

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

WHY DO NEWS CHANNELS CHOOSE ENGLISH TO STATE THEIR NATIONAL DIFFERENCES

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HAVE YOU WATCHED the news lately? War? Famine? Rioting? Economic crisis? Make that crises. One is never enough now. History repeating itself, as Marx would say, in all its tragic and comic fullness. The news amply reminds us, on a daily basis, that the world is a shitty, dangerous and dysfunctional disappointment. Try as they may, no number of whooshing motion graphics and tribal drum effects can truly dull this fact. Not even a "feelgood" item featuring a precocious ferret saying the word "Fuck!" on cue. In that time, another bomb somewhere has detonated.

Someone's mother, father or child becomes a sound bite-primed statistic. Without numbers – or more precisely, body counts – the news couldn't be the news.

How and why the world is such a pitiless shit-pit depends on whose news you're listening to. But does it matter which language they're delivering it in? For many of the emerging economic powerhouses in the world, the answer gleaned from surfing satellite channels today is a resounding yes.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, one of the very last things the West was able to export to the rest of the world was its moral superiority. Acclaimed news services such as the BBC World Service, New York Times, le Monde, der Spiegel, etc; embodied Enlightenment values, wielded like a sword: truth, reason, rigour. This was media made to make everyone without a "free press" feel deficient, envious.

Even now, as the European Union faces systemic, contagious crisis, America's credit rating is "downgraded" for the first time ever, and the Murdoch media empire sullied

by phone-hacking high jinks, do we not all turn to the very same stable sources to find out what is happening around us? Probably not. A proliferation of state-funded, English-speaking news channels from Doha to Beijing has expanded available choice. Surely one of the hallmarks of our time: apparently infinite choice, but the same finite number of hours in a day. It has ushered in new forms of international English borne from diasporic traces of a global education aimed at like-minded citizens.

The news studios boast brightly coloured layouts, sleek desks, impeccable anchors with groomed suits. The ticker-timer running constantly across the bottom of the screen desperately updating you with what's now right now. All these are visual, aural, informational tropes that have been taken up from Tehran to Mumbai. They signify that this is "serious objective news," comparable to BBC World Service, the New York Times, le Monde, der Spiegel...

Despite a third of the world's population being Chinese or Indian (a convincing argument surely for Cantonese, Mandarin or Hindi as the next universal lingua franca), the colonial language of choice – English – now serves a cunning post-colonial purpose. English's purported neutrality smuggles through all manner of vested political propaganda and regional hysteria. Watch simultaneous coverage of the same news story on several channels, and not so subtle nationalistic differences of perception present themselves – in the polite garb of Malay or Columbian accented English. The form says one thing, the words another. And the hybrid accents something else yet again. If the world is not flat, the use of English to describe it on a daily basis makes it look as if it is.



Here is a selection of what's out there.

PRESS TV

There is a fine line between myth-busting and paranoid conspiracy-mongering.

And this is the very line that Iran's state-controlled Press TV builds an entire news-mandate from. It is fired by the same anti-imperialist, straight-talking vim that fuels Iran's casually attired president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. No opportunity is missed on Press TV, and many are created, to lambast America's political hypocrisy and meddling interventionism. In fact a whole programme is dedicated to this pursuit: Afshin Rattansi's Double Standards. Imagine Jon Stewart's Daily Show, but with hand-drawn cartoon pinstakes of American politicians. Rattansi's English could pass as indigenous at Eton Boys' School, but this all the more arms him to satirise the West's follies from within. The Keiser Report, which is also aired on Russia Today, extends the America-bashing to the endemic corruption inherent in the greed-fest that is also known as the global financial marketplace. Is it ironic that American accents are aplenty across all the channel's presenters? Or mocking? As in, "Look! We can find American educated people to defame the country that gave them this accent!" Press TV's male anchors never don neck-ties (an Iranian no-no) and sport well-trimmed beards; while every female correspondent, Muslim or not, is required to wear a hijāb, thus exporting the revolutionary dictate of the Iranian Republic to secular countries worldwide. Last but not least, George Galloway's late-night phone-in rants surely evidence the channel's stated plight to "Encourage human beings of different nationalities, races and creeds to identify with one another." That is, if they can decipher Mr Galloway's perma-irate, Scottish pronunciation.

RUSSIA TODAY

"The channel is government funded but shapes its editorial policy free from political and commercial influence... We're here to bring you another story." The Cold War may have officially thawed 20 years ago, but its legacy lives on in Russian media. Russia Today (RT) opts for citrus green as its chromatic background, inverting any assumption that Russia is, or was, ever Commie Red. Stories of border disputes with former Soviet satellites remind you that the Union survives in idea if not in international law. Vladimir Putin appears with calming frequency – clothing optional – to share his nation's Schadenfreude at America and Europe's economic and military woes. News anchors: chiselled in appearance, their delivery of English tinged with eastern bloc stoicism. During the Ratko Mladić trial, RT chose to highlight a different narrative than the Srebrenica massacre where 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys had been killed. Instead, it chose to ask about the deaths of Serbs at Bosnian hands, insinuating that similar genocides had taken place but without the disapprobation of the international community. They did promise "another story," didn't they?

CCTV NEWS

Broadcast from its looped skyscraper in Beijing (designed by the Dutch firm O.M.A. in favour of an indigenous Chinese architect), state-controlled CCTV announces that "a new Asia has emerged," and this is its voice. Whether the question of Tibet, Google or the Chinese Communist Party comes up, China often states that the outside world simply does not - or cannot - understand its psychology or principles.

CCTV News is an uncharacteristically non-belligerent attempt to project China's moderated modernism. Its emphasis on Asian-interest stories, and by implication, China's moral or

economic influence within, is portrayed by a core crew of Chinese news anchors whose English is openly inflected by Cantonese. Chinese domination of the English language does not involve embodying it entirely. Instead, it appropriates language in the same manner that the fake Apple store in Kunming recently revealed the fake iPhone, five months before even scheduled for release. You also find American, English and Australian English-speaking reporters to provide that authenticity patina common to all of these channels: vested internationalism.

WATCH SIMULTANEOUS COVERAGE OF THE SAME NEWS STORY ON SEVERAL CHANNELS, AND NOT SO SUBTLE NATIONALISTIC DIFFERENCES OF PERCEPTION PRESENT THEMSELVES - IN THE POLITE GARB OF MALAY OR COLUMBIAN ACCENTED ENGLISH.

AL JAZEERA ENGLISH

Between 2001 and 2006, the words Al and Jazeera were shorthand for Taliban sympathisers and Al-Qaeda's media mouthpiece, according to the Bush regime. Much of that demonisation hinged on Al Jazeera being in Arabic, a language that cried out "terrorist" as unambiguously as a turban. Then, Qatar launched Al Jazeera English (AJE). Ever since, it feels like the gravitational centre of international news reportage has shifted eastwards. More so since the start of the "Arab Spring," which is fast heading into the "Arab Autumn". It is not just that AJE was formed from the ashes of recently redundant BBC staff, nor that it poached well-known journalist-personalities like Rageh Omaar and David Frost. But it was the first international news network to have four broadcast centres: Kuala Lumpur, Doha, London and Washington DC. As the world turns, so does AJE's coverage. Ethnicities, skin colours and accents vary across the anchors but the language of English unites them all. "Balance" may be a word once associated with the BBC news service, but AJE actively enacts it in programmes such as Inside Story, which pits three divergent experts against one another on a single topic for 30 minutes. Like many of the other channels mentioned here, AJE commands a regional focus (the Middle East), but its in-depth coverage of Latin America and Africa adheres to the station's ambition "to balance the information flow between the south and the north." So far, so groundbreaking. However, even this new behemoth has its political blind spots, to be found in what isn't said about delicate matters in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and its own backyard, Qatar. The only language universal enough for these instances is silence.

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