are equally available to everyone in the interaction, when the rules of the game are to speak in English.

I reflect back here, to the mirror of Self I described earlier in the lecture, where I felt silenced by my limited capacity to contribute in Japanese and that sense of powerlessness I experienced. If we can place ourselves in the position of Other and be sensitive to the challenges of the language for the non-native speaker, our English Speaking Union will truly be all the stronger for it.

## CONCLUSION

The question still remains: is the valuing of diversity and Other, this absolute openness to difference sustainable? If everything is margins, can there only be, ultimately disintegration? While English remains the main international language, the requirement for it to bear the full weight of cultural differences, cultural adaptations, cultural inventions, and cultural clashes, over the coming years, will certainly be demanding.

Our capacity to think inventively, sympathetically, openly and creatively about the future will be enhanced if we can use all the riches that this extraordinary diversity offers to engage with our regions and the rest of the world. However, we may need to keep in mind that: ‘One way streets can only lead to dead ends. The same may be said for culture.

The challenge for us all is to find ways to democratise our intercultural exchanges so that the power relationships of the past, that leaders like Churchill fought so hard to free us from, are not duplicated in new forms of linguistic imperialism. Perhaps Churchill should have the last word: “attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference”.