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## **FIVE YEARS OF RIAS**

Editors' Picks



## SERVING McAMERICA...

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English is a global language, and probably already spoken at a great deal at International American Studies conferences without being officialized. Making English the official language of these conferences is, in diplomatic terms, too aggressive; it will imply that a scholarly contribution by a native speaker of English has more global impact and higher quality than by a scholar who does not 'speak American'. As the author of *Weird English* (Harvard University Press, 2004), a book that chronicles how English can be combined with foreign languages, I am aware of the virtues of English as a bridge language. But here, as in *Weird English*, I argue for multilingualism. The American experience is no longer monolingual for anyone. Some English will naturally occur in critiques about America, but imposing a rule that English should be used excludes many scholars. And it may cause a decline in the imaginative and creative potential of American studies scholarship.

Across the globe, scholars have critiqued America in any language with occasional English to fill in the holes during translation. Journals (for instance *Transtext(e)s/Transcultures*) that publish essays in a number of languages are gaining popularity. Critiques of America, from the popular to the academic, are also viewed or read in many languages. Dubbed versions of *Borat* are causing international buzz. Jean Baudrillard's *America* and Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* had large impact in their original language. And countless scholars have been obsessed with defining Americanness, without even approaching the fluency of Nabokov and his linguist *Lolita*. For such critiques, we don't need language

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requirements. History has shown that people can offer insights into a culture without being fluent in that cul-ture's language.

Some say English would bring a little bit of order to American studies. There is no discipline in the discipline, one scholar said to me. But the lack of order and the indiscipline in the discipline is enlightening: it exposes the subject that makes American studies so messy—the lack of boundaries of America itself. *America is everywhere*. It is no longer confined or confinable to a specific population, or specific landmass. Its image, substance, or spirit are no longer communicated or experienced solely in English. Aside from its immigrant and multilingual residents, its potential to be experienced polylingually is provided by travelers, internet surfers, and visitors. They tell us how America looks from everywhere. They blog, snap, scribble, and paint; through photos, films and other media and in this way give us their experience of America.

Welcome or not, America is a concept of living that is portable by plane, telephone and now internet. The increased role of globalization in defining Americanness has made it more difficult to discern the ingredients that compose it. We do not simply use other languages to connect to the American consciousness, we rely on them. America has translated itself to other cultures so much that homophonic equivalents of Coke (*kele* in Chinese or *coca* in French), McDonalds, and Starbucks exist globally. Youth culture has maximized the potential of the internet to bring skateboard contests to every country that can afford them. With internet use, there is less control on the property of America that used to have some connection to solid ground. America's ubiquity is an issue in itself, something to be managed. And in pre-internet times, language was one of the ways in which conceptions of America could be defined and controlled. But now, visuals and language tools make instant translation possible ... perhaps such roll-out translations are not always polished but language tools are increasingly accurate.

We cannot manage the ubiquity of America in one language without risk of reinforcing the franchise mentality that has accompanied globalization. American studies is enriched by the possibility of being captured by another language. Furthermore, the advantage of other languages being used to describe America

is that it makes us translate the other, and listen to the other as a separate voice. America is too often the benefactor of translations. American studies scholars have opportunities to shape what America means to the globe. For the present, Americanness is no longer amber waves of grain and a healthy dollar, but we have the opportunity to shape its image and to see what others think America might be.

Conferences must also reflect that America, being multilingual, has much to benefit by presentations that feature its other main languages—Spanish of course being one of them. *Spanglish*, a comedy film, accomplished this well when it told the story of an immigrant housekeeper learning English. If we do declare English as the language of International Conferences, another problem is, what English? American English is a *mélange* that does not have either stable or standard percentages of English and other languages. In the barrios and Chinatowns of America, English can often be but a fraction of linguistic practice and must compete with Spanish and dialects of Chinese. The bridge language, the Spanglish or Chinglish that emerges in the mix, is a result of the linguistic commerce between cultures and generations. The linguistic triumph is that these languages can be mixed, that the *bric-a-brac* architecture of syntax and grammars is liveable space, linguistic homes that can be either clumsy hybrids or elegant reconstructions, depending upon whether the art of language is important to the users. In *Weird English*, I focus on the mixed Englishes of writers, devoting most of the work to the fine details of the elegant reconstructions of English—but I also find fruitful the study of spontaneous hybrids and rule-breaking concoctions that can happen. I found indiscipline in immigrant and postcolonial linguistic anarchy—and the immigrant and postcolonial experiments with language that defied rules of grammar and syntax. At American studies conferences, indiscipline might be found in the jettisoning of English when describing America.

In the chaotic linguistic worlds of ethnic-speak, English is not only broken but at times uttered in completely foreign accents. Social, emotional, economic, and artistic transactions happen despite apparent unintelligibility. In fact the collision of all these things that have shaped contemporary English has made the notion of intel-

ligibility less important. Getting the idea can be more important than getting the language right. One example of English getting lost in the forces of evolution is rap. Most of my students cannot transcribe rap music, yet they love listening to it iteratively, so it might seem that artistically English is important in this case while the ideas being communicated are less of a priority. Emotion—the creation of American emotion—is what is being established by rap, rather than any systematic linguistic connection. What is American about that emotion? Perhaps that it is exuberant and exhausting, adventurous, raw, pioneering ... we can put in the sense, mood, or flavor—the Americanness—that we desire.

This debate might be an indication that someone, somewhere is looking for a way to control the flow toward linguistic chaos that is happening in America itself. But if American English itself is experiencing an inevitable spiral towards linguistic chaos, American studies conferences can reflect this by embracing the chaos of mixed languages. To enforce McEnglish is a mundane alternative; why not enjoy the phenomenon of a mixed language conference—where people will be inventing linguistic hybrids to communicate to one another, and having arguments over how to convey an idea in non-English. Other cultures will be more than up to the challenge of finding bridge languages (such as ‘I have un feeling about the wifi’ or ‘are the san-ming-zhi at mai-deng-lo the same as in America?’), and the goodwill that American scholars will obtain by temporarily immersing themselves in another culture’s medium will not only lead to valuable international relationships, but make American scholars more aware of the burden and value of the Americanness they carry. This, after all, underlies the aim of American studies, and scholars can use conferences as a training ground for becoming both intellectuals and diplomats.

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