

RETHINKING THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: A CRITIQUE OF AMBER ENGELSON

Setiono Sugiharto
*Faculty of Education and Language,
Atma Jaya Catholic University*

Abstract

This article critiques some arguments on religious discourse in the context of academic discourse recently proposed by Engelson (2014). In relation to this critique, four points are raised: religious identities in academic discourse, structural inequities of the spread of English in the Indonesian context, Indonesian rhetorical traditions, and the role of religious expression in academic discourse.

Keywords: religious discourse, academic discourse, religious identities, Indonesian rhetorical traditions, religious expression.

INTRODUCTION

I read with great enthusiasm Engelson's article on "The "Hands of God" at Work: Negotiating between Western and Religious Sponsorship in Indonesia" recently published by *College English*. In the context of multilingual literacy, not only does the article demonstrate the compatibility between religious discourse and academic discourse, but it also contributes to our understanding of how one's local religious identities play a pivotal role in helping fortify peripheral voices, which are often subjugated amid the presence of hegemonic power of Western academic discourse. "Prompting students to critically examine the textual contact zone between religious identity and academic discourse, as Engelson (2014) asserts, might help them negotiate between competing discourses on their own terms" (p. 293). Nevertheless, despite valuable insights Engelson has generated in her article, I have serious reservations about the case she has made. I shall elaborate each of them below.

Direct all correspondence to: setiono.sugiharto@gmail.com

POINTS OF CRITIQUE

To begin with, I am disturbed with Engelson's uncritical espousal to Jeffrey Ringer's contention that students' faith-based identities shift when they infuse their religious beliefs into the academic discourse. Such an argument doesn't always hold water as far as the Indonesia's geopolitical reality is concerned. As a country with the highest Muslim population, putting an Islamic belief in texts – be they academic and non-academic – is of paramount importance for revealing one's identity as a devout Muslim. This Islamic identity is supposed to be infused and maintained in the process of texts construction. We need to understand that given the parochial system of most Muslim communities in Indonesia, students are highly encouraged to be submissive and not to flout their Islam-based identities, which are based mainly on the Islam's sacred texts, the Holy Koran. Consider, for example, extracts of an academic text written by a former Indonesian Muslim Ph.D. student from Indiana University, U.S. Cheddar Alwasilah (2014) in his *Islam, Culture and Education*,

These tenets comprise: *syahadat* (a testimony of belief in Allah and Muhammad as his messenger), *shalat* (the five daily prayers), *shaum* (fasting in Ramadhan), and *zakat* (raising alms for the needy). (8)

...It is philosophy of globalization introduced by Prophet Muhammad about 15 centuries ago. He himself was proclaimed by Allah Almighty as *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for the whole universe). (9)

Throughout the book, Alwasilah consistently maintains his Islam-based identity, and more importantly this identity doesn't undergo a shift, as has been claimed by Ringer it does. And although he has published extensively in both local and international scholarly works (in some of which he displayed his religious beliefs), Alwasilah's still strongly upholds his Islam-based identities; he's still a devout Muslim.

Furthermore, Engelson (2014) relates her study to structural inequities of the spread of English in the Indonesia setting, the argument she borrows from applied linguist Robert Phillipson. By this she implies that Indonesia as a both material and immaterial resource-dependent country on the West is experiencing linguistic imperialism. It is true that, as Engelson affirms, that "Western sponsorship is also pervasive in the Indonesia literacy context..." (295), and that...Indonesia has been and still is vulnerable to non-Indonesian ideologies circulating with global capital, whether educational or

monetary (301). It is also true that, as Engelson claims, academic publication in Indonesia has been hegemonized by Western publishing convention through the use of the English language. Yet, because of this reality, one shouldn't be too hasty as to lay a claim that linguistic imperialism is at work in Indonesia (see also Sugiharto, 2015). Such a claim clearly constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum*. As a center teacher and researcher working only in a far-flung Yogyakarta, West Java, Indonesia, it is understandable that Engelson fails to fathom the ideological position of the global spread of English most Indonesians adhere to. Most people in Indonesia perceive that the spread of English is an ineluctably natural phenomenon concomitant with the notion of globalization, giving rise to what applied linguist Stephen Krashen (2003) calls "English fever". This prevailing perception was initially spearheaded by the proponent of the English language (notably, the late Indonesian renowned language expert Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana) who steadfastly argued that English terminology was needed to enrich the terminology of Bahasa Indonesia, and thus the former was adopted to fulfill the needs of modern science and technology, industry, commerce, the mass media, government administration, and higher education. This view of the spread of English is labeled by Pennycook (2000) as both "colonial-celebration" and "laissez faire liberalism" ideologies, whereby the former "sees the spread of English as inherently good for the world" and the latter views the spread of English as natural, neutral and beneficial, as long as it can coexist in a complementary relationship with other languages" (p. 108). With the adherence of such ideological positions, the global dominance of Western material and immaterial resources now available in Indonesia, cannot, as Pennycook argues, be viewed "as *an apriori* imperialism but rather as a product of the local hegemonies of English" and "must therefore be understood in terms of the complex sum of contextualized understandings of local hegemonies" (p. 117). Clearly, Engelson overlooks this point, and her rather smug conclusion that linguistic imperialism is at work in Indonesia is groundless.

Another vital point that Engelson summarily dismisses in the article is her mention on the notion of "Indonesian rhetorical traditions" (297), which she intended to compare it with the Western ones. Unfortunately, nowhere in the article did Engelson explicitly elaborate the former, thus leaving readers wonder what they look like. Here she seems incognizant that unlike the monolingual Western rhetorical traditions, which is easy to characterize, the phrase Indonesian rhetorical tradition is rather deceptive. In fact, it a vacuous concept, as Indonesia is an incredibly multicultural and multilingual country with multiethnicities. The problem here is that Engelson's approach to conducting her study is based on the fragile assumption that Indonesia is a

monocultural and monolingual country; that is the people in the country speaks only the Indonesian language (*Bahasa Indonesia*). Further, her sheer ignorance of unrevealing ethnicities of her two respondents (Faqih and Ninik) makes her finding susceptible to the perpetuation of the Western hegemonic discourse. Non-Indonesian readers of the article need to be informed that most Indonesians, especially those from Javanese (my guess is that because the location where Engelson conducted was in Yogyakarta, Central Java, both Faqih and Ninik are of Javanese ethnicities) value a “total obedience” culture, which they strongly uphold through the Javanese philosophy *ewuh* (feeling uncomfortable) *pekewuh* (feeling uneasy) (Dardjowidjojo *Cultural*). With this in mind, it seems to me that compared to Butaniah’s negotiation strategies (Canagarajah, *Place*), Engelson’s respondents - Faqih and Ninik - exhibited a lack of negotiation power, not because of their inability to negotiate, but because of a cultural constraint.

Finally, Engelson’s interpretation of Faqih’s narrative “God’s willingness” as a “powerful role religion plays in Faqih’s literate identity” (305) is too exaggerated. This expression is just an Arabic equivalent “Inshallah” and Indonesian equivalents of “mudah-mudahan”, “semoga” or “jika Tuhan mengizinkan”, which Muslims and even non-Muslim in Indonesia commonly utter when they feel unsure whether they can perform any action in the future. The use of such an expression is just a matter of language preferences or choices, and as such has nothing to do with religion.

THE AUTHOR

Setiono Sugiharto is associate professor of English at Atma Jaya Catholic University, Jakarta, Indonesia. His research interests include language and ideology, linguistic imperialism and multilingual writing. His works have been published in *International Journal of Applied Linguistics (in press)*, *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, *The Journal of ASIA TEFL*, and *The Routledge Handbook of Educational Linguistic*

REFERENCES

- Alwasilah, C. (2014). *Islam, culture, and education*. Bandung: Rosda International, Canagarajah, S. (2011). Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(3), 401-417.
- Dardjowidjojo, S. (2001). Cultural constrain in the implementation of learner autonomy. *Journal of Southeast Asian Education* 2(2), 309-322.
- Engelson, A. (2014). The “Hands of God” at work: Negotiating between Western and religious sponsorship in Indonesia. *College English*, 76(4), 292-312.

- Krashen, S. (2003). *Dealing with English fever*. Taipei: Crane Publishing Company.
- Pennycook, A. (2000) English, politics, ideology: From colonial celebration to postcolonial performativity. In T. Ricento (Ed.), *Ideology, politics and language policy*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, (pp. 107-119).
- Sugiharto, S. (2015). Disentangling linguistic imperialism in English language education: The Indonesian context. In M. Bigelow & J. Ennsner-Kananen (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of educational linguistics* (pp. 224-236). New York: Taylor and Francis Group.