

# The English Linguistic Imperialism

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**Abstract:** The causes of the current global spread of English is critically analysed in this article. A discussion on the following questions is the basis of this article.

- Is English a global language today as a result of policy to make it so?
- Or is it just an accident?
- If, it was planned, then by whom? And why?
- If, it was not planned, then how did it get to where it is today?

Two contemporary related articles—Phillipson's "English Language Spread Policy" and Pennycook's "English in the world/ the world in English" are quoted to look in a little more depth about the present spread of English.

## The present status of English:

English is not the only language that is widely used around the world: Chinese, Spanish, French, Arabic, KiSwahili, Russian, and Hindi are also widely spoken. Nevertheless, the global power and prestige of English raises particular issues. Otto Jespersen ([1938] 1968) estimated speakers of English to have numbered 4 million in 1500, 6 million in 1600, 8.5 million in 1700, between 20 and 40 million in 1800, and between 116 and 123 million in 1900. At the end of the twentieth century, the number of speakers of English appears to have increased almost tenfold since 1900. Today, a rough agreement can be found on figures that put the total number of speakers of English at between 700 million and 1 billion. This figure can be divided into three roughly equal groups: native speakers of English, speakers of English as a second (or intranational) language, and speakers of English as a foreign (or international) language. It is this last group that is the hardest to estimate but clearly the fastest-growing section of world speakers of English. Beyond these crude figures, a measure of the extent of the spread of English can be found by its varying usage around the world. For some time now, there has been circulating a range of descriptions of and statistics on the use of English, which have now become enshrined in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of languages*:

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English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well-established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three quarters of the world's mails is written in English. Of all the information in the world's retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. English radio programs are received by over 150 million in 120 countries. Over 50 million children study English as an additional language at primary level; over 80 million study it at secondary level (these figures exclude China). In any one year, the British Council helps a quarter of a million foreign students to learn English, in various parts of the world. In the USA alone, 337,000 foreign students were registered in 1983. (Crystal 1987:358)

### **The accidental view of the spread of English:**

The predominant view about the spread of English coincides with Hindmarsh's (1978) bland optimism that "the world has opted for English and the world knows what it wants, what will satisfy its needs." The view that the spread of English is natural, neutral and beneficial is believed by a large number of people, they treat English from a functional perspective. They believe, the spread of English is an accidental by-product of global forces, and English is not connected with cultural or political issues, people can only benefit by gaining access to English.

### **Linguistic imperialism:**

Now we will look at the other argument that the spread of English was the result of deliberate British and US policy. This has been termed *linguistic imperialism* by Robert Phillipson. There would be an effort to clarify how this term is used and what are the arguments for and against understanding English in this way. Auerbach (1993:11) quotes Phillipson's (1992: 1) comment that "Whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them." According to Tollefson (2000: 13), "Phillipson's analysis places English squarely in the center of the fundamental sociopolitical processes of imperialism, neo-colonialism, and global economic restructuring. In this view, the spread of English can never be neutral but is always implicated in global inequality. Thus Phillipson, in contrast to Kachru, argues that the spread of English is a positive development for some

people (primarily in core countries) and harmful to others (primarily in the periphery). The spread of English, in this view, is a result of policies adopted by core countries to bring about the worldwide hegemony of English, for the benefit of the core country institutions and individuals.”

If it is true that we cannot today ignore the global spread of English, it is also true that in language policy and planning we cannot ignore Phillipson’s argument about linguistic imperialism. Since the publication in 1992 of his influential book *linguistic imperialism* (on which this article draws significantly), Phillipson has been at the center of a great deal of debate about the notion of linguistic imperialism. Although, he did not invent the term, his work is certainly now most commonly associated with this concept.

Phillipson (1992) views ‘English linguistic imperialism’ as one type of ‘linguistic imperialism’, which in turn is part of what he and Tove-Skutnabb-Kangas call ‘linguicism’. ‘Linguicism’, a concept similar to racism and sexism, points to the ways in which unequal relationships are maintained between groups defined on the basis of the language. In the same way that the division between men and women is often one of inequality, so the divisions between language groups are often an unequal one.

Phillipson defines English linguistic imperialism in the following way: “The dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (1992: 47). What does he mean by this? First of all, he is arguing that English is constantly promoted over other languages—English is both socially privileged by being embedded in social and institutional structures (schools, education system, workplace etc), and culturally privileged by being constantly promoted as a better or superior language over others. But Phillipson is not only concerned with the way in which English is promoted over other languages but also with how this is connected to larger political and economic relations of inequality. He explains:

We live in a world characterized by inequality of gender, nationality, race, class, income, and language. To trace and understand the linkages between English linguistic imperialism and inequality in the political and economic spheres will require us to look at the rhetoric and legitimation of ELT (for instance, at protestations that is a ‘neutral’, ‘non-political’ activity) and relate what ELT claims to be doing to its structural functions. (1992: 46-7)

Phillipson is, therefore, arguing that English Language Teaching (ELT) plays an important role in solidifying the structure of global inequality. The notion of imperialism in ‘linguistic imperialism’ therefore refers not only to the

imperialism of English (the ways in which English has spread around the world) but also to imperialism more generally (the ways in which some parts of the world are dominated politically, economically, and culturally, by other parts of the world). It is not a coincidence, therefore, that English is the language of the great imperial power of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Great Britain) and of the great imperial power of the twentieth century (USA). But notice that Phillipson is suggesting not just that the spread of English is a reflection of this global history, but also that it helps produce and maintain inequitable global power relationships.

If Phillipson seems to have good evidence for his argument that English has spread out of a very deliberate policy, then the other part of the question is whether English has also spread for other reasons?

According to Phillipson, "A vast amount of the aid efforts has gone into teacher education and curriculum development in and through English, and other languages have been neglected. A Western-inspired monolingual approach was adopted that ignored the multilingual reality and cultural specificity of learners in diverse 'Third world' contexts." (19)

Phillipson argues that in "the current global economy, English is dominant in many domains, which creates a huge instrumental demand for English. There has therefore already been a penetration of the language into most cultures and education systems." (20-21)

#### **Pennycook's view about the spread of English:**

Now let us come to Pennycook who tries to articulate a relationship between English and global relations that does not take the spread of English as a coincidental conjunction or as linguistic imperialism. He argues that English plays an important role in the reproduction of global inequalities. But social, cultural and political concerns are also interlinked with the spread of English. Postcolonial literature in English shows appropriation and resistance against English and the formation of counter-discourse in the face of various discourses. English today is bound up globally and locally. Non-native speakers of English take English and use them to serve their local purposes. That is why English is termed as a 'glocal' language.

Pennycook addresses two significant issues. On the one hand the continued acknowledgement of inequalities and dependencies between first and third world countries, and on the other, an attempt to conceptualise these relationships in a way that avoids the reductionist and deterministic tendencies inherent in looking predominantly at socioeconomic relationships.

Pennycook suggests Phillipson's work as 'deterministic'. He says: "We cannot reduce language spread to an imperialism parallel to economic or military imperialism. Although English has been one of the major languages of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa, a language linked to oppression, racism and cultural imperialism, it was also the language through which opposition to the colonizers was formed." (23)

### **Conclusion:**

English language teachers have been poorly served by a body of knowledge that fails to address the cultural and political implications of the spread of English.

As English language teaching professionals we should become political actors engaged in a critical way to use English to oppose the dominant discourses of the west and to help the articulation of counter-discourses in English and we should be actively aware of the implications of the spread of English for the reproduction and production of global inequalities. As teachers of English, we should be conscious about the spread of English: its negatives and positives, and we should also make our students alert and critical about the consequences English brings. We should not be deterministic or antilinguistic at any time and at the same time we should not take the spread of English as neutral, beneficial and natural. At the very least, intimately involved as we are with the spread of English, we should be acutely aware of the implications of this spread for the reproduction and production of global inequalities. Rogers (1982) argues that given the falsity of the hopes that English teaching provides, we should try to discourage the teaching of English. As the responses to Roger's article rightly suggests, however, to deny people access to English is an even more problematic solution (Abbott 1984; Prodromou 1988).

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