THE WEAPON OF LANGUAGE: BASIC ENGLISH AND THE BATTLE AGAINST OBSCURANTISM IN THE YEARS OF ANGLO-JAPANESE ALIENATION

PETER O'CONNOR*

Basic English was in some ways a reactive pedagogy, born in the chaotic aftermath of the First World War, and seen by its founders and their followers as a tool of discernment and analysis in the cant and obscurantism of the 1930s. Basic caught the eye of the British Foreign Office around 1935, and was transformed from an individual intellectual response of its founders to their times, to a pedagogy which became so loaded with official approbation that it suffered from the taint of 'linguistic imperialism'. This essay examines the main elements of Basic's appeal — its call for clarity, its internationalism and its Englishness — and analyses the private and official sponsorship of its development in East Asia in the mid-1930s.

What motivated C. K. Ogden, the inventor of Basic English, and his collaborator Ivor Richards? In the 1920s, many felt that the World War had blocked the advance of humanity. Propaganda, dogma and wildly conflicting traditions fogged the intellectual climate. Language itself had become debased by the new media. Ogden, Richards, and many of their contemporaries hoped desperately for clearer, deeper communication between peoples and world organisations.

As a student, Ogden was greatly inspired by Jeremy Bentham's *Theory of Fictions and Oppositions*. In the discussions of the student society, the Heretics, which he founded to resist compulsory chapel attendance at Cambridge colleges, fictional words like 'rights', 'spiritual', 'morals' and 'sin' were criticised for their magical potency in transmitting religious authority. A key influence on Richards was the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore and his ideas of translation into the concrete. All their lives, Ogden and Richards distrusted abstractions, universals, and concepts. These were 'sym-

* Associate Professor, Faculty of Contemporary Society, Musashino Women's University.

† I am most grateful to Professors Nobuo Hayashi, Nori Morita and John Hatcher for their valuable help with this essay.

bolic machinery' — what they called 'word magic': the use of words without clear referents.

William Empson said Basic did not begin as a teaching tool but as an investigation into 'the root ideas needed for any language, or any clear thought'.[1] If Ogden's and Richards' lives have a common theme, it is their sustained effort to advance our sense of the power and precision of language knowingly used. In 1923 in *The Meaning of Meaning* Ogden and Richards defined 'good' as an 'emotive' expression of whatever one likes. These were hard-headed men of words; they were not soppy.

In 1918, Bertrand Russell came up with what he called a 'logically perfect language' virtually independent of contexts with a complex writing system which was 'explicitly truth-functional': it could not be used to tell lies. This slightly sinister model acted as an immediate stimulus to Richards and Ogden to find their own ideal language, except that their language would, on the contrary, be strictly dependent on contexts.

These are some of the roots of Basic. More immediately, when Richards and Ogden were writing the chapter *On Definition* for *The Meaning of Meaning*,[2] they found that certain words reappeared whenever there was a task of definition to perform. The possibility of a limited set of words for defining all the other words in a language was suggested, and this idea stimulated Ogden's refinement of the Basic word list, beginning about 1925.

Ogden published his first list in the 1929 prospectus for Basic: it has hardly changed since. Ogden aimed for simplicity, economy, regularity, ease of learning, scope, clarity, naturalness and grace. He claimed to provide learners with 'a minimum vocabulary with maximum efficiency'. The list consisted of 850 words, plus a summary of rules. It was a language on a page, with 600 names of things, including 400 'fictions' such as nation, hope and harmony, 150 'qualities' (adjectives), and 100 'operators' — prepositions, directions and verbs. In the *General Introduction* of 1930 there were only 18 verbs — but even these disappeared after the war, or were shifted into the 'operator' category.[3]

[1] William Empson, "Basic and Communication", (c. 1939), mentioned in *Argufying: essays on literature and culture*, ed., J. Haffenden, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), 7.

[2] C. K Ogden and I. A Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism. With Supplementary Essays by B. Malinowski and D. G. Crookshank* (London: Trubner & Co., 1923).

[3] C. K. Ogden, *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1930).

Basic English was planned as a self-sufficient international auxiliary language, which had to be learnt even by native speakers of ordinary English if they were to make themselves understood by 'fluent' speakers of Basic English. It was a language in itself which made the speaker independent of ordinary English. Basic's appeal to speakers of languages with few of the common elements of English seemed obvious.

C. K. Ogden and Ivor Richards were steeped in the values of interwar Cambridge humanism. As believers in human perfectibility, they invoked the power of language to change the human condition. They put their faith in Basic English as a method of bringing clarity and knowingness to human exchange. For them, Basic English was a weapon of language in the fight against obscurantism which, as they saw, exercised a powerful influence on the popular mind through the cant of the day: European fascism, American populism and isolationism, and, from the mid-1920s, the increasing espousal of the amuletic *kokutai* in the political life of Japan. As Richards' biographer put it, Richards and Ogden believed that '. . . a more developed understanding of language can reduce cant and fruitless ideological battles'.[4] Richards' pupil, William Empson, wrote, '. . . one purpose in choosing the [Basic word] list was to be free from words with confused double meanings and added emotional claims. Or rather, because these two may come to the same thing, from words with the sort of associated meanings which imply a special attitude or doctrine.'[5] Some Basic *aficionados* believed that any text without real meaning could be exposed as nonsense — jargon or 'word magic' — when translated into Basic — a claim that used to be made for Latin.

Basic was a product of its time, but it would be wrong to ally such well-known simplifiers of language as Orwell and Ernest Hemingway with Ogden and Richards in a 1930s movement for clarity of expression. The relationship was more complicated. Orwell was enthusiastic about Basic, and produced a talk on it at the BBC in 1942. We know that the arid utilitarianism of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was inspired by Basic, (and possibly justified in Orwell's mind by Stalin's hearty approbation of Basic in wartime). But *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was an affirmative work, a love story, after all, as much a declaration of human values as an attack on

[4] J. P Russo, *I. A. Richards, His Life and Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989), 113.
[5] Empson, *Argufying* 9–10.

officialdom and aridity. Orwell intentionally heightened the richness of his prose in the novel to show his readers what they would be losing if they lost their language, as well as to emphasise the poverty of Newspeak.

Hemingway's awareness of the reorganisation of meanings consequent on World War I, evidenced in his illustration of 'honor' and 'glory' in *A Farewell to Arms*, puts him in Ogden's and Richards' camp, but for Hemingway and Orwell, the struggle was more with themselves and their writing than with the forces of obscurantism. And yet, both men were deeply and actively engaged in the political life of their time, and we can say that they shared with Ogden and Richards a yearning for greater clarity, honesty and plain-speaking in public life (fewer of Pound's 'liars in public places') and international exchange at a time when there were people and movements resolutely, even proudly opposed to any such development.

As far as Japan was concerned, Ogden was quite open about the advantages of Basic English as an effective counter to the decline of English teaching there. The preface to the 1930 *General Introduction* to Basic English noted that, '. . . after decades of compromise on orthodox lines, the teaching of standard literary English is a failure — and even in danger of being abandoned [in Japan]. The present vocabulary provides the practical and theoretical foundation for a reform movement . . . and any serious Japanese student should be able, with the assistance of a radio, to find his way about the system in less than a month'.[6]

Frank Daniels pioneered Basic English teaching at the Otaru Shyōka Daigaku in Hokkaido for a few years from 1930.[7] Empson began teaching Basic in Tokyo around the same time. Thereafter, here and there in Japan, Basic found institutional and individual adherents. By 1939, Basic English had offices in twenty-five countries and was under consideration by education authorities in many more.

It was more as a result of the momentum gained during its remarkable first ten years, and less to do with any intrinsic post-war appeal, that Basic became, with the Reading Method, the dominant language teaching method of the post-war decade. The popularity of Basic with educators in the 1930s had much to do with their perception of the most urgent needs of their

[6] Ogden, *Basic English* (1930) 8.

[7] There is a story that Daniels' contract was not renewed in 1932 because his teaching methods were deemed too rudimentary, but I have been unable to confirm this.

students at the time, as well as with the tireless promotional efforts of Ogden, Richards, Empson and others.

British official involvement with Basic English did not really begin to happen until the mid-30s, when formal Anglo-Japanese relations were close to collapse. In this, it followed that pattern of neglect alternating with indiscriminate support which characterised the British Foreign Office's approach to cultural propaganda in the first half of this century. In wartime and periods of sustained tension, the English language was perceived as a weapon, and those who taught it as soldiers in a propaganda war. When peace came or tensions eased, Foreign Office support dwindled.

Thus, during the First World War, the short-lived *New East*, a bilingual periodical put together by J. R. Robertson Scott and Hugh Byas in Tokyo, received ample Foreign Office supervision and funding, but became a casualty of peace in 1918. Also during the First World War, the Foreign Office did its best to persuade the independent English language press in Japan, notably the *Japan Advertiser* and *Japan Chronicle,* to follow an uncritically pro-Anglo-Japanese Alliance line — to little avail. After the war, official patronage for bodies such as the Japan Society of London and the Asiatic Society of Japan in Tokyo, and English speaking societies in Tokyo and Osaka continued on a low-key basis.

When Harold Palmer came to Japan in June 1923 as 'linguistic adviser' to the Department of Education and Director of the new Institute for Research in English Teaching, Britain and Japan were enjoying a sort of post-Alliance euphoria. The weapon of English needed no sharpening, and Palmer's Oral Method was ignored by British officialdom until the crisis years of the 30s. One of the reasons why Basic English got so much official support and had such a strong start in life was that it was introduced as a method in the crisis decade of the 1930s.

The Foreign Office stepped in to promote Basic English in Japan and China just when English teaching there was most endangered. In October 1935, John Burbank, Professor of English at Tokyo University, wrote to the English Association in London, reporting on a proposal to stop teaching English in middle schools in Japan. According to the September 1935 *Bulletin* of The Institute for Research in Language Teaching, this decision had been taken 'on the grounds that the results achieved by the present teaching do not represent an adequate return'. This, as Burbank reported, was 'of more than local interest', as the middle school programme in Japan was by

then 'the largest scale experiment to teach English as an international language' in the world.[8]

In March 1936, Mr. A. V. Houghton of the English Association in London sent a Memorandum entitled, *Practical Advantages of the English Language as an International Language* to the News Department of the Foreign Office. The Memorandum was enthusiastically received: 'This will provide excellent material for an article on the subject. We will have one prepared and distributed,' minuted R. Kenney of the News Department.[9]

In April 1936, Britain's ambassador, Sir Robert Clive, wrote from the Tokyo embassy to say that the proposal to end middle school English teaching in Japan, was due to 'the prevailing nationalist temper of Japan'. In the same despatch, Clive enclosed a Memorandum he had received from nine British teachers of English working at prestigious institutions in Japan, among them A.S. Hornby, John Burbank and Ernest Pickering. The Memorandum urged the Foreign Office and the Board of Education to help British teachers of English in Japan to raise standards, to redeem the status of English as an international language, and to afford 'wider opportunities for intellectual co-operation' between Britain and Japan. The signatories quoted the *Bulletin* of The Institute for Research in English Teaching, to back up their argument, '. . . it must be obvious to all that English teaching in this country was never more under challenge than it is today'.[10] The British teachers' Memorandum pointed to the excellent cultural relations Germany and France enjoyed with Japan. In the 1920s, pressed by Paul Claudel, their energetic and far-sighted poet-ambassador in Tokyo, the French had opened the *Maison Franco-Japonaise.* In the thirties, forty Japanese teachers were awarded the *Legion d'honneur* and ninety the *Palme Academique.* The Germans had opened the *Japanisches-Deutches Kultur* in Tokyo, and Germany had decorated several Japanese scholars. But the BBC World Service and the British Council had yet to reach Japan.[11] In the same file, the Far East Department of the Foreign Office took note of a May 1936 letter, describing the impressions of the British ambassador in Tokyo of the mood

[8] (FO 395/536 [P380/39/150]). This and all other Foreign Office citations refer to the archives of the Foreign Office Correspondence held at the Public Record Office, Kew, UK.

[9] (FO 395/536 [P1013/39/150]).

[10] *Bulletin*, Institute for Research in English Teaching, Sep. 1935.

[11] (FO 395/336 [P1728/39/150]). BBC World Service broadcasts to Japan began in 1943. The first British Council office in Japan opened in Tokyo in 1953.

of an annual conference of teachers of English, at which he noticed 'a certain reaction against the study of English — the existence, in fact, of a kind of language nationalism'.

In February 1937, the Foreign Office took note of an article in *The Times* headed 'English in the East'. The article referred to the spread of a corrupt English in China and Japan and pointed to the urgent need for what the writer called 'a definite system' of teaching. Referring to Japan's unwillingness to 'acknowledge the predominance of English', the writer continued, 'Mr. Harold Palmer in Japan and the founders of Basic English have conducted valuable research into this question, but there is so far little evidence that their schemes are being systematically applied . . . The application of real pedagogical science would be welcomed by the many foreigners who are only too anxious to speak English well'.[12] The Far East Department minuted this article, 'The British Council is doing something to assist the teaching of English in the Far East by supplying text books and general literature'.[13] Such blandness disguises the energy with which senior officials at the Foreign Office were already promoting Basic English in preference to other teaching methods, including Palmer's Oral Method.

Since the mid-1920s, the Far East Department of the Foreign Office had been working hard to restore some of the old amity to formal Anglo-Japanese relations and turn round anti-British sentiment in Japan. The publication of Ogden's *General Introduction* coincided with the stormy sessions of the London Naval Conference. The Manchurian Incident cranked up the tension in 1931. Then came Matsuoka Yosuke's dramatic walkout and Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations, (announced by Matsuoka in faultless Oregon-flavoured English). These events, and Japan's isolation from the international community, brought Anglo-Japanese relations to the edge of the abyss.

The Foreign Office had little grasp of the finer points of Ogden's theory. For them it was enough that this was Basic *English* — not Basic French or Basic German. Under the circumstances, Basic English seemed a godsend, offering a low-cost, low-key route to a better understanding by the Japanese of British culture and, by extension, an appreciation of the *status quo.*

The Trojan Horse for Basic English in the Foreign Office was the senior

[12] "English in the East." *The Times* 2 Mar., 1937.

[13] (FO 395/504 [P504/79/150]).

official and Richards intimate, Sir Stephen Gasalee. By May 1937, Gasalee was gathering official backing for Basic English, setting up a committee reporting to the new 'national' Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, with representatives from the Board of Education, the Economic Advisory Council and the Colonial Office.

In a letter written towards the end of May 1937, Gasalee complained that there was 'a snake in the grass' at the Colonial Office, in the shape of a Mr. Mayhew, 'a bitter and, I think, unreasonable opponent' of Basic English. Gasalee favoured keeping the Colonial Office out of the reckoning altogether if by doing so Mayhew could be excluded, and confining membership to the Board of Education and tame representatives of the Economic Advisory Council. The appointment of Charles Duff, an ex-Foreign Office man and a Basic English supporter, to an influential post at the Institute of Education at the University of London, promised to swing the Board of Education round to Basic and thereby establish a pro-Basic caucus on the Prime Minister's Committee.

Gasalee also managed to get Kenneth Pickthorn, the Junior Burgess of Cambridge University, to make a speech in the House of Commons on the urgent need for 'an expert inquiry' into 'some system or other of simplified English whether it is basic or another'.[14] Such labyrinthine negotiations do indicate a real sense of urgency on behalf of Basic English at the Foreign Office.

Correspondence in the same file shows Gasalee persuading the long-suffering Master of Corpus Christi to grant Ivor Richards yet another year's leave of absence from Cambridge from April 1937, in order to present a report to the Chinese Ministry of Education on the teaching of Basic English in China. As Gasalee explained, this was part of the 'more general question of the use of Basic English as a means of British cultural and intellectual propaganda abroad'.

Richards had been in China since 1935, lobbying local school officials, provincial commissioners and the minister of education. In June 1937, the Chinese Ministry of Education adopted a large scale pilot programme for teaching Basic English in middle schools. On the 5th July 1937, Richards began teaching the summer term at Yenching University. The Marco Polo Bridge shooting began on the 7th, and Richards held classes to the sound of

[14] (FO 395/553 [P239/79/150]).

gunfire. On the 27th July, Japanese troops entered Peking. As late as August, Richards was doing everything he could to keep Chinese official interest in Basic alive, as well as trying to find a new home for the Orthological Institute and his staff.

Richards' extraordinary persistence may indicate a feeling that for him this was the crunch, that everything he had believed in up to now, everything he had campaigned for through so many years was being put to the supreme test. Richards in these terrible months acted almost as if Basic constituted or symbolised an answer to Japanese machine-guns, but such defiance could not last. In December 1937 Richards accepted that the effective promotion of Basic English in China would have to wait. In less than two years Britain was at war with Germany, followed by the Pacific War in late 1941.

China was Basic's biggest defeat. Richards had finally cleared all the bureaucratic barriers within the country, and it must have been galling to be forced to retreat at this time.

*

The First World War made Basic English. The Second World War nearly killed it, in part because the post-war retreat from colonialism (what Empson called 'the new English idealism') induced a tremendous feeling of guilt that extended to any official promotion of English. In September 1943, Winston Churchill went to Harvard to receive an honorary degree. Basic English provided Churchill with a symbol for the post-war 'special relationship'. In his speech, Churchill praised the achievements of Ogden and Richards and declared that Basic English would help to expand 'the empires of the mind'. As William Empson said, this was 'the kiss of death'.[15] Although the Ministry of Information took up the cudgels on behalf of Basic English for the rest of the war, and many flocked to Basic English during the post-war decade, in the long term Churchill's praise was damaging. The taint of linguistic imperialism clung to Basic and drastically slowed its spread in the post-war world.

However, the damage caused by Churchill's speech may have been spread by Ogden's insistence, as Empson said, on 'boosting the scheme as an international language; that was only a possible late incidental result of the main intention, and far more likely to grow if allowed to stay in the

[15] William Empson, "I. A. Richards and Basic English" (1973) in *Argufying* 223.

dark'.[16] However, in the thirties Empson himself was in the habit of stressing the importance of Basic as "an 'auxiliary' international language".[17]

In 1946, collaboration between Ogden and Richards came to a standstill. They differed over directions, pedagogy, and the division of funding between Ogden's Foundation and Richards' Language Research group at Harvard.

Ogden died of cancer in 1957. Richards continued to campaign for Basic English until his 1979 tour of China. He missed no opportunity. In 1964, when Richards was made a Companion of Honour, the Queen became so absorbed in discussing Basic English with him that she forgot to ring for the next person.[18]

Those who championed Basic English made a large assumption about the nature of intercultural communication: if only people had a common second language, they would understand each other better and the world would be a better place.[19] Because English itself had become the second language of so many around the world by the 1930s, the spread of Basic English seemed a foregone conclusion to its originator, his main collaborator, and their colleagues and disciples, as well as their friends in high places.

Nobody seems to have questioned the assumptions about human nature on which this optimism was founded. There never was any systematic survey of Basic English compared to other teaching methods, never any close enquiry into its effectiveness as a weapon of language in Japan and China.

Just after its introduction in Japan, William Empson wrote of Basic English: 'That it is not suited to the Japanese I can believe; it is not suited to our mortal nature; it is a logical and analytical system which may prove too sharp a mental discipline, by itself, for people to use. But surely it would be a more cheerful first step in English than learning 20,000 words bang

---

[16] *Argufying* 219.

[17] "Basic English". *The Spectator*, 14 Jun., 1935.

[18] Russo, 165.

[19] A visitor to Richards in his rooms at Harvard in the early 1960s, told me about finding the floor covered with hundreds of little plastic gramophones, each fitted with a record and mounted to a parachute. Richards told his visitor that the gramophone records held the complete Basic Word list, recorded by him. The idea was to drop the gramophones by their parachutes over the South American jungle. On the jungle floor, the slightest touch by a curious native would be enough to set a device in motion and broadcast the entire 850 words in Richards' distinctive voice.

off.'[20] Empson knew Japan and the Japanese better than Richards, and perhaps he saw that Basic's call for analytic precision had a limited appeal in late 1930s Japan. After all, from July 1937 until they had better things to do, many in the Japanese educational establishment stood hypnotised by the pages of the *Kokutai no Hongi* — surely one of the richest sources of word magic ever written.

J. M. Keynes spoke for Ogden and Richards when he wrote that his generation believed, 'in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people . . . we repudiated all versions of the doctrine of original sin, of there being insane and irrational springs of wickedness in most men. We were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only preserved by the rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved'.[21]

Richards' and Ogden's optimism, their essential humanism, helped power the international spirit which brightened the thirties. In this sense, Basic English did battle with isolationism, fascism and the forces of obscurantism. If Basic English really was the litmus test of Ogden and Richards' humanism, then we have to say that in the 1930s, at least, their convictions were found wanting. However, in troubled times, someone has to raise the banners of clear and critical thinking as high as they dare, and it is interesting that for a short while at least, a method of language teaching, no more and no less, constituted one such banner and that CK. Ogden and Ivor Richards, one of this century's most original minds and one of its greatest teachers, considered it so deserving of the world's attention. That the British Foreign Office travelled alongside them in this endeavour, though with different ends in view, is evidence that, at least in an emergency, even the most blinkered of institutions can be forced to see the light.

(A version of this paper was given at the 68th ELSJ Conference at Rissho University, Tokyo, 26th May 1996).

Received June 28, 1996

[20] William Empson, letter, "The Learning of English", *The Japan Chronicle*, 25 Nov. 1931, p5, in Empson, *Argufying* 8.

[21] J. M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs" in *Two Memoirs* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), 90–91.