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Another Kind of Global English

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Another Kind of Global English



María Mencia, *Another Kind of Language*. Courtesy of the artist

The spare white screen that opens María Mencia's interactive Flash work, *Another Kind of Language* (2001), offers three choices to its users, presets that will determine the language of the typographic and sonographic field: A (Arabic), C (Mandarin Chinese), or E (English).¹ The structure of each is the same: mousing over the screen reveals fragments of linguistic signs and phonemes vocalized in broken and abbreviated bursts of sound, almost as if by a chorus performing vocal exercises. Intuitively, one might be given to think that moving the mouse is an inscriptive process with alphabetic characters activating spoken sounds, but what becomes clear is that the association of characters with sounds is neither necessary nor motivated; rather, what unfolds on the surface of the screen is the performance of an inscriptive process. *Another Kind of Language* explores the visual aspects of writing in the three languages even as it violates their respective structures for the presentation of text. The screen does not function as a rectilinear grid that constrains the movement of the mouse, nor does it approximate a page with its stabilizing spatial coordinates (top- and left-centric orientation for English). It instead resembles an unlined sketch pad in that the user can draw lines and shapes as he or she chooses. In this sense, the signs, or fragments of signs, are linear not in syntactic structure but in their temporal unfolding. Signification is at once seemingly proffered and withheld: the alphabetic characters are at times incomplete and at others clustered together as material rather than semantic typographic marks. So, too, the phonemes are primarily nonsyntactical eruptions of sounds punctuated by recognizable syl-

labic formulations. Disconnected from syntax, the marks and sounds are sensory and material but without meaning.

What does a media artwork such as Mencía's have to teach us about the predominant function of language in computational environments, its default setting as communicative medium? What aesthetic and political commentary on translanguaging and translation practices does Mencía's work present? Given its paratactic positioning of Arabic, Chinese, and English, what does it suggest about imperial monolanguages and the cultural logic of global English in the twenty-first century? Put another way, does its design suggest that global English as hegemonic language, as imperium, is at its end? This special section of this issue of *the minnesota review* reminds us that global English as such is not only a social, political, economic, and cultural phenomenon but also an academic phenomenon. What, then, can be said of its status as a discourse? Has there been a schism between the general and academic "appreciation" (or inflation) of English, an appreciation that has historically been linked to the discipline of English studies but now also exists apart from its control and has become the work of governments, global corporations, and even software? In this essay I propose to highlight these two issues: global English in relation to the contemporary sociotechnological milieu and the place of global English within the twenty-first-century university, perhaps no longer the University of Excellence but the University of Efficiency. My overarching suggestion is that the discourse of global English needs to expand well beyond disciplinary and curricular concerns to consider English as the literal and metaphoric operating system for what Manuel Castells terms the "network society." If the discourse is to have any critical purchase, in other words, it cannot afford to think only in terms of print culture, for to do so would be to sidestep its primary operational field and the means by which it maintains its continuing paradigmatic function.

With linguistic and network power in mind, the three-layer design of *Another Kind of Language* appears as one of its more striking features. Absent is the notion that English continues to operate as a colonial entity, program, and technique: in short, the habituation of English that begins with colonial linguistic policies and the notion that "native" populations should learn to speak and read as someone other than themselves—that they should in other words be "English in all but color"—has led directly to the call centers of the twenty-first century. Absent as well is the reminder that the native speakers of Mandarin Chinese far outnumber those of English or that the

treatment of Arabic as a singular language has both practical and political implications. Indeed, on the surface of the screen, seemingly all aspects of linguistic politics are stripped away. The three languages are proximate, linked by parataxis rather than hierarchically ordered, and none is presented as a metalanguage within the frame of the work itself—homologous relations that are also suggested by the iconic visual header with its horizontal orientation. Given the commercial and academic investment in English as both practical necessity and the preeminent form of cultural capital, we might at first glance consider the relatively equivalent positioning of the three languages as the product of an alternate global imaginary, one that articulates the default or operational setting for consumer culture as multilingual rather than monolingual. (Here we have to remember that the audience, whether visiting the gallery or the website, is figured as participant in global circuits of cultural exchange.) Perhaps more interesting, *Another Kind of Language* does not gesture toward, even as fictional performance, linguistic translation. Just as there is no correspondence between the written characters of each language and the respective phonetic sounds, there is also no correspondence among the different languages. In other words, it is not the case that each is simply a translation of a single master text. Each layer, then, is discrete, the written characters and sounds “proper” to each language contained therein. On the one hand, this is a descriptive model for global English now: one of three distinct sociolinguistic groups (four, if Spanish were included), each in its place with no apparent cognizance of the others, no visible public route toward translanguaging, no obvious structure for commonality. On the other, it is a prescriptive model, with the inflection falling not on a refusal of exchange but rather on a hopeful turn away from linguistic and territorial imposition, an aspiration toward “another kind” of language that does not need to assert sovereignty or otherwise engage in “language wars” (Calvet 1998).

While *Another Kind of Language* does not pretend to actual translation on the surface, it does offer a poetic commentary on the same, one that proves instructive when considering the contemporary linguistic *doxa*, with particular respect to computational environments and the ideology of monolanguages. Even at the level of the title, the artwork presents itself as an auxiliary: “another kind” of language, one constituted by its difference from the predominant linguistic order, one that aestheticizes rather than communicates. Its difference is also operational: the interactive engagement does not heed the principle of service on demand but rather draws the user into a relation of co-

responsiveness; his or her movement of the mouse initiates a change in the surface state of the text, which elicits an affective response that in turn conditions his or her ongoing engagement. It is not, however, transactional in that the play between the semantic, phonetic, and visual registers of language does not have a conventional end; the temporality of the artwork is in this respect open. Even more significant is the speech music, the instrumental voices that perform phonetic exercises in chorus. “Another kind” of language is not one that is transmittable by a diagram of linguistic elements but rather one that is lively, both inhabited and enacted by communities of actual speakers.

Consider by way of contrast the now common translation platforms and applications, Google Translate notably among them, that suggest an equivalence among the so-termed major languages—those for which a large corpus of translations already exists. Using statistical rather than rule-based machine translation, which had been the industry standard, Google Translate works with large data sets of human-executed translations, comparing millions of documents in order to identify the patterns that will then form the basis of the translation. With statistical machine translation, as opposed to the rule-based SYSTRAN (which is used by Yahoo! Babel Fish), the computer does not “learn” linguistic principles; rather, it learns to recognize patterns.² While automatic (i.e., not human assisted) machine translation tends to require restricted or controlled input (with pretranslation editing needed to eliminate subordinate clauses and ambiguous words so that the output is reasonably legible), a statistical algorithm can quickly sort through the massive extant knowledge base and score possible translations based on the likelihood that certain words and phrases will follow from others. Such a system is predictive rather than restrictive, which means that it is not limited to a basic, abbreviated, and strictly functional syntax, provided of course that its data set is sufficiently large. For this reason, translations that move directly from one so-termed minor language to another tend to be less elegant, if not inaccurate. Since there are comparatively fewer translations between documents in Norwegian and Bengali, for example, it would be more efficient to use English as the pivot language, in effect operating in accordance with Warren Weaver’s notion that translation ought to be considered as a problem of cryptography. Envisioning the potential future of computer-aided translation in a memorandum from July 1949, Weaver speculated that there were “certain invariant properties” common to all languages and that this linguistic foundation, along with the deciphering techniques developed during the war, would

make it possible to translate all manner of scientific and technical material (1955, 16). This vision of translation-as-decoding was formulated in terms of the biblical paradigm of linguistic division: the Tower of Babel. Weaver speculates: “Thus may it be true that the way to translate from Chinese to Arabic, or from Russian to Portuguese, is not to attempt the direct route, shouting from tower to tower. Perhaps the way is to descend, from each language, down to the common base of human communication—the real but as yet undiscovered universal language—and then reemerge by whatever particular route is convenient” (23). This “common base” is for Weaver in part a mystical common source, but it is also a matter of protocol; in other words, the basic logical structures of language that undergird his proposal do not await discovery but are rather instantiated as such. They are in this sense determinative, forming and informing processes of machine translation and, by extension, computational environments themselves. If one were using a machine translation application to bridge the towers of Chinese and Arabic now, the more convenient “direct route” would be through English, and it is precisely the ease-of-use argument that contributes to what David Singh Grewal (2008) describes as the “network power” of global English: the whole system of administrative, institutional, and social procedures and protocols that have been set up to facilitate its functioning as a global linguistic standard.

The exponential growth of machine translation applications for both desktop and mobile devices, particularly with speech and character recognition capability, means that functioning in a multilingual social matrix need not necessarily be hindered by monolingualism.³ It is precisely these developments in translation technology that lead Nicholas Ostler to anticipate the obsolescence of English as a global *lingua franca*. In his prognosis, Ostler suggests that the rapidly developing corpora of electronic linguistic resources coupled with advances in machine translation will facilitate all manner of interlingual communication and thus obviate the need for a single *lingua franca*. Participation in the global information economy will thus simply require “a dictionary, grammar, parser, and a multi-million-word corpus of texts—and they’d better all be computer tractable” (2010, 262). (It is not insignificant that this forecast presumes that each language community will have both the requisite electronic corpora and adequate text analysis tools.) In my view, however, Google Translate—for all its promise of linguistic pluralism as a league of languages, each granted nominally equal participation—in fact reaffirms global English as a

mode of being and knowing in the world: the unquestioning assurance that one's own linguistic position is the self-evident and ineluctable global norm that makes knowledge of languages other than English patently unnecessary. Statistical machine translation applications globalize translation practices by containing the very linguistic differences that produce them. They statistically calculate sameness, predicting and thereby enacting a principle of interchangeability; all languages are rendered equivalent to each other through phrasal units, and local and dialectical differences are managed through probability. As a result, they also globalize English in their de facto articulation of it as a normative default setting within the context of a supranational linguistic network. Even, or perhaps especially, in the age of Google, then, English retains its protocological status.

If the “network power” of global English is for the moment secure, how are we to understand its place in the university, which is itself experiencing unprecedented structural and technological transformations? As I have argued elsewhere, global English is inextricably bound up with the sociocultural function of schooling and managed as a bureaucratic set of linguistic, literary, and academic practices through state organizations, the classroom, and a suite of learning aids such as textbooks, videos, and audio programs (Raley 1999). It is even constituted as a kind of John Henry Newman–like “idea” on which to found an entire college—as in the Global English College Ltd., in Vancouver—thus making it possible to trace a direct line from the production of global English as *techne* in the nineteenth-century university to both contemporary courseware initiatives and the new globally networked university (e.g., New York University in Abu Dhabi). For this reason, in addition to considering the instrumental rationalization particular to the communication systems of the network society, the discourse of global English also needs to consider English as a global business language in the context of the university's becoming a global business itself.

As has been well documented, institutions of higher education are becoming disaggregated, with tutoring centers developed on the model of call centers; they have been slow to adapt to fundamental changes in the delivery and distribution of instructional content and are now hurriedly developing online courses; and they remain subject to the force of what in corporate parlance is called “disruptive innovation” as they witness the exponential growth in sectors of the education market that they had principally abandoned. Regulatory practices such as accreditation are slowing down the process of dramatic

transformation, but it is clear that the university is gradually evolving into an entirely different kind of entity, one that has all the hallmarks of the lifelong-learning model espoused by corporate culture. Profound shifts in delivery and distribution, as with courseware and open-education initiatives, have been commonly recognized, though slightly less critical attention has been paid to processes of disaggregation, as in the development of tutoring centers on the model of call centers. The new networked universities are driven by the principle of disruptive innovation, beginning with a corner of the market not necessarily prioritized by traditional institutions (tutoring, introductory-level instruction), and continually oriented toward what we might regard as a market takeover (the Enlightenment project of knowledge production wholly transformed as online study groups become online universities). From the rise of for-profit universities to the push to develop online “content modules” branded with the names of established universities, it is clear that the twenty-first-century university is fundamentally networked, a situation nearly impossible to envisage without the objects and methodological practices of the computational sciences.

As just one example, consider the recently established Peer 2 Peer University, begun in September 2009 by the former executive director of Creative Commons. A grassroots educational initiative that uses the tools and techniques of social and participatory media, this is an instance of the university literally run as a network, the ideal for which is the smooth transmission of messages, a kind of “pure” communication that emerges from the synthesis of gesture, dialect, abbreviations, and icons into a language that is both mobile and adaptable on the fly. Here it is important to note that global English as such is fundamentally segmented, rotten, broken, shattered, and untidy precisely because it has been invested with the energy of the popular, its heteroglot quality indicating a fundamental mutability even as academic and institutional forces endeavor to shore up a standard idiolect. Global English, in other words, does not require linguistic policing; its mode is that of multiplicity, difference, and local distinction, and it is precisely because it has been open sourced that it has become, as Ben Russell puts it, “one of the most pervasive and powerful operating systems on the planet” (36). But this in itself points to a significant shift in the appraisal of expert culture, a system of certification that has historically legitimated, and been legitimated by, global English. This shift has in part been facilitated by the wide-scale phenomenon of collaborative content creation, including not just wikis

but also social networking (Facebook, foursquare) and the development of consumer knowledge bases (Yelp). Such is the skepticism about the value and utility of expert knowledge that it is not uncommon to encounter someone on the op-ed pages who asks why we need universities when we have all that the electronic public sphere affords, in addition to such entities as the Peer 2 Peer University. Experts become superfluous if one can learn everything one needs to know from Wikipedia—or from Grammar Girl or any number of online chat settings in which the particularities of English idioms and possessive nouns are discussed.

Global English certainly persists as a disciplinary configuration, as this special section attests, and we would do well to keep a critical eye on the processes by which smaller foreign language departments are clustered into single departments of language and literature that operate in practice if not in name as departments of “Literature in English.” We would also do well to articulate a difference between, on the one hand, global English as a disciplinary configuration that realigns literary studies with a paradoxically transnational yet also culturally myopic global imaginary and, on the other, a more productive notion that articulates relations among divergent English dialects on the basis of linguistic praxis rather than national affiliation. But another kind of global English is one not exclusively linked to curricular and canonical matters, important as they may be, but rather one that considers the relations between English and the very sociotechnological milieu that it continues to code. The question of global English and the university has not disappeared, but it has been reinstated by the technological innovations of the last decade.

Notes

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1. *Another Kind of Language* was first installed in shows at the Atkinson and Pitshanger Manor Galleries (2001–2) and more recently appeared in a show at the University of Buffalo Center for the Arts (2011). It is also accessible as a stand-alone web work.

2. In addition to Google Translate and Yahoo! Babel Fish, the other major machine translation service is Microsoft’s Bing Translator, also available as widget and commercial API (application programming interface), both with collaborative translation functionality that allows for the crowd-sourcing of post-translation editing.

3. With the aid of the Google Goggles application, which scans and then translates text, a monolingual English speaker in any of several European countries would not even need to type words in a language not his or her own.

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