The Hegemonic Ha

English in a Neoliberal Information Economy

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Though humor can offer a retreat from the oppression of power structures, it remains embedded in the very order it strives to escape. The comedic website Engrish.com, which features examples of botched English in Asian countries, illustrates the ongoing struggle over control of the English language, a key form of capital in today’s information economy. By highlighting the mistakes of nonnative English speakers, the website constitutes yet another mechanism that reinforces native English speakers’ elite status in social and economic spheres, as well as their power to dictate what is and what is not “English.”

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Without words, what do we have? From language, we define what is possible—what we think, who we talk to, what we do, and where we go. Language is more than a vessel for thought. It communicates our identity and status and reinforces the cultural and economic politics of globalization.¹ It is the “battlefield … upon which players in the global information economy grapple for property, respectability, and political voice.”² A fascination with the ways in which language shapes the human experience motivates me to explore the evolving relationship between English and neoliberal capitalism.

To observe this relationship in daily life, I examine its place in humor. Though many uphold humor as a retreat from hegemony, it remains embedded in the very order it strives to escape. Engrish.com is a website that shows examples of botched English in China. By highlighting nonnative English speakers’ mistakes, Engrish.com demonstrates native English speakers’ efforts to maintain their control of English, a key form of capital in today’s information economy.

Language in a Globalizing World

Globalization, the compression of time and space, generates encounters among diverse actors.³ These encounters create both connections and tensions. English, today’s dominant language, acts out this phenomenon of globalization. While it facilitates exchange, specifically the free trade of people, goods, and services, English strengthens divides by excluding those who do not speak it and eroding other languages and the cultures embedded within them.

To illustrate my argument, I distill the wide variety of linguistic proficiencies and identities into two categories. Native English speakers, those who grew up in a home that spoke primarily English, I define as “elites.” Nonnative English speakers, those who learned English as a secondary language, I identify as “subalterns.”⁴

The social and economic dominance of elites over subalterns, known as hegemony, preserves itself through a combination of coercion and consent.⁵ Though it might be tempting to imagine one group intentionally orchestrating this dominance, the power dynamics are, in fact, complex and subtle. As Umberto Eco emphasizes, “Power is not single, but is massive; it is not a one-way process between an entity that commands and its subjects.”⁶ Historically, successful hegemonic orders have employed minimal coercion. Though courts, police, and the

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⁴ Sonntag 9.
military do play a role in maintaining power structures, they rarely interfere with the daily lives of individuals. Consent, fostered through institutions such as religion or the media, maintains power more effectively. Those who perceive their conditions as supportive and benign are far more likely to submit and contribute to them. Umberto Eco explains the most extreme example of this phenomenon, asserting that “Fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech … Power is not only repression and prohibition, it is also incitement to discourse and production of knowledge.” \(^7\) A hegemonic order that subtly promotes a particular brand of discourse will endure far longer than an order that severely restricts its population.

By fostering individuals’ consent to today’s hegemonic order, language perpetuates the power imbalance between elites and subalterns. Language operates on multiple levels. Globally, English is the most commonly used language of international trade. Nations that want to compete economically need English. However, when they “invest” in English, they also reinforce their second-rate status. In an economy that relies on “information—finding it, peddling it, hiding it, distorting it,” English will always be “manipulated and controlled by more powerful players in more powerful countries.” \(^8\) On a smaller scale, the English language incorporates the individual into the hegemonic order as a worker and a consumer. English grants access to institutions that support the neoliberal capitalist order: perhaps an Indian citizen becomes a candidate for an outsourced position at Dell or a Dutch teenager falls in love with Harry Potter and buys every book. Academia’s lack of attention to English’s dominance reveals the language’s subtlety in inducing consent. \(^9\) Yet this subtlety should not be taken as a lack of influence. Robert Phillipson argues that “while there is no simple correlation between the use of English and either British culture or US corporate interests, these developments embody and entail hegemonising processes that tend to render the use of English ‘natural’ and ‘normal,’ and to marginalise other languages.” \(^10\) English’s role in incorporating individuals as subjects is underemphasized but pervasive nonetheless.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the school. Though some uphold the school as an ideology-free environment, it is one of the primary mechanisms that incorporates individuals as subjects. On the global level, a nation’s prioritization of education affects its role in the international order. For example, from the late 1940s to the 1960s, the Philippines began to incorporate English language instruction into its education system, in part to increase its citizens’ global economic competitiveness. However, this campaign ultimately fueled the export-driven economy promoted by multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. \(^11\) On the individual level, each group of students “ejected en route is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfill in class society: the role of the exploited … the role of the agent of exploitation … agent of repression … professional ideologist.” \(^12\)

The school, therefore, inserts students into specific positions within a hegemonic order.

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7 Eco 241–2.
8 Prendergast 3.
10 Phillipson 191.
Linguistic Empire

Capital is largely defined by its ability to add value to itself. As an asset put to productive use, an asset that wants to expand itself, language is a form of capital. One uses language to accumulate more language. For example, students lean upon a framework of academic language learned in high school to develop more sophisticated jargon in college. As Selma Sonntag states in *The Local Politics of Global English*, “different elites draw on different capital to acquire and retain their elite status.” Language is one form of capital that perpetuates status. For many, “mastery of global English generates a significant amount of linguistic capital.” The more difficult it is to learn English in a given country, the more valuable English language capital tends to be.

All languages act as capital and relate to each other within a network of power. Disequilibrium facilitates movement within such networks. For example, it is easier to exchange commodities in an economy with money than in a bartering economy. When money emerges as a commodity of pure exchange value, other commodities gain relative value. Money becomes a standard, a unit by which one measures other commodities. Consensus dictates what money is—be it digital or physical, such as paper or plastic. The English language plays a similar function in the network of languages. Just as money is the commodity of pure exchange value that allows all other commodities to possess relative value, English, the language of exchange, facilitates the global trade of languages while relegating other languages to second-rate status.

Over a billion people from different language backgrounds speak to each other through English rather than translate between their two languages. More than 1.5 billion people speak and understand English, and for over 300 million, English is a second or third language essential for participating in their society’s central processes. As such, English is an “object of enormous investment, as eagerly sought as a piece of property or a hot stock” and a “form of currency, one that can help markets function best for all participants by serving as a neutral medium for exchange.” English is “the buyers’ and sellers’ language, the stock language of the market.” The distribution of language capital has material consequences. In 2001, those who possessed English, the language of pure exchange value, consumed 80% of all available resources.

Great Britain’s industrial leadership in the nineteenth century, coupled with the United States’ economic, military, and technologic leadership in the twentieth, brought English to its position as the language of pure exchange value. The “coca-colonisation of the world” during the second half of the twentieth century cemented this order. In *The Adventure of English*, Melvyn Bragg states that “American brand names, American popular music, its movies and

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14 Sonntag 8.
15 Sonntag 8.
18 Bragg ix.
19 Prendergast 1.
20 Prendergast 6.
21 Bragg 305.
22 Phillipson 189.
23 Sonntag 3.
television, stormed the world…. To buy and sell, to enjoy and participate, to sing and be heard, increasingly and everywhere, you needed American English.” 24 Today, English bears the ideology of globalization that includes “aggressive casino capitalism, economic restructuring, McDonaldisation and militarisation on all continents.” 25 To participate in commerce and international politics, nations need English, the language of the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the International Monetary Fund, OPEC, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the European Union. 26 A nation has a better chance of having its voice “heard” internationally if it uses English, the “global card played in local contestations for power.” 27 Selma Sonntag points to China’s exclusive use of English to issue a warning to Taiwan in 2002, positing that China likely chose English because it wanted to send a message to the international community, not to Taiwan. 28 Indeed, English is used for choices that impact the global population. 29 Other, perhaps more surprising groups that depend on English include the Baltic Marine Biologists, the Asian Amateur Athletics Association, and the African Hockey Federation. Culturally, English connects individuals to such giants as the BBC, CNN, Hollywood, and MTV. 30 These institutions reflect and reinforce English’s status as the most valuable form of language capital.

Accumulating English

Catherine Prendergast draws upon the case of Slovakia to illustrate investment in language capital. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, English was censored due to its association with capitalist countries. The Velvet Revolution of 1989 brought about the peaceful overthrow of communism. Then in 1993, the former Soviet state of Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Within about a decade, Slovaks went from rarely hearing English to walking through shopping malls with English names. Perhaps the best illustration of this transition is a mall in Bratislava with corridors called “Wall Street” and “Fifth Avenue.” 31 To become a capitalist state, Slovakia had to learn “capitalism’s first language: English.” 32 English taught Slovaks the “rudimentary logic of capitalism: how to shop, how to drive, and most of all to learn ever more English to keep your job.” 33 Prendergast traces those learning English in an ethnography, an investigative tactic she admires for its ability to recognize the individual within a structure. 34 Indeed, as Robert Phillipson states, “everything happens locally. However global a practice may be, it still happens locally.” 35 Embedded within an international industry devoted to teaching English are the stories of millions of people each striving to learn a language. While Prendergast recognizes the particularity of each of these experiences, she

24 Bragg 305.
25 Phillipson 187.
26 Phillipson 187.
27 Sonntag xii.
28 Sonntag xii.
29 Phillipson 189.
30 Phillipson 187.
31 Prendergast 2.
32 Prendergast 2.
33 Prendergast 3.
34 Sonntag 4.
points to a “common denominator” of “people’s perceptions of English” in Slovakia. During the communist era, most associated English with freedom, while after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many began to associate English with money and power.  

Though English economically boosted Slovaks, it also “provided the terms through which they continued to be cast as ‘backward’ in the development narrative …. Slovaks were given a place in the global economy through English, but it was a sharply defined and decidedly second-class one.” As the information economy forced Slovaks to depend on English for economic prosperity, it “dictated that English as lingua franca would ever be out of their control…. The language was as likely to reinforce their marginal status as it was to assure their success.” Though Slovaks constantly strove to accumulate more English through different types of schools, such as au pair or business schools, they remained perpetually behind.  

This never-ending quest for more English or the “right kind of English” illustrates how language is capital. In an information economy, (seemingly) new information is more valuable than old information. English had to be constantly remade in order to stay valuable. For Slovaks, English became a shifting target. In economics, this phenomenon in which one party has more relevant information than another is known as information asymmetry. Prendergast explains that profit was “to be made from keeping information as asymmetrical as possible.” This asymmetry supports geographer David Harvey’s idea of accumulation through dispossession. Harvey argues that a neoliberal economic order lacks productive power. It generates wealth primarily through dispossession; the few accumulate wealth by detaching the majority from their property. In Slovakia, as in the rest of the world, a strong industry emerged to accommodate the demand for English, a demand that emerged from dispossessing subalterns of language capital.  

The English-teaching industry generates wealth for elites. The support scheme for English teaching in postcommunist European countries included major investment from oil giants British Petroleum and Shell. Projects that support English language specialists in nations such as Bulgaria are “doubtless good for both the oil company and for British textbook business.” The English-teaching industry, which includes language schools, publishing, and teaching degrees, has continued to increase in value since the 1980s, when it was worth approximately 6 billion pounds.  

The English-teaching industry also promotes ideology that reinforces elite status. In 2000, British Minister of Education and Employment David Blunkett celebrated the potential gain in linguistic homogenization when he publicly stated that “it makes good economic sense to use English fluency as a platform to underpin our economic competitiveness and to promote our culture overseas.” Thus, subalterns find themselves stuck. Although they need
the “indispensable global medium” of English “for pragmatic purposes, even for survival in the global economy,” they recognize that English is not “culturally or ideologically neutral, far from it.” They risk “acquiescing in the negation of their own understandings of reality and in the accompanying denial or even subversion of their own interests.” 46 This dialectic constricts subalterns’ freedom.

The case of Slovakia illustrates ideology through the idea of hope—the subject of Prendergast’s Buying Into English: Language and Investment in the New Capitalist World. People need hope to make investments that in turn impact economies. 47 Prendergast witnessed that “when people invest in English, they do so with some hope but by no means complete faith in the development narrative.” 48

**Speaking Engrish**

Engrish.com features misuses of English in China, among other Asian nations. Examples include T-shirts that say, “How do you tape it more than whether to sing what,” “Star Wars—Usa The Force,” and “Beady eyes bustle with activity. Loving Friend for Always.” These absurd examples illustrate the ways in which even humor pulls power imbalances into daily life. Indeed, as Umberto Eco states, “the comic … seems bound to its time, society, cultural anthropology.” 49 Humor does not exist in a vacuum. It emerges from a context, and thus always reveals information about a larger political and economic situation.

Neuroscientist Robert Provine’s study supports the idea that humor emerges from a social context. He recorded 2,000 conversations at a mall and found that laughter typically comes from relationships. People laughed at phrases like, “How’d you do on the test?” and “Here comes Mary,” not jokes. Provine concluded that “people who laugh at others may be trying to force them to conform or casting them out of the group.” 50 This study illustrates laughter’s bonding function.

In linguistic miscommunication, one can laugh at one’s own misunderstanding or at that of another. Laughing at someone else’s misunderstanding occurs only from a privileged perspective in which one can grasp multiple meanings. 51 More often than not, it is native English speakers who laugh at subalterns’ use of English, not the other way around, because of English’s tremendous influence. Eco observes that humor often involves the “violation of a rule committed by a person of lower degree, of bestial character, toward whom we feel a sense of superiority, so that we do not identify ourselves with his downfall, which in any case does not move us.” 52 Thus, in the case of Engrish.com, laughter at misuses of English suggests elite judgment of linguistic subalterns.

Note, however, that ultimately, the joke is on native English speakers. In reality, many Chinese speak better English than native speakers do. Today, there are more people learning English in China than there are native English speakers. 53 This illustrates China’s commitment

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46 Phillipson 195.
47 Prendergast 18.
48 Prendergast 10.
49 Eco 269.
51 Karatani and Speaks 75.
52 Eco 270.
53 Sonntag xi.
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to moving beyond its role as a labor and manufacturing source to becoming an equal or
greater participant in the information economy than the United States. At the same time, over
a billion people speak Mandarin as their first language, while English has only 380 million core
speakers. \(^{54}\) Linguistic elites—native English speakers—are largely excluded from the world of
Mandarin. When Engrish.com mocks Chinese efforts to use English, it reinforces a pre-existing
order in which native English speakers rule and a foreigner’s English is always inadequate. The
nonnative speaker must always strive to accumulate more language capital.

**Linguistic Counter-Hegemony**

In illustrating elites’ efforts to maintain control over English, Engrish.com suggests
anxiety about transitioning or transforming linguistic power. Many anticipate that Chinese,
Arabic, or another language could soon usurp English as the world’s dominant language. \(^{55}\)
English is not the first language to occupy the position of dominance, and it will likely not
be the last.

Linguistic subalterns could also challenge English’s throne by transforming the English
language itself. Critics might argue that language is not open to interpretation and that neither
elites nor subalterns can redefine language. However, Ferdinand de Saussure presents a
linguistic system that challenges this notion of a fixed language. De Saussure explains that
language is not a “naming-process,” a set of words that match “ready-made ideas.” \(^{56}\) Rather,
a concept (the signified) is relatively amorphous until fixed by a signifier (sound-image, i.e.,
a word’s sensory impression). This arbitrary union of signified and signifier is known as a
linguistic sign. \(^{57}\)

According to de Saussure, language is a self-referential system whose interdependent
terms have value only when held in contrast with other terms. \(^{58}\) It is slippery: “the signified of
a signifier is another signifier, and thus meaning as such does not exist; instead, there is only a
chain of signifiers.” \(^{59}\) When a person strives to describe a word, he or she can only compare it to
or contrast it with other words. Without foundation or center, de Saussure’s linguistic system is
“disequilibrated and excessive,” “dynamic” because of “incessant internal slippage.” \(^{60}\) Speakers
and authors must renounce control over a statement’s interpretation.

The self-referentiality of language forces the listener or reader to choose among the multiple
meanings embedded in a statement. Saul Kripke emphasizes the slippery nature of language when
he says, “there can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word. Each new application we
make is a leap in the dark; any present intention could be interpreted so as to accord with anything
we may choose to do.” \(^{61}\) Expressing and interpreting meaning is a dynamic social process.

Yet to function in daily life, one cannot dwell on language’s slippery, self-referential
nature and the multiplicity of meanings it engenders. Karatani explains, “Psychotics live,
as it were, within the self-referential paradox.” Schizophrenics struggle to choose among the different meanings they perceive in language. When confronted with two contradictory messages, they find themselves "trapped in the double bind" of "a self-referential, and therefore undecidable, system." This "sense of disorientation" from "mutually conflicting messages" occurs to everyone, not just schizophrenics. Thus, speakers cannot assign their own meaning to a word they choose and expect it to be understood, even though the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary. "Collective behavior," or convention, dictates societal expression. As Ludwig Wittgenstein emphasizes, "The meaning of a word is its use in language." English playwright Dennis Potter put it more humorously when he said, "The trouble with words is that you never know whose mouths they have been in." We only have access to shared language, one that society imprints with meaning that cannot be chosen at the individual level. Linguist Noam Chomsky stated that every spoken sentence is a unique new creation. Language changes constantly through use.

Saul Kripke illustrates this idea mathematically. He first states that 2+2=4. Everyone accepts this equation. However, the equation 2+3=6 can also be considered correct if one assumes that the + symbol demands multiplication, not addition. Thus, mathematic or linguistic rules are never truly set; they can be constantly adapted to fit each new context. Words’ meanings are "negotiated" with every interaction.

Ludwig Wittgenstein compares the process of language definition to a game. Players run around the field, throwing, rolling, and chasing a ball in a seemingly aimless way. Then one player explains that they have been playing a ballgame all along and strictly following a set of rules. Wittgenstein concludes, “And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along.” Though the English of Engrish.com seems illogical, it could merely be governed by an alternative set of rules.

In this analogy, Wittgenstein neglects the uneven power dynamics among "players" in language formation. Elites have a disproportionate ability to define what is true or proper when it comes to history and language. Power emerges not from “the ability to speak,” but rather from “the ability to speak to the extent that this ability becomes rigid in an order, a system of rules, the given language.” One can understand this as “sticking power.” Though all can speak and construct norms of language, an elite’s redefinition of language has more sticking power than that of a subaltern.

62 Karatani and Speaks 78.
63 Karatani and Speaks 76.
64 Karatani and Speaks 76.
65 de Saussure 67.
66 de Saussure 68.
69 Noam Chomsky, as cited in Sonntag 6.
70 Kripke 21.
71 Sonntag 6.
73 Eco 241.
Today’s power structure dictates that the English of Engrish.com is “incorrect,” not a creative reinterpretation of the language. As Sonntag explains, “Elite history is hegemonic. It is assumed to be the truth.” Yet though their influence remains relatively low, linguistic subalterns are already redefining language. Subalterns are not passive consumers of the hegemonic cultural form of English.

China’s growing economic prowess will likely increase the sticking power of its language redefinition. The relationship between Caliban and Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* illustrates this possibility. When Prospero enslaves Caliban and teaches him English in an effort to control him, Caliban resists Prospero by swearing at him. Rather than “abandon the imposed linguistic structure of Prospero,” Caliban “creatively transforms it in the act of resistance.” How does our laughter at Engrish.com change when we understand the examples of “botched” English as acts of redefinition or resistance? Engrish.com is one way in which linguistic subalterns are already challenging elites by altering their medium of control.

Singapore’s Singlish offers another example of this resistance through reinterpretation. English was used for a century and a half in Singapore. When Singapore became independent in 1958, English became the official language of business and government because it facilitated exchange among Singapore’s diverse population and across borders. Singlish, a hybrid of English, Malay, Hokkun, and other languages, both complements the country’s official English and transforms it. Plurals and past tenses are optional, so phrases such as “Got so many car!” and “The house sell already” are commonplace. Singapore is not the only nation to make English its own. In Korea and Taiwan, a “product” is called a “produk.” Bragg predicts that “produk” could replace “product” as these nations gain economic power.

Today’s information economy reinvents language in surprising ways. Social media provides new avenues for communicating and transforming language. The proliferation of Text English demonstrates the ways in which social media is already transforming language. In 2003, the *Guardian*’s article “English as a Foreign Language,” featured this example of Text English: “Dnt u sumX rekn eng lang v lngwindd? 2 mny wds & ltrs? ?nt wr b usng lss time & papr? ? we b 4wd tnking + txt?” Youth today use this version of English, though it may be incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with texting. Technological innovations will alter the balance of linguistic power. Although 70% of the Internet is in English, its language of origin, many predict that the percentage of other languages present online will increase.

Street art also creates new spaces for reinterpretation of language. For example, artist Shepherd Fairey plastered a sticker that said OBEY throughout cities. As others mimicked the sticker across the world, it found new meaning among diverse groups. Street art makes
public the phenomenon that already takes place with the ordinary expression of daily life. All phrases and words create new meaning and norms as they are performed in society.\textsuperscript{81}

Laughter at Engrish.com labels this process of linguistic reinterpretation absurd and reinforces the notion of one English, a fixed English that belongs to an elite class of native speakers. Yet we have seen that “all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice … the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”\textsuperscript{82} Those who laugh at “botched” English in an effort to retain their language capital may soon find themselves the subject of farce as history repeats itself and English fragments, evolves, or falls under the reign of a new linguistic hegemon.

\textsuperscript{81} Pennycook 128.
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