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Analysing perceptions of English in rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on research analysing perceptions of English in rural Bangladesh, the paper explores the ideological and practical issues involved in the promotion of English in this context, with respect to the language's former and current associations with colonial and imperialist agendas, and the politico-cultural situation of present-day Bangladeshi society. The analysis – which is underpinned by a blending of world Englishes and postcolonial theory – reveals how dominant discourses of English as a language of global opportunity persist in these rural communities, despite the limited opportunities for using the language or developing proficiency in it. By representing these 'subaltern' views on English in what is an under-researched context, the paper offers critical insights into the impact of English-language education on rural Bangladeshis' social prospects, communities and cultural identities.

INTRODUCTION

In discourses about the role of English in present-day Bangladesh the language is often framed as a valuable resource for both personal and national development (Hamid & Erling 2016; Seargeant & Erling 2011). The fundamental premise on which such framing rests is English's status as an international lingua franca, and particularly its perceived role as the *de facto* language for engagement in global economic markets (Graddol 2010). The promotion of English in these terms is operationalised by means of large-scale international development programmes, for example the English in Action (2010) project (see below). With English language education playing an increasingly important role within society, the question thus arises as to what impact this is having on cultural politics and cultural identity issues in Bangladeshi society. The background context here is one in which Bangladesh is a territory which formed part of a British colony, and in which the postcolonial history of the country and its founding has been marked by a politics explicitly fought out around language issues. This history, along with the political issues and sensitivities which it has engendered, makes Bangladesh a particularly interesting canvas for examining the cultural politics of a 'global' English in the context of postcolonialism, as language politics have been and continue to be a highly salient element in discourses of national identity in the country.

The aim of this paper is to explore these issues through a critical analysis of the perceptions of English as revealed in a study conducted in rural Bangladesh that examined the attitudes and aspirations of local community members to the impact of English-language

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education on their social prospects, communities and cultural identities. The analysis draws on theoretical insights from postcolonialism and world Englishes in order to explore the role played by English in the historico-cultural dynamics of Bangladesh and in the perceptions of its future development. Both world Englishes and postcolonial theory foreground and legitimise the voices and practices of the subaltern, and as such are well suited to the analysis of language practices and language-related issues faced by people in diverse contexts such as this. One of the direct effects of these two theoretical paradigms is to have led to an exploration of previously relatively unexplored contexts such as rural Bangladesh, and to give space and legitimacy to voices that may have previously been excluded from the discourse. Both approaches provide a range of conceptual and analytical tools which help us understand the complexity the cultural politics of English in situations such as this, where current English-language practices and ideologies are not simply a question of hegemony, nor of unproblematic agency, but instead patterns of belief around the role of English – and by extension attitudes towards English-language education – are a negotiation of past and present language politics, along with an evaluation of the necessities of engagement with a combination of local and global social forces.

To this end the paper is structured as follows. It begins with an introduction to the context of Bangladesh and the important role played by language politics in its founding, history and culture. The paper then goes on to present data from a study of attitudes to English in rural Bangladesh, which explore some of the key issues around the role that English currently plays in postcolonial contexts. In the final section the paper combines an analysis of this data with discussion of the insights and perspectives that world Englishes and postcolonialism theory provide for research in this area.

THE CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

One of the key legacies of postcolonial theorising has been to stress the importance of viewing social and cultural issues (and, in this case, applied linguistics issues) within an understanding of their historical context (Pennycook 2001: 68). For any inquiry into attitudes to English in Bangladesh, this historical perspective is vital, given the fundamental role played by language politics in the founding and political development of the country. As will be discussed, the social and geographical context are also of direct relevance to the more specific questions we are addressing, and thus, before we move to the research data itself, it is worth giving an overview of the context in which it was conducted.

Bangladesh, formally East Pakistan, came into being as an independent nation state following a nine-month war of independence with West Pakistan in 1971. The country's foundation was predicated around issues concerning language rights and its colonial heritage, and the intensity of feeling around the national language is reflected in the name of the country, which literally means 'Country of Bangla'. It is a densely-populated, predominantly Muslim country in the northeast corner of the Indian sub-continent, with an estimated population of around 153 million (BBS 2012). The country is beset by vast challenges in a number of significant fields. These include the environmental, with land erosion and changes in the patterns of the climate adding to the general locational challenges of roughly a third of the land area being underwater for approximately a third of the year. Given that Bangladesh is a predominately rural nation, this leads to serious subsistence challenges.

In addition, Bangladesh has a very low position on the Human Development Index of 146 out of 186 (UNDP 2013) and has suffered from recent political insecurities in which many working days (and some lives) have been lost to protests and strikes. Despite some successes of innovative development initiatives (including the Noble Prize winning Grameen microfinancing and community development initiatives), this insecurity, along with accusations of government corruption and the suppression of dissident voices under successive governments, has impacted on international investment and the population's opportunities to become significant commercial or economic players on the world stage. Similarly, in the field of education, while there have been improvements in school enrolment in recent years, the 2.2 per cent investment of its GDP in education is one of the lowest in South Asia, while the literacy rate still hovers around 54 per cent for 11–45 year olds (BBS 2013).

The territory that is now Bangladesh has, effectively, during the last 150 years been through three political phases that have influenced its sociolinguistic development (and, conversely, its sociolinguistic development has also influenced political change). In the first period, during British rule, there was a push by some social reformers to introduce both English and Western education for Indians (Hamid & Erling 2016). Christian missionaries played a lead role in implementing English education, and this was inevitably for proselytising purposes. There was some local resistance to this but by the early 20th century English had become the medium of education in many schools, leading to concerns about the threat to vernacular languages in education (Spear 1938). The demand for English, with its associations with the ruling class, was, despite some resistance, also great, though with access generally limited to the urban elite (Kachru 1983; Rahman 2005). Chowdhury (2010) points out that Hindus were more welcoming of English than Muslims, who saw it as a potential threat to Islamic education (Hossain & Tollefson 2007).

In the second phase, after British Colonial rule came to an end in 1947 and the territory became a part of Pakistan (known as East Pakistan), the role of English, as the language of the recently dispatched coloniser, was still contested in relation to local languages. A much greater concern for the population of East Pakistan, however, was the push by the dominant West Pakistan to introduce Urdu as the national language at the expense of Bangla. Bangla was the native language of the overwhelming majority of East Pakistan, and the majority native language, in fact, of the whole of Pakistan (57%), with Urdu spoken as a native language by just 3.5 per cent of Pakistan's total population (Thompson 2007). The Pakistani state's decision to adopt Urdu as the national language resulted in student-led civil discontent and a push for the joint establishment of Bangla. During a student procession on 21 February 1952 armed police killed a number of student demonstrators, and the deaths provoked wide-spread civil unrest. This incident of 'language martyrdom' is still commemorated in Bangladesh, and was the catalyst for a strong nationalist Bangla language movement which laid the foundation for the long but ultimately successful fight for the establishment of independent Bangladesh in 1971.

On entering this third phase, and given this history of colonisation by the British followed by (attempted) linguistic and political dominance by Pakistan, it is perhaps not surprising that 'Bangla-centric sentimentalities overshadowed any discussions about the role of English within the new nation' (Hamid & Erling 2016). Bangla was firmly established as the medium of instruction in state educational institutes and the nationalistic fervour supporting the language led to a long period in which the teaching of English was

not seen as a priority and given little or no attention at state level (Rahman 2005) with the perhaps unintended consequence that English education was available only in the private sector and therefore only to an elite who were able to afford it.

Despite being a contentious political issue, the role played by English did not divide the political parties. Instead of having different political ideologies on the concept of nationalism, the leaders of subsequent governments stressed the shedding of the so-called dominance of 'imperial English', and assigned new roles to Bangla in public life to gain popularity. Policy makers have therefore always been keen to influence issues around English and its role in the country, continually making it an important part of the communication matrix, especially of urban educated Bangladeshis.

Yet while an ambivalent attitude to English was perhaps understandable and arguably even advantageous for developing a sense of nationhood during this period, it was not only English that was de-prioritised. Minority languages were also neglected, or even ignored, with an expectation for minority populations to adopt Bangla (Hossain & Tollefson 2007; Hamid 2011).

During the 1970s and 1980s it became increasingly apparent that standards in English amongst the population in general were falling, while only a wealthy elite had access to the language which, due to these socio-economic factors, was already seen as providing social and economic advantage. The Ministry of Education commissioned a special task force to look into falling standards, which eventually resulted in the introduction of English as a compulsory subject from grade one (age 6) in 1991, with students having to qualify in both English and Bangla in the board examinations. At the university level, English has been introduced as a compulsory subject in many disciplines since the 1990s (Rahman 2009). Despite the promotion of English at policy level and the privileged position of the language in the educational curriculum, the number of English speakers in the country is relatively low (Euromonitor 2010 estimates it to be around 18% of the population). Moreover, the standards of English language teaching (and the quality of education in general) are dramatically low (Hamid 2011).

Another key factor in the role played by English in this context is that the language is now very often viewed in diverse world contexts as an important resource for international development, a trend which we have elsewhere labelled 'English as a language for international development' (Seargeant & Erling 2011). In Bangladesh, as in many other development contexts, English is increasingly being promoted as a skill that can help people lift themselves out of poverty and increase their ability to participate in world economic systems from which they have previously been excluded. This is the reasoning behind a number of government and non-government initiatives aimed at both teachers and learners to improve the standard of English in schools. Such projects, which have been implemented by various donor agencies (including the UK's Department for International Development, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank) and endorsed by the Government of Bangladesh include the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), Teaching Quality Improvement (TQI) and the Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project, which has the enhancement of English language teaching as part of its brief (Rahman 2005). A very recent example of an English-improvement project is the large-scaled 'English in Action' (EIA), funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), which was designed 'to significantly increase the number of people able to communicate in English to levels that will enable them to participate fully in economic and social activities and opportunities' (EIA 2010; Solly

& Woodward 2012). Such projects have had mixed outcomes, but the commitment to learning English at all levels of society from government to farm labourer, and from rural parents to urban politicians, appears stronger now than at any other time.

English in this context is conceptualised very much as a globally-relevant resource; one which is 'deterritorialised' (Blommaert 2010) in that it is not explicitly associated with any one culture or national politics; and one in which historical associations (such as the language's role within colonial history) are not alluded to as of any great relevance. The aim of the research, therefore, was to survey the attitudes and beliefs held by people brought up and living within the language-political context of Bangladesh, and at whom initiatives such as EIA, which promote English as a resource for development, are aimed. It is to this that we now turn.

ENGLISH IN RURAL BANGLADESH

The question we are interested in pursuing in this research is: given the historical context outlined above and the historical and cultural associations that English has had through the colonial and postcolonial periods, to what extent do the cultural politics of the language influence people's perceptions of or relations to it now, and how should this inform the manner in which it is taught as part of international development programmes? This section of the paper reports on the perceptions of a sample of people from rural Bangladesh in terms of the impact of English-language education on their social prospects, communities and cultural identities, and how they relate to the language and the cultural meanings it currently has for them. We will first outline the methods used in the collecting of this data and its analysis, before moving to a discussion of the findings that came from it.

METHODOLOGY

Until recently little has been known in Bangladesh about popular beliefs concerning English and the associations that may exist in people's minds with regard to English and development (although see Erling et al. 2013). This is most probably due to a combination of factors including a lack of concentrated research focus on the country, local expertise and funding for research, as well as challenges in infrastructure and data collection opportunities. Because of the growing interest and recognition of the role of English in current shaping of postcolonial contexts, however – due in part to the fields of postcolonialism and world Englishes – this field of inquiry is growing (Hamid & Erling 2016, for an overview). Indeed, the methodology employed in the study reported on here can be seen as a product of the epistemological space opened up by postcolonial studies which has, from its earliest developments, stressed the importance of the subaltern perspective for an understanding of issues relating to colonial and postcolonial history (Spivak 1988).

In order to gain a better understanding of local attitudes and aspirations in rural Bangladesh, this study employed an ethnographically-based methodology, surveying a cross-section of two rural communities in order to offer a picture of perceptions of English. The communities of Toke in the middle-eastern part of Bangladesh and Shak Char in the south-east were the sites of the research. Two Bangladeshi researchers – both co-authors of this paper – conducted semi-structured interviews during field visits of five days in each site, where they also recorded their insights on the geographic, socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic specifics of the local communities.

The interviews were structured around topics which included participants' perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of education in general, towards the acquisition of English in particular, and towards the relationship of education and English language knowledge to both individual and community development and to issues such as local language politics and cultural identity. These topics were drawn from an earlier analysis of the discourse of English as a language for international development in Bangladesh, which revealed the ways in which English is often equated with economic value, technology and education (Seargeant & Erling 2011). The researchers had a list of possible questions for participants, which they used as a guide, but were flexible enough to accommodate situations where participants wanted to elaborate on a certain topic, where they brought up issues out of sequence, or if certain topics were deemed not to be relevant. They were encouraged to treat the interview like a conversation, to remember the importance of anecdotes and to allow space for the participants to tell stories that illustrated the points they wanted to make (Blommaert & Jie 2010: 46–52). The interview data were transcribed and translated by the Bangladeshi researchers involved in the project. These translations have been left mainly unaltered, thus reflecting local sociolects of English (excerpts from these interviews appear below in italics). The translated interviews were then analysed by means of a qualitative content analysis (Silverman 2006), which gave insights into the experiences of the participants, their perceived needs and attitudes to the issues which the research was focused upon, as well as broader ideological patterns relating to the positioning of different languages within society.

In total, 28 people were interviewed, 23 male and 5 female participants with an age range of 22 to 62. These participants were chosen in order to represent a broad cross-section of people in terms of the following variables: profession, age, social class, gender and religion. They included representatives from formal and educated professions like banker, college teacher, politician and religious leader to informal and self-employed workers such as barber, fisherman, farmer, cleaner and rickshaw driver. There was great variation in the education levels of the participants, with some of them reporting very limited formal education and virtually no literacy skills apart from the ability to sign their names.

In viewing the methodology as a product of the theoretical space that postcolonialism has opened up, it is important to note the limitations that undertaking research in this context give rise to, as this continues to influence knowledge and understanding of the subaltern experience. This has both practical and epistemological aspects to it. On the practical side, for example, we were not always able to achieve the representation we aimed to, and were faced with a number of important ethical issues in carrying out this research (Hultgren et al. 2016). While we aimed to have an equal representation of male and female participants in the data, this proved to be a considerable challenge for the researchers due to cultural issues. It transpired that women generally prefer not to interact with strangers in rural communities of this sort. In order to respect the local culture, all interviews with female participants were organised in their home environments and took place in the presence of a male adult family member. Interviews for the rest of the (male) participants were conducted at their place of work.

In carrying out the interviews, the researchers were keenly aware that taking part in the interview process meant a potential loss of income for the participants. These rickshaw-pullers, fishermen and cleaners, for example, lived at or below the poverty line, and lost out on any income they might accrue during the hour in which the interview was taking place. With this in mind, it seemed unethical not to give them a small token of appreciation. And

yet while we wanted to express our gratitude, we at the same time needed to ensure that such tokens did not distort the research or give people false expectations about taking part in the research. It was thus decided that food items would be provided to the poor participants as tokens of appreciation. Given the socioeconomic background of these participants, giving these tokens was thought to be more beneficial/ appropriate than providing items like pens or diaries, which were provided to participants with a higher socioeconomic status.

In order to take full account of the fact that education and literacy rates of the participants were generally very low, oral interviews were the primary means of data gathering, and all statements of informed consent were explained orally. Where applicable, participants also signed a written consent form. Researchers needed considerable time to develop rapport with the participants, and to make them comfortable with the recording devices used; the role of a local guide was pivotal in this. The fact that contact with one participant often led to contact with another helped develop this rapport and inspire trust in people. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' anonymity.

Finally, with regard to epistemological issues, it is important to note that the perceptions recorded here will likely include the internalisation of dominant discourses of the value of English. As Pennycook (1998) has shown, the effects of colonialism still permeate the cultures and discourses of both the colonial and colonised nations. For this reason, analysis of the participants' opinions needs to be seen within this context.

ENGLISH AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Postcolonialism as a disciplinary approach has attempted to respond to the cultural legacies of colonialism by calling for a major rethink of the social, political and cultural representations of the coloniser and colonised. This has resulted in a critical destabilisation of categories and histories established during that time, as well as the creation of an intellectual space for the expression of subaltern voices (Spivak 1988). Influenced by postcolonialism – or as one might perhaps put it, the incarnation of postcolonialism within applied linguistics – the field of world Englishes has similarly brought a fundamental rethink of linguistic categories, constructs and applied practices (such as language education) through its recognition and acceptance of the speakers and varieties of English in contexts where the language has taken root as part of its colonial spread (Kachru 1983; Pennycook 1998; 2001; Banu & Sussex 2001). As initially conceived, WE intended to highlight issues around English use around the world, with particular reference to its diversity and variety, and to shift deep-set perceptions of these, explaining issues in terms of history, local and global cultural politics, and breadth of function. Within this broad context there are two key concepts from postcolonialism and world Englishes that are particularly relevant to the present study and that we shall therefore focus on here: agency and resistance. While these are in many ways interrelated – with agency to an extent acting as the overarching analytic concept (resistance itself being a form of agentic action on the part of those involved) – we will discuss and exemplify them each in turn in the sections below.

Agency

when I go to the pharmacy, I face some problems for lacking English. I don't have any other option than to bring the medicine which the vendor gives me home. I don't know if this is good medicine or not. (Momin Khan, Farmer)

The idea of agency, developed through postcolonial theory and of significant importance in socially-oriented linguistics, offers a particularly productive angle of interpretation for this data. Said (1993) has argued that, instead of being subject to the irresistible forces of imperialism, the colonised were active agents in shaping modern day global discourses and practices, and their independence. Considering the concept of agency with regard to the spread of English, Canagarajah (1999: 2) has said that:

in everyday life, the powerless in post-colonial communities may find ways to negotiate, alter and oppose political structures, and reconstruct their languages, cultures and identities to their advantage. The intention is not to *reject* English, but to *reconstitute* it in more inclusive, ethical, and democratic terms. (italics in original)

In other words, while the subaltern population has been excluded from power structures by being denied voice, the appropriation of English becomes a means of enabling participation and laying claim to this voice.

Such attitudes to English as a language of agency or empowerment can also be found in the data from the present study, where the reasons behind what emerges as a generally positive attitude to English among the participants include being able to help themselves, to participate in discourses that could enhance their work or status, to avoid having to rely on other people, and to gain access to important information which at present circulates in English.

For many, the learning of English was seen as one of the major ways in which people could take action to improve their lives and their social mobility:

no matter what the profession is, if you have a better knowledge of English you can improve your lifestyle. (Niranjan Sheel, Barber)

And in this respect, English becomes part of people's envisioned success:

I could be a 'supervisor' or an 'in-charge' if I knew English. Usually, people who know English become a team leader of 4/5 persons. (Moshiur, Farmer)

It was also the belief of participants that knowledge of English (given its status as a global lingua franca in a wide range of different domains) could be used to gain access to information that one would otherwise not be privy to, and thus gain agency over their immediate circumstances. For example, one farmer mentioned how knowledge of English can be of essential use in understanding and applying pesticides:

When the company gives us pesticides there is a paper with instructions written in English with it. If I knew English, I could have followed the instructions properly [. . .] If we put in too much in the field, the crop will be harmed and if we put in too little, the diseases will not be cured. (Moshiur, Farmer)

In another example, Devika, a cleaner, relates how her daughter, who has skills in English, has access to information that others do not, and how because of that, she plays an important agentic role in the community:

many people bring their electricity bill to her and say [. . .] can you look at the bill and tell me 'Where should the money be paid and by when?' [. . .] when someone falls in trouble and visits a doctor, she

comes to my daughter with the prescription and asks, 'Can you please see when I should take which medicine?' (Devika, Cleaner)

A lack of English knowledge, therefore, can mean that people are reliant on those with knowledge of the language to help them with various essential tasks. Given the role that English plays within the global knowledge economy, being unable to speak and read it thus has the effect of diminishing people's sense of agency, social standing and self-esteem:

Suppose someone has a poultry business. Lots of information on poultry medicine is written in English. If a person could read and understand this by himself, he would not have to ask for someone's help [. . .] I know someone like this [. . .] He is illiterate; he cannot do anything. He has a poultry business and goes to a lot of people when he cannot understand. He would not need to go to someone else if he knew English. (Ferdousi Begum, Housewife)

In summary, therefore, knowledge of English was seen among the cohort as something that would give them freedom to act on their own and make more informed decisions and choices. Lack of English, on the other hand, was seen as something that inhibits people's capabilities and contributes to their lack of agency. In fact, it seems to be the position of these participants that being denied access to English would be de-limiting, dis-empowering, and part of the cycle of disadvantage and poverty that they, as rural Bangladeshis, are trying to break out of, given the geopolitical linguistic realities of the role English currently plays in society. The perception that it is possible to use English as a means of agency can also be related to a sense of 'ownership' of the language. Discussions of ownership of English have been a central issue in the field of world Englishes, relating to the way in which English is appropriated by its speakers and becomes indiginised in formal and ideological terms (Widdowson, 1994; Higgins, 2003). This metaphor of linguistic ownership has been transferred or extended from other postcolonial discussions about the ownership of land (physical space in which people live) and the regulation and administration of cultural and social spaces, which were central to the refiguring and re-appropriation of these places.

In the current study, the participants seem to be describing what one might call a 'post-ownership' situation, in which English is not seen as foreign or outside the culture (not specifically the property of the historically Anglophone countries), and is seen to be compatible with local cultural and religious values by dint of its function as a global lingua franca.

When I speak English, it is I who speak it. My language will always be mine. (Shafi Islam, Farmer)

Some participants even perceived the potential for English to be used as a medium for promoting or promulgating the local culture, another form of agentic act:

If we know English, we can invite the foreigners into our local cultural programmes. Then the foreigners can know about our culture. We can present our culture to the rest of the world through English. (Rafiq, Mobile phone sales)

In this sense English is seen as detached from its colonial origin, and is instead a deterritorialised entity (Blommaert 2010). At the same time there was no discourse of appropriating the language through indigenisation processes (though it should be noted

that the interviews did not ask specifically about such issues. There was little evidence of seeing English as a 'Bangladeshi language' (as is the case in Kachruvian ideas of, Indian English). This could possibly be explained by the fact that English does not serve as a local or national lingua franca in Bangladesh, unlike many other postcolonial contexts (although it may be increasingly used as a regional lingua franca; Banu and Sussex 2001). Instead the language is viewed as having an important functional role, and thus being entirely compatible with Bangladeshi society, but not as a cultural marker. At the same time, acquiring skills in English seems to be something that is perceived to be possible for these participants (or if not for them, for their children), again showing a sense of agency that English *can* be owned by these communities as a functional language of international development.

Resistance

Bangla is our language. No one will be able to take it away. (Shafi Islam, Farmer)

It has been argued that unequal power relations between the centre and periphery (or the developed and developing world) have resulted in the less powerful persistently consenting to or 'buying into' the dominant ideologies spread through imperialism, in many cases without coercion (Gramsci 1971). In this view, even after colonial subjects had brought about emancipation from colonial rule, they continued to be oppressed by the forces of imperialism and subject to ideological control through the hegemonic structures which play an important role in the organisation of global society (Whitehead 2010). According to this perspective, the dominance of English in the world is one of the continuing ways in which the culture of key Western powers effects a hegemonic position (Phillipson 1992). Such a perspective can be seen in Imam (2005: 474), who calls English in Bangladesh 'a displacer of national tradition, an instrument of continuing imperialist intervention, a fierce coloniser of every kind of identity'. Within this perspective, English is viewed as being incapable of representing Bangladeshi culture and identity.

In the present study, however, views such as those voiced by Imam were not echoed in the participants' own responses. In the main, the participants did not express the view of English as an imperialist force or a usurper of local identity. While they were aware that such views existed and were perhaps prevalent during previous phases of Bangladeshi history, none of the participants was of the belief that the language was harmful to the local culture, or felt that learning English was in conflict with Bangla identity. The cohort did not appear to feel that the national language, culture or religion would be lost or corrupted by learning English. The rejection of this position can be exemplified by the following quote:

we are Bangladeshi. We speak Bangla. For job, technology, and for going abroad English helps a lot; however it does not have any negative effect on our language. (Shanto Hawlader, Mobile salesman)

In fact, as the following example shows, there was great confidence expressed in the nature and integrity of the local national culture, and the role that Bangla plays in this:

Monish: We all are Bangladeshi. We always speak in Bangla. We have to speak in Bangla regardless of how much English we have learnt.

Researcher: Is it possible to forget Bangla?

- Monish: No, it's not possible [smile].
 Researcher: Why?
 Monish: We have always spoken in Bangla. English comes later but Bangla is before everything.
 (Monish Dev Barman, Fisherman)

A similar confidence in the robustness of local cultural and linguistic practices was reflected in views about religion, with the majority of respondents expressing with certainty that the growing influence of English in Bangladesh would not in any way threaten religious practices or beliefs:

If you are true, then your religious practices will not be negatively influenced. (Suleiman Shahid, Farmer)

There was also the conviction that 'every language is an Islamic language' (Maulana Mohammad Golam, Hafez), and thus English is not considered antithetical to Islam. There was recognition that Islam, while privileging Arabic, embraces all languages:

We don't know anything that says that learning English is against the religion. Because every language is an Islamic language. Allah hasn't specified any language, He has given some preference to Arabic. We have to love Arabic for three reasons – it's the language of Quran, it's the language of our prophet and it's the language of Jannat (Heaven). So, we need to love Arabic but we can't exclude any language as all the languages are from Allah. (Md. Hanif, teacher)

Amongst the Islamic community leaders (Imams) and religion teachers who were participants in this study, there were views expressed that English can and should be used to serve Islam, as it allows people to engage with other Muslims throughout the world and to spread the word of Allah:

when an aalim [scholar] goes preaching, he will be able to speak in both Bangla and English. (Fakir Ali, Teacher and part-time farmer)

This strand of the discourse relates also to the idea of agency where English is used to engage with the international community, promote the local culture, and give a platform to local voices. Such views have also been recorded in other studies of world Englishes, for example Mahboob (2009), who finds that English in Pakistan is capable of representing Islamic values and embodying South Asian Islamic sensitivities.

There was, however, an acknowledgement by some of the participants that negative attitudes towards English did once exist during a historical phase of colonial resistance in Bangladesh, but the point was made that this was no longer, in their opinion, relevant:

A very small group of people once thought that English can have debilitating effect on our religious practices and cultures. But now such attitudes no more can be found. Now even a madrasa [Islamic school] student knows that there is no way but to learn English. (Faruk Karim, Chairman)

Some of the respondents even suggested that if a threat does exist it is through *not* learning English, as this can be to the detriment of progress for Muslims. The following

story was given to exemplify the perceived error of holding anti-English attitudes in colonial Bangladesh:

In British period, many Hindus learned English and they progressed much while the Muslims thought that if they learn English, then, their religion will be negatively affected and they would become Christian. As a result, the Muslims detached themselves from learning English [. . .] This is the reason we [i.e. Muslim-dominant Bangladesh] are lagging behind. (Harun Khan, Chairman)

In summary, therefore, the participants in this study – living in rural Bangladesh and thus far removed from the resource-rich urban elite – vocally articulate resistance to the idea that linguistic and cultural imperialism is occurring with respect to English: the language is not, in their view, seen as a threat to Bangla culture or language, and for some it is seen as a resource for promoting local culture. There exists a very clear political consciousness on this issue among the participants, who would all have had direct or indirect experience of the war of independence, their education will have stressed this important role Bangla played in the creation of the nation, and they still celebrate Martyrs' Day. Their views about Bangla exist alongside positive views about English – and on the whole they do not see language policy issues as an either-or situation – Bangla is viewed as secure, and on top of this English is also desired.

CONCLUSION

The picture that emerges from this data is one in which attitudes towards English were overwhelmingly positive, primarily due to the ways in which it facilitates a certain amount of agency for people within their everyday existence, but that at the same time the cohort exhibited an overall confidence in the endurability of Bangla national cultural and religious practices traditions. While historically there may have been a sense that English had to be rejected as part of emerging Bangladeshi nationalism and in order to reinforce the strength of Bangla as the national language, English is now perceived, even in rural communities such as these, as being a necessary resource for participation, representation and development. There seems to be complete 'buy in' to and acceptance of this idea from the participants in the study. From their point of view, the most notable role of English is providing access to global conversations, as well as acting as a medium for the promulgation of local beliefs and culture. The evident confidence about the deep-rooted dominance of Bangla as the national language (which is an almost total reversal of the position that existed during the Pakistani-dominated and British Colonial era) perhaps indicates that whatever the postcolonial legacy is in terms of attitudes to English, there is strong confidence in the status of Bangla as national language, with little indication of a perception of this being threatened. Furthermore there is little or no sense that it is an either/or situation, but that a stable Bangla-English bilingualism could exist with different languages fulfilling different functions (while in practice, for the present at least, this is far from the linguistic reality).

A focus on imperialism or hegemony would lead us to consider whether the participants were perhaps naïve in their perception that English had a generally benign presence in their communities, or that by learning it they may be able to change their situation or status for the better (Bruthiaux 2002). There can be no question that the practices that worked to construct and inscribe imperial ideologies on colonised land and people persist

in international development programmes and education policies that promote English (Appleby 2010), and one of the important legacies of postcolonial theory has been to highlight the underlying power structures within which attitudes and opinions of the sort expressed in this data exist. This group of participants seems to have completely bought into the idea that English language learning is, within the current geopolitical situation, a necessity for a level of global engagement – and the geopolitical situation is itself a product of a history of imperialism and neo-liberal politics and ideologies. This being said, the concept of agency offers perhaps an alternative angle for the interpretation of the situation. Knowledge of English was seen in the data as something that would give people autonomy in decision-making and professional activities, while lack of English was viewed as inhibiting people's capabilities and compounding their lack of agency. Furthermore, despite the barriers to providing educational quality in Bangladesh and the relatively low levels of literacy, and without downplaying the significant structural problems that exist for educational endeavours within this context, the acquisition of skills in English was perceived as something within the reach of Bangladeshis for the purposes of taking measured action to promote their personal and national development.

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