

Linguistic Imperialism

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The study of linguistic imperialism focuses on how and why certain languages dominate internationally, and on attempts to account for such dominance in an explicit, theoretically founded way. Language is one of the most durable legacies of European colonial and imperial expansion. English, Spanish, and Portuguese are the dominant languages of the Americas. In Africa, the languages of some of the colonizing powers, England, France, and Portugal are more firmly entrenched than ever, as English is in several Asian countries.

The study of linguistic imperialism can help to clarify whether the winning of political independence led to a linguistic liberation of Third World countries, and if not, why not. Are the former colonial languages a useful bond with the international community and necessary for state formation and national unity internally? Or are they a bridgehead for Western interests, permitting the continuation of a global system of marginalization and exploitation? What is the relationship between linguistic dependence (continued use of a European language in a former non-European colony) and economic dependence (the export of raw materials and import of technology and know-how)? In a globalizing world, has English shifted from serving Anglo-American interests into functioning as an instrument for more diverse constituencies? Or does U.S. dominance in the neoliberal economy constitute a new form of empire that consolidates a single imperial language?

Imperialism has traditionally been primarily concerned with economic and political aspects of dominance (Hobson, 1902). Later theorists have been concerned with analyzing military, social, communication, and cultural activities, and the underlying structures and ideologies that link powerful countries, the 'Center,' with powerless countries, the 'Periphery,' and the structure of exploitation from which rich countries benefit and poor countries suffer (Galtung, 1980). Resources are distributed unequally internally within each country, which has its own Center and Periphery, which in Marxist analysis is seen in terms of class (Holborrow, 1999). Linguistic imperialism was manifestly a feature of the way nation-states privileged one language, and often sought actively to eradicate others, forcing their speakers to shift to the dominant language. It was also a feature of colonial empires, involving a deeper degree of linguistic penetration in settler countries (e.g., Canada, New Zealand) than in exploitation and

extraction colonies (e.g., Malaya, Nigeria). Linguistic imperialism presupposes an overarching structure of asymmetrical, unequal exchange, where language dominance dovetails with economic, political, and other types of dominance. It entails unequal resource allocation and communicative rights between people defined in terms of their competence in specific languages, with unequal benefits as a result, in a system that legitimates and naturalizes such exploitation (Phillipson, 1992).

Linguistic imperialism can be regarded as a subcategory of cultural imperialism, along with media imperialism (e.g., news agencies, the world information order), educational imperialism (the export of Western institutional norms, teacher training, textbooks, etc., and World Bank policies privileging Center languages in education systems; Mazrui, 2004), and scientific imperialism (e.g., dissemination of paradigms and methodologies from the Center, which controls knowledge about the Periphery). Linguistic imperialism may dovetail with any of these, as for instance when English as the dominant language of science marginalizes other languages, English as 'Lingua Tyrannosaura' (Swales, 1997; Ammon, 2001; Phillipson, 2002).

The mechanisms of linguistic imperialism are documented in works that link linguistics with colonialism (Calvet, 1974 refers to linguistic racism, confirming the interlocking of 19th century philology with European racist thought), relate the promotion of English in educational 'aid' to the economic and political agendas of Center countries (Phillipson, 1992), and discuss the effect of literacy on the local language ecology, including the role of missionaries (Mühlhäusler, 1996). Linguistic dominance has invariably been buttressed by ideologies that glorify the dominant language: as the language of God (Arabic, Dutch, Sanskrit), the language of reason, logic, and human rights (French over several centuries), the language of the superior ethnonational group as advocated by (imperialist racism, German in Nazi ideology), the language of modernity, technological progress, and national unity (English in much postcolonial discourse). A Ghanaian sociolinguist describes linguistic imperialism as

the phenomenon in which the minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, governments, the administration of justice, etc. . . . Linguistic imperialism has a way of warping the minds, attitudes, and aspirations of even the most noble in a society and preventing him from appreciating and realizing the full potentialities of the indigenous languages (Ansre, 1979: 12).

There are studies that focus on the discourses accompanying linguistic hierarchies (Pennycook, 1994), and the ambivalent role of English in contemporary India (Rajan, 1992). English in Africa is seen as “an imperial language, the language of linguistic Americanization, a language of global capitalism, . . . creating and maintaining social divisions serving an economy dominated primarily by foreign economic interests and, secondarily, by a small aspiring African bourgeoisie” (Mazrui, 2004: 30, 40, 52), though English is simultaneously appropriated for Afrocentricity in Africa and in the United States. The tension between the need to learn English for local empowerment alongside local languages, and the adequacy of our theories for addressing these issues has been explored (Canagarajah, 1999, several contributions in Ricento, 2000).

Fishman *et al.* (1996) is an anthology on *Post-Imperial English: Status Change in Former British and American Colonies, 1940–1990*, with contributors from many countries, who were asked to assess linguistic imperialism in each context. The editors see the need for English to be “reconceptualized, from being an imperialist tool to being a multinational tool English . . . being postimperial (as the title of our book implies, that is in the sense of not directly serving purely Anglo-American territorial, economic, or cultural expansion) without being postcapitalist in any way.” Fishman, in a ‘summing-up and interpretation’ of the contributions to the book, correlates the status of English with hard data on the use of English in the media, education, studies abroad, technology, administration, etc., and more subjective assessments. He tabulates the degree of ‘anglification’ in each state. His assessment is that the “socioeconomic factors that are behind the spread of English are now indigenous in most countries of the world” and that the continued spread of English in former colonies is “related more to their engagement in the modern world economy than to any efforts derived from their colonial masters” (1996: 639). Fishman seems to ignore the fact that ‘engagement in the modern world’ means a Western-dominated globalization agenda set by the transnational corporations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, with the U.S. military intervening whenever ‘vital interests’ are at risk. Although some contributors conclude that linguistic imperialism is not present, they have no difficulty in using the concept in country studies, and none question its validity or utility.

Others are more robust in distancing themselves from a linguistic imperialism approach, when reassessing the language policies of the colonial period and in theorizing about the role of English in the modern world (Brutt-Griffler, 2002) and when describing the

global constellation of languages (de Swaan, 2001), on which see Phillipson (2004). English plays a supremely important role in the ongoing processes of globalization, which is seen by some scholars as synonymous with Americanization. English is playing an increasingly prominent role in continental European countries and in the institutions of the European Union, though in principle and law these are committed to maintaining linguistic diversity and the equality of the languages of the member states (Phillipson, 2003). Increased European integration and market forces are, however, potentially leading to all continental European languages becoming second-class languages. This concern has led to the advocacy of Europe-wide policies to strengthen foreign language learning, but few European states (probably Sweden and Finland are those most active) have elaborated language policies to ensure the continued strength of national languages alongside competence in English and full respect for linguistic human rights.

One symptom of market forces is the major effort by ‘English-speaking’ states to expand their intake of foreign students. Higher education is increasingly seen as a market opportunity, a sector that the British government seeks to expand by 8 per cent per year between 2004 and 2020. The British economy benefits by £11 billion directly and a further £12 billion indirectly (British Council). Over half a million foreign students attend language schools in Britain each year. The English Language Teaching business is of major significance for the British economy. These figures reveal something of the complexity of the supply and demand elements of English as a commodity and cultural force. They also demonstrate the need for the analysis of linguistic dominance to shift from a colonial and postcolonial perspective to contemporary patterns that are maintained by more subtle means of control and influence, language playing an increasingly important role in the internationalization of many domains.

Thus in the teaching and marketing of ‘communication skills,’ a shift from linguistic imperialism to communicative imperialism can be seen: “Language becomes a global product available in different local flavours The dissemination of ‘global’ communicative norms and genres, like the dissemination of international languages, involves a one-way flow of expert knowledge from dominant to subaltern cultures” (Cameron, 2002: 70). A focus on communication skills may well entail the dissemination of American ways of speaking and the forms of communication, genre, and style of the dominant consumerist culture, which globalization is extending worldwide.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri (2000) draw together many threads from political, economic, and cultural theory and philosophy, and astutely unravel the role of communication in global social trends, and the ways in which language constitutes our universe and creates subjectivities. They reveal how the hegemonic power imposes or induces acceptance of its dominion. They show why it has been so important for the corporate world not only to dominate the media but also education, which is increasingly run to service the economy and to produce consumers rather than critical citizens. Linguistic dominance as such is not pursued in their book, and it is also largely neglected in social and political science. Linguistic imperialism, or linguistic dominance in the sense of the maintenance of injustice and inequality by means of language policies, is invariably connected to policies in commerce, science, international affairs, education, culture, and the media, all of which involve material resources and attitudes, and all of which evolve dynamically.

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