

Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex

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 - *Date:* Wed, 26 Oct 2005 21:09:02 –0400
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On 25 Oct 2005 05:14:28 –0700, "InspiredPoet"
<inspired_great_poet@xxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

>The Linguo–Racial Complex

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>The Linguo–Racial complex is a phenomenon that I (and many other
>people, I guess) discovered while learning foreign languages. It refers
>to how average people associate a language with people's racial
>characteristics and have confusing reactions to the speaker of the
>language if he/she does not have the appearance that a "normal" speaker
>of such language has. Here are some examples:

>

>A White American took years of Spanish and is now fluent in it. He
>talks Spanish to some Mexican or Cuban immigrants in the US. They make
>a wry face and answer in broken English. He again speaks Spanish to
>them. They again answer in English (which is much worse than the white
>American's Spanish).

I've never once experienced this phenomenon. I've worked with local
immigrants to the US from a variety of Latin–American countries
(Spanish and Portuguese speaking) and never once was my Spanish met
with their English, unless it was their desire to practice English,
which I am more than happy to oblige!

I've also been overseas (to Spain) and, well, if you don't speak
Spanish, you don't get very far.

I have been taken as being Cuban and Galician, so perhaps it might be
different for other "whites".

>A Brit learns Japanese and speaks it very well now. He stops people on
>the streets of Tokyo and talks to them. They look at him like they have
>seen E.T. –with eyes wide–open and jaws dropped. Some smile sheepishly
>and walk on. Some look irritated and say in Japanese– "the language, I
>do not speak the language". Some answer in bad English, some walk by
>saying "I do not speak English", some asking him: "Do you speak
>Japanese?"(And what is he speaking now, Bantu?).

My forays into Tagalog and Waray–Waray have been met with delight (I

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don't think I could ever be confused for Pinoy! :))

>A European gentleman sits in a restaurant in an Arab country. He calls
>a waiter and asks for "thom"– garlic. The waiter looks shy and makes
>gestures at the customer– "One moment please, one moment please" and
>>walks away. Thinking that he went to get garlic, the customer patiently
>awaits his food. Guess what? He brought another waiter who addresses
>the customer with "May I help you, sir?" "I asked for bloody garlic in
>Arabic, why are you here asking me again?" "Sorry sir, we did not
>realize you could speak Arabic". "But I was speaking Arabic to the
>first waiter!"

I find this one harder to believe. Islam is a world–wide religion, and all sorts of ethnic groups mix and match in, for example, Saudi. I'd find it very difficult to believe that a Caucasian person speaking Arabic in almost any major city (Cairo, Mecca, Bagdad, Tehran, etc) could possibly be this surprising.

>The first waiter's mind did not register the fact that in spite of the
>speaker's European appearance he was, in fact, speaking Arabic.

>

>An American man who spent 15 years in the Philippines is with his
>girlfriend. He stops a taxi and talks to the driver in Tagalog. The
>driver ignores him like he does not exist and starts talking to his
>girlfriend about the taxi fare and all. People with high noses and
>white skin speak English. People with flat noses and brown skin speak
>Tagalog. People with high noses and white skin speaking Tagalog are
>absurd and probably unreal. Let's talk to the girl– her nose is flat
>and her skin is brown. She is a Tagalog speaker.

I'll have to try this one! ;)

>Here is another example: an Australian has spent half of his life in
>Thailand and speaks Thai fluently. He stops at a street stall. The
>hawkers look at him incredulously as he begins speaking Thai. One of
>them lights up and starts yelling out to others: "He can talk! He can
>talk!"

So far, the Thais seem to be the brightest of the bunch — at least they can recognise and (presumably praise) the foreigner for his attempt at speaking sensibly to them!

>The Lingo–Racial complex can take ugly extremes such as people ignored
>at restaurants and not served. People not being rented apartments
>because the landlord is afraid that he cannot communicate with English
>speakers (who speak his language very well) and friendships and dates
>being denied because, you see, I can't speak English. "

>

>"But I can speak your language!" A dull and incredulous look and
>silence are the answer.

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With all due respect, I simply don't think the facts of life fit the bleak outlook! At least in more cosmopolitan locations — sure when you get out into the back country of the Philippines or Japan, a foreigner being able to say howdy or ask where such–and–such a place is must be quite the shock. I refuse to think that the more educated folks in Metro Manila or downtown Tokyo could be so parochial.

But of course, here in the capital of Parochia (Washington DC), you do find some very similar attitudes towards foreigners who try to speak English. For the most part, their attempts are met with praise and a sincere desire to help out.

- >In a place that has many tourists and foreigners of a particular
- >"stock" people form a stereotypical reflex about how a person who looks
- >like that should talk and behave.
- >
- >In places that are excessively provincial and or/nationalistic people
- >cannot even conceive of a person who is clearly of another race being
- >able to speak their language.
- >
- >In some Latin countries particularly in the Caribbean and Mexico the
- >speakers see Spanish as "their" language and become shocked and even
- >insulted if a person of "another (non–Latin) race" speaks it.

I've got to ask: what happens when a Madrileño speaks to them? Nice blonde lady who looks like she could be German or American? Do they automatically assign her to gringo status?

- >Anglo–Saxon countries such as the US , UK, etc. do not have that
- >complex but the opposite of it– in their cultural view the whole world
- >speaks English and if they don't they should and soon will. So there is
- >no surprise if a Japanese person speaks English– he should.

Our complex comes from the fact that, as luck would have it, our native ("racial", to use your parlance) language coincides perfectly with the present and de facto world auxlang.

- >Argentina, being an immigrant Spanish speaking society will have a
- >similar attitude and will lack the Complex. So, I guess, would Brazil.
- >
- >Good news? Well, not everyone has the complex. There are many people
- >who are happy to see that you speak the language and many people who
- >will not even be surprised that you do. Many will treat you as an equal
- >especially after they got to know you. However, when one studies
- >languages of nations where the majority of people do not look like you,
- >one has to get ready to face the awkwardness of it.
- >
- >It's all in the expat's day's work. What's to do?

Learn a foreign language and make use of it. Bust up these stupid stereotypes.

Padraic.

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ast meiyoer ke 'l andrext ben trasfu.

• *Follow–Ups:*

◆ *Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex*

◇ *From:* Nathan

◆ *Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex*

◇ *From:* larrysulky

• *References:*

◆ *The Linguo–Racial Complex*

◇ *From:* InspiredPoet

• Prev by Date: *Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex*

• Next by Date: *Re: "standard" Arabic translation of Don Quixote*

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