

# The Obsession with Modernity: Why English as a Second Official Language?

Review of an address given by Dr. Liao, Hsien-hao  
Taipei, Taiwan 3/25/04

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## Prefatory Remarks

This review originally appeared in *Asian English Studies, Monograph Series No. 4: Taiwan Study Tour* which was published by the Japan Association for Asian Englishes (JAF AE) in October 2005. I would like to extend my thanks to the current editor of the JAF AE journal, Sanae Tsuda, for her permission to reprint it here in our department kiyo. Professor Liao is a brilliant speaker, and I think many of the issues he raises are of value to be considered by our own full-time and part-time faculty, as we weigh the various interpretations of world Englishes, and its ramifications for outer and expanding circle contexts. His insights into the situation in Taiwan should be especially informative for our own situation in Japan. There were movements afoot to make English a second official language in Taiwan in both 2002 (Lin), and again in 2006 (China Post), but it has not as yet achieved that status, so it would seem Dr. Liao's voice is still carrying the day!

Nagoya, January 2008



Professor Yano and the author with Dr. Liao (far right)

## Introduction

Dr. Sebastian Hsien-hao Liao's address was the second of two special papers -- following that of Dr. Su-chiao Chen -- given to the JAF AE study tour group on March 25, 2004 at the Formosa Regent Hotel. Dr. Liao was invited by Professor Masao Aikawa, leader of the study tour, in order for the group to gain a perspective on language policy issues from someone closely connected to the Taiwanese government. Dr. Liao currently serves as Commissioner at the Department of Cultural Affairs, Taipei City Government, and Professor at National Taiwan University. While to say his views are 'quite controversial' would be an understatement, listening to Dr. Liao proved to be one of the most intellectually stimulating segments of the study tour, and highlighted the value of periodically stepping away from one's specialty -- in our case linguistics, Asian Englishes, and language education -- to view larger issues from a cross-disciplinary approach. While at first his views seem to run radically counter to those of world Englishes, I argue that they are, in many ways, in congruence.

Professor Yasukata Yano of Waseda University eloquently introduced Dr. Liao as a 'man of letters,' and a truer word was never spoken. Holding a PhD. from Stanford University in Comparative Poetry, Dr. Liao has spent time in 1990 at the Hyderabad Institute in northern India, and also studied on a Fulbright at Princeton University. He is chairman of the Society of Comparative Literature and has authored numerous books and publications. The breadth of his knowledge is obvious, and commendable. While Dr. Chen came equipped with three large black bags and did a wonderful PowerPoint presentation, Dr. Liao arrived without so much as a briefcase, armed only with his small brown leather calendar book, a few notes jotted down within. Perhaps this shows, in a way, a difference between literature, as an art, and linguistics, as a science. His demeanor is understated, but the grace and power of his delivery, and the logical workings of his mind, are infectious. Dr. Liao's lexicon, and his entire discourse, is designed to awaken and alert the listener to a dangerous view of modernization. I will preserve his actual language in order that the reader may feel his presence.

## The Lecture

Dr. Liao referred to the obsession with modernization as a 'twisted phenomenon.' He stated that while Taiwan seems to have outgrown its third-world categorization, the feeling that it is not modern enough, actually translates as 'not Western enough.' His stance, conversely, is that the island is not modern enough because it has not 'caught up with what it

*means* to be modern.' He then began to view the issue of modernity from the prism of the Chinese language. He feels that one problem with Chinese in Taiwan is that it has not been Romanized. It is a huge debate now in Taiwan. It has been done in China, but the Taiwanese feel that if they follow the Chinese system, it is a form of *surrender* to the enemy! From a historical perspective, Dr. Liao explained that the obsession with modernity began with the country's first contact with modernity. Encountering the military prowess of the West, China felt itself to have an inferior culture, and language is the symbol, a microcosm, of that culture. He quoted Hegel, who said that China is like a teenager, still on its way to maturation because it hasn't been alphabetized.

The second wave of modernity came not through military might, but via the media and globalization. He calls it a 'seduction of lifestyle.' Reminiscent of American linguist Henry Giroux, Liao speaks of the 'benign,' yet sinister face of this intruder. He spoke of this seduction as creating a fear among Taiwanese of the possibility of being 'left out of what's happening, what's beautiful, what's worthwhile.' As a result, this fosters the sentiment that the world should have a global language. He mentioned the creation of Esperanto 100 years ago by L.L. Zamenhof. While seemingly a noble effort, Liao said that the '*sober mind* realizes it's a Western language, paraded as a world language.'

### **English as an Official Language**

Liao recognizes the possibility that English is in fact necessary, but queried, "Is it necessary as an official language?" He mentioned that even if Taiwan does not adopt it, it will nonetheless become very important, but one 'has to keep it in its *proper place*, without amplifying its status. This seems quite negative, but in fact, the sentiment is rather close to the feeling of Braj Kachru that English is 'the medium, not the message.' It also echoes the feelings of Paroo Nihalani that the key to world Englishes is bilingualism with international intelligibility and preservation of national identity, and of Nobuyuki Honna that English should be an *additional* language in countries of the expanding circle. Japan's former Prime Minister Obuchi floated the official language' balloon in the previous decade and it was shot down, but as Larry Smith mentioned, his desire was not that English really become an official language, but that the discussion of the language's role come to the forefront. Liao bemoaned the fact that even without English being announced as an official language, every day-care and kindergarten in Taiwan is teaching English. In fact, his wife tried to locate one that did not offer English, and couldn't! As a postscript, I would like to add that in August 2004, the government decided to immediately prohibit the teaching of English in Kindergartens! (Oladejo, 2006)

What should the official policy be? Liao continued that to give English official status in Taiwan would require a prohibitive amount of resources (perhaps in making signs and in translation of all government documents, etc.). He also cast serious doubt on the idea of a 'new breed: the bilingual person.' He doesn't believe that such a breed is possible, based on his own study of psychology. He says there 'has to be a major language.' With bilingualism, you can't find a person who has a complete language. He said, "Take myself as an example. My Chinese is definitely better." And this is coming from a man who speaks English with such a powerful, poetic discourse! I would say that his English is a more educated variety than that of this author. And my second language, Japanese, is only enough to follow faculty meetings at 60 percent comprehension. Edwin Thumboo also asserts that one needs a 'Main Working Language.'

While Liao would draw heavy criticism from scholars in the bilingual field, he is undaunted. His conviction is that "if someone is equally competent in both languages, then they are equally *incompetent* in both languages"! He feels that if the two languages are equal, then the individual will be lacking in creativity; one has to do sophisticated and complicated thinking in one language, or you will have a *superficial* operation of the brain! He treaded further down this path, arguing that these problems have surfaced in Singapore, which is 'facing a terrible brain drain!' I beg that a scholar such as Anne Pakir of NUS might differ. Or perhaps it doesn't matter. If one reaches the English level of Dr. Liao, then even if his Chinese is in some ways 'better,' his scholarship in English is perhaps as good as his work in Chinese. This issue is always controversial and vitriolic. A debate over the benefits and dangers of teaching English to young children raged for over a month in the 'letters to the editor' section in the English Daily Yomiuri earlier this year, with the likes of Stephen Krashen participating, and was not resolved. My best conclusion, after following that debate, was that it is not dangerous to raise children as bilingual, but neither is it necessary to start too early. Perhaps Dr. Liao's point of being 'equally competent' is not a necessary condition.

Another point made by Dr. Liao was that Taiwanese language policy should encourage studying of *different* languages, 'not this one.' There is a danger that people will read about many cultures only through the English media, which is biased, according to him. He stressed also the power balance between global and local forces. "We have a national government to protect national culture, but pre-modern languages are receding to a reduced realm. We can't trust the government to protect national languages if we adopt English as official in the era of electronic media." Dr. Liao summarized, "my tentative conclusion is that teaching of English as a second language is crucial to 'so-called' competitiveness of the people in

a society, but we cannot, should not, adopt it as a second official language. We have to carefully *circumscribe* its role, or it will do great damage to local culture." He had consumed only half his allotted time, but had given us a month's food for thought.

## Questions and Answers

Professor Aikawa thanked Dr. Liao for his thoughts on the pros and cons of English as a Second Language, and opened the floor to questions from the JAF AE study group. Professor Yano said that in Japan we spend an enormous amount of money, time and energy on English, but asked how do we make *use* of it? Do we need to provide real-life situations? Dr. Liao did not answer the question directly, but began to discuss language teaching in general; stating that he feels that there is no comparative method in teaching language *manners*. He feels that teaching of speech acts should be very objective, stating that 'so-called' cross-cultural pedagogy is completely Western. He gives an example that in the West equality is discussed, but only on a business/contractual level. Any student 'would develop and inaccurate adoration of Western culture.' There is too much 'obsession' and 'adoration of modernity' and the view is non-critical, echoing a theme of Takao Suzuki, that Japanese only look at the 'upper body' of the West. He mentioned the Western value of conquering and bringing 'order' among the wilderness, while Asians traditionally lived in harmony with nature, citing the example of pre-capitalist Kai Fung city, which in 1000 A.D. had no problem with handling waste. In Taiwan, a broken car door is fixed; in the U.S. it is replaced due to the expense of human labor. He concluded this point by saying that most teachers of English, who teach cross-cultural studies, don't 'cross cultures.'

Judy Yoneoka, another tour participant, observed that she had noticed two apparent systems of Romanization in Taiwan, and then mentioned that there cannot be a creativity problem in 'outer circle' societies, giving the example of the growing body of critically acclaimed English literature in India. Dr. Liao responded, "I like these two questions!" He explained that DPP controlled areas had adopted the Tongyong system, which is just a modification of the Chinese system, but that if you want to prove you're a separate nation, you need to adopt a completely different approach. For example, 'zh' comes from the Russian way, so it's communist.' Regarding Indian English literature, Liao used the example of his good friend Vikram Seth, author of *A Suitable Boy*. While doing his Ph.D. in economics at Stanford, he went to China to do research on demographics, went to 'heavenly lake' on a trip, and decided to become a writer and wrote a travelogue! Liao's key point is that Seth cannot write Hindi! He asked, "How many Indians can read his work, *Golden Gate*? Americans admire him. Is he contributing to Indian culture, or global English culture?" He

continued, "Certainly the latter. The ruling class in India is completely English competent; a terrible situation: two societies! The more English novelists India produces, the worse the cultural situation will become there." Dr. Liao is nothing if not controversial, but the audience was spellbound. I would have loved for Dr. Paroo Nihalani or Professor Ayo Bamgbose to have been in the audience. What a debate we would have had! Dr. Liao then gave an example he used several times: He was in India and encountered, "an Indian taxi driver who could explain all about the Taj Mahal, but if he hadn't studied English so much, maybe he wouldn't be driving a taxi!" This observation struck close to home for us in Japan, where working in the travel or hotel industry remains a dominant ideal for our English majors. He reiterated his Singapore analogy, stating that we "can't force everybody to be very good in English; they'll be *mediocre citizens* with some fluency in English."

Dr. Chen, the first speaker, seemed unsatisfied, and asked about Singapore and Nigeria, where things "seem to work very well, so why not adopt English?" Liao responded that they're both ex-colonial countries, and have a 'cultural lethargy' in trying to change the situation back. "They're collages of different tribal groups, not meant to be nation status, so they use a language that doesn't have strong power connotations, that is neutral." He elaborated: in the Philippines, Tagalog is spoken by only 35% of the people from Mindanao/Cebu in the south, and the nation didn't want to buy that. Similarly, the Dravidians in southern India, non-Aryans, didn't want Hindi as an official language. Indonesia was clever in choosing Malay (spoken by only 10 out of 200 million) rather than Javanese or Sumatrese. He also related that older Taiwanese now feel more comfortable communicating in Japanese than in Hakka or Hokkien since the colonial period is over! With Dr. Liao having a position of some influence on language policy in Taiwan, I don't see the country adopting English as an official second language anytime soon.

Professor Usui then asked a question about the balance between different Taiwanese groups' mother tongue and Mandarin. Liao mentioned that he speaks 10 dialects, explaining that they are not different languages, just different pronunciations of the same language. He gave an example of the Philippine Chinese, where their dialects were outlawed, and then the ability to learn Chinese 'dropped drastically.' For him, the logic is the same: to preserve the mother tongue, teach the mother tongue and Mandarin as if they were one language! Don't force them to choose. He said, "I still don't think they can be equally bilingual in these two — one has to be dominant."

The group was energized, and the conversation continued over a sumptuous buffet lunch in the hotel. Dr. Liao is so passionate about his field that the exchange of opinions took

precedence over his enjoying the food. He engaged in a lively debate with Shi Jie regarding the trilingualism of her 10-year-old son Zsa Zsa (who joined the study tour), and also, on the topic of the novel *Waiting* by Chinese writer Ha Jin who migrated to the U.S, many years ago. Shi Jie has done a study of that novel, looking at the 'Chineseness' contained within, using an 8-category method.

Regarding the trilingual child, Liao felt that he would have to cope with a 'struggle within' but that this might result in his becoming an artist. Here I feel that Liao may be contradicting his own claim that bilingualism reduces creativity. Liao said he himself had this problem, and considers himself to be essentially an artist. This was an interesting revelation, because his mind does work like an artist, always crossing disciplines, synthesizing and looking at deeper issues. Regarding Ha Jin's novel, Liao said that most Chinese elements in the novel were negative and reinforced stereotypical images of Chinese.

Whatever the topic, Dr. Liao is fascinating to listen to, and puts forward ideas that are sure to encourage debate. Some of his opinions seem quite difficult to support, but from the perspective of our group, it was highly valuable to have the tenets of world Englishes challenged a bit, and helps us as scholars to think more deeply about what the implications are of the expanding reach of English, and its effects on cultures such as Japan's, where the debate continues to rage. I myself wonder at times about the opportunity cost of intensive English programs at the University level in Japan, regarding the narrowing of our students' ability to handle deep issues in their first language. Will our students be able to cross disciplines and draw connections the way Dr. Liao does with such ease, or will they be taxi drivers, hotel clerks and ground hostesses? It is certainly food for thought, and a very valuable new source for us to tap. The value of the study tour in bringing new voices into our community is unquestionable in the development of JAF AE, and Asian Englishes; well done Professor Aikawa! I hope this first contact with scholars such as Dr. Liao will allow for the broader community within JAF AE to have the opportunity to hear their voices directly in a future forum.

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*\*The following appeared later in the Monograph, in a Remarks section. I include it here because the differing approaches towards bringing in inner-circle native speaker teachers, between Japan and Taiwan, are relevant to our situation in Japan. Dr. Chang came to Japan the following year, at the invitation of Prof. Aikawa, to be keynote speaker at JAF AE # 18 at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies.*

## Remarks on the Study Tour

James D'Angelo

I would like to make just a brief comment on what impressed me most during the study tour. This study tour was a truly precious experience in all facets. The hotel was magnificent, the food was marvelous, getting to know the other members was delightful, and Taipei and its people were warm and welcoming. We had a wonderful schedule prepared by Professor Aikawa, and the balance of guest lectures and hands-on visits to see classes in action, was very valuable. But perhaps, there is one lesson I learned that will stay with me after the other memories have begun to fade. That was the visit to National Taiwan Normal University, and that is what I would like to write about here.

At the Normal University, we have an extremely informative and well-organized lecture delivered by Dr. Vincent Wuchang Chang, Chairman of the English Department. Professor Chang is a warm and gracious person, as well as an impressive scholar.

In his talk and thorough handout, we learned of the process of recruiting and training English teachers for primary and secondary education in Taiwan. What impressed me the most was that Taiwan develops its own English teachers from citizens within the country. In March 1999 45,495 applicants for the new program to train primary school English teachers were given a proficiency test, and 3,536 were accepted. The candidates who were accepted had to undergo a sophisticated ELT Methodology Program of 120 hours. I think that Taiwan has taken the ideal of world Englishes, and Asian Englishes to heart, deciding to develop their own teachers from speakers of the educated variety of Taiwanese English. As a 'native speaker' of English, this was a powerful image. As things are changing in Japan, I have come to realize that Japan depends too heavily on expensive programs such as JET, and too little on its own people. Japan needs teachers from many backgrounds, but the main thrust should be on Japanese people teaching English to their own youth. There are so many young Japanese who are studying English very hard, and traveling overseas to gain more knowledge, that Japan should be self-sufficient in English teachers, and Japan needs to develop top quality ELT masters programs such as that at NTNU, to give those teachers a solid theoretical and practical foundation.



Dr. Chang

Taiwan and Japan seem to have chosen very different paths to reach their goal, and I

think we should all look at the laboratory of Taiwan and other Asian nations to see the results as they take shape, especially at this critical time in Japan.

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