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English as a dead language?

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EDITORIAL: ENGLISH AS A DEAD LANGUAGE?

The abolition, in the course of the nineteenth century, of the *scriptum latinum*—Latin composition as a condition for entry into the university—is impossible to separate from the pull towards the language of ‘the people’ during the nationalistic era in European politics. This revocation of Latin as a ‘language requirement’ for higher education entailed both its purification as a ‘classical’ language and the recursive monolingualization of the literary history of the emergent European nation-states, which at that point urgently needed to fortify their precarious political borders on the cultural level. This development has for a large part eclipsed the reality that, until far into the 16th and 17th centuries, Latin was not just a ‘Gelehrtensprache’ but served as a volatile medium of international expression—and of artistic creation for authors as far apart as Francesco Petrarca, Pierre de Ronsard, John Milton, and János Csezmicei—which effortlessly crossed the Atlantic to the New World.

Today, questions like ‘Do you speak American?’ seem to echo the motto that was for a long time inscribed in the statutes of the university of Paris: *latine loqui, pie vivere* (‘to speak Latin is to live piously’). In more than one respect, English has now taken up the functions that Latin filled for several centuries, until the growing importance of French led to Latin’s gradual demise as a vehicle of international communication. In many educational institutions all over the world, English language tests such as TOEFL can be seen as present-day equivalents of the *scriptum latinum*. We may well wonder whether and how English will in its turn be fractured into a multiplicity of vernaculars—each representing the voice of ‘the people’—and be declared ‘dead’. Obviously, contrary to the position of Latin since late Antiquity, English can fall back on a large body of first language speakers from Antigua to Zimbabwe. But is not the split between ‘first’ and ‘second’ language users—like that between ‘living’ and ‘dead’ cultures—itself a construct of a monolingual age now increasingly under pressure (although, obviously, we have always been more multilingual than is often supposed)?

The pioneers of American Studies may have ‘Englishized’ their discipline in order to break away from local European standards and to connect to the typically ‘American’ idiom that purportedly defined the US nation. In recent years, the internationalization of American Studies has led many organizations and editorial boards around the globe to adopt English as their preferred



language of communication. While this trend seems to have the obvious advantage of opening up the field to formerly inaccessible 'outside' perspectives, it cannot be denied that it also has its downside. Such a shift to an 'English Only' policy could reinforce the inherited monovocalism of American Studies and perpetuate the linguistic hegemony of English all over the world. The generalization of English as an international scholarly language, in itself no guarantee of a broader readership, may also serve to eclipse the reality of American multilingualism by cutting out of the object of research the many 'in-between' tongues and slanguages that clash and coalesce on the back alleys and street corners of the US.

However different their perspectives, all contributions collected in this special issue of *RIAS* deal in one way or another with the *dilemmas* of multilingualism in American Studies. To begin, we offer a digest of a topical and lively debate among the members of the IASA executive council about the language policy of *RIAS*. Most board members agree that IASA's hemispheric ambition requires some sort of recognition of American languages other than English. Some even suggested that we should open the door to submissions in the native languages of Americanists all over the globe. At the same time, there are very real practical constraints involving translation costs as well as broader ethical objections: Is not the inclusion of non-English languages in an American Studies journal, whose readership generally has a good command of English, a form of academic tokenism? Since this debate is by no means closed, we have reproduced some excerpts from it here to stimulate the broader IASA community to enter the fray.

A recurrent thread in this special issue is the idea that the global hegemony of English does not merely pose an obstacle to an adequate engagement with America, but at the same time entails the possibility of talking back to the center from the outside. Not just an emblem of McAmericanization, English has developed into a "proteiform" language (Patrick Imbert), absorbing the most diverse cultural registers and speech ways that come its way. These 'foreign' inflections serve to decentralize the language, but also underscore its *vitality* as 'an agile lingua franca' (Doris Sommer) and a 'bridge language' (Evelyn Ch'ien) connecting the various ethnolinguistic communities in the US and the Americas as a whole. It is now possible for a bilingual *Québécois* to win the Booker with an English language novel, more or less in the same way as a Renaissance author from the Low Countries could address a European audience in locally inflected Latin. Instead of juxtaposing different languages, therefore, why not embrace this linguistic cross-fertilization and organize a mixed language conference?

The other contributions collected in this issue tackle the ambivalent role of 'World English' in a less head-on fashion, but all of them stress the contingencies and even downright contradictions involved in its emergence. Thus, in his review article of Emily Apter's *The Translation Zone*, Armin Paul Frank notes how the 'alarmist mode' in which this book addresses the 'English only' perspective of American security forces in the war on terror at times results in an intensified preoccupation with translational 'adequacy', a model that Apter ascribes to the 'old' translation studies. Likewise, Jannika Bock's

report of the ASA conference in Oakland indicates how the generalized use of English in American Studies journal around the world has not necessarily made these journals more visible or attractive to US scholars. Finally, Patrick McGreevy and Melani McAlister's rejoinders to Gönül Pultar's report on CASAR's inaugural conference in the first issue of *RIAS* are more polemical in kind, but they too reflect on the two-way logic of Americanization and the life-in-death existence of English as a global language.

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