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Note: This was written at a time when there was an ongoing public debate through the media as to whether English would weaken the importance of Arabic. It appeared in the editorial column on 8 November, 1988.

Pulled-out tongues

Your editorial of October 30, 1988 was a timely warning to Arab countries that even something as basic as language can serve as an instrument of domination. It hinges on the fear that ideas and philosophies that characterize the thought-processes of a culture may become blurred during translation, as inevitably they must, if a single language is allowed to march relentlessly as the language of the world imposing its will on the vanquished tongues. It is true that the superimposition of one language on another would pose certain conceptual constraints to the learner at the intellectual and aesthetic level. But, what of its effect on those to whom language is bread and butter?

Speaking at a symposium on Black Culture and Education at the Festac '77, Olusagun Obasanjo, Nigerian Head of State at that time, said: “The standing tragedy of Africans is that their tongues have been pulled out and they must speak in strange tongues.” He was referring to the use of Metropolitan languages to produce Africans to sub-serve the Capitalist system and subscribe to its values; a fact that is as true of Asia or Latin America or the Caribbean countries as it is of Africa. Metropolitan languages, and in particular English, are being perpetuated in these parts by artfully advocating the impression that they would always be needed for transferring skills and technologies. Whether such transfers would be appropriate for a particular socio-economic situation is not probed deeply enough.

Ironically, this ploy has been used to internationalize manpower. Those who reach the top of the professional ladder in developing countries have often been lured away by lucrative offers. What is wrong with that, one might ask. Nothing, if it is only the individual that matters. But, what of society as a whole? That trend has led to a ‘brain-drain’ in the very countries which so desperately need trained people to man its development projects and which had invested so much to educate their youth. At no cost to themselves, the developed countries have managed to *capitalize* on what they themselves have not invested in. Truly, they have reaped where they did not sow.

The pity is, academics in the developing countries have, in the main, accepted the adoption of a European language as a *fait accompli* -if only for self-preservation- and are more concerned to present a rationale for it than to entertain criteria that might disqualify it in a given situation. In refreshing contrast, the academics of the Philippines have, in a report that they prepared for the government, stated that English is partly to blame for some of the ills that have beset that country in recent years. (Page 10, *Arab News*, 4 July, 1988). Space does not permit elucidation.

This letter is not suggesting that English should have no place in our 'global village'. That would be ignoring the principle of historical determinism. The importance of English as a medium of international communication is not something one can wish away. This letter, however, is to suggest that the domain of English and those of other languages, and in particular one's own, can and must be kept functionally separate. One cannot be a substitute for the other. I might add a rider to it; any language has the potential to develop as new challenges are posed. One couldn't think of a better role model than Anglo-Saxon itself.

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