

# Linguistic Imperialism

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## Framing the Issue

*Linguistic imperialism*, like many other similar sociopolitical phenomena, is a direct result of the spread of English during British colonization, which took place in the global multilingual setting in the second half of the 20th century. Linguistic imperialism takes its shape when in a multilingual setting one language acquires a powerful position, gets the higher status, and is given preference over other languages for various functions in the society. In such a situation, the most powerful language dominates and marginalizes the less important languages. The issue of linguistic imperialism has become an important concept in applied linguistics, especially in the last few decades. It is primarily related to the study of the attitude and understanding of specific communities towards the roles of a dominant language in relation to other languages in a multilingual society. Based on exploring the local attitudes towards different functions by different languages in a society, it is mainly the study of *how* and *why* a language dominates over others locally as well as internationally and, while doing this, the experts are interested in providing the theoretical foundations for such dominance by one language in a specific setting.

The introduction of European languages to America, Africa, and Asia is seen as a legacy of the European colonial and imperial expansion from the 15th century. The languages of the early modern period colonizers are, therefore, still the dominant languages of their past colonies. English, Spanish, and Portuguese are spoken as the dominant languages of the Americas. Similarly, the languages of their colonizers are the principal languages and have symbolic pride in many African and Asian countries. In this sense, linguistic imperialism is the study of the relationship between political and linguistic independence and the role of language along with the postcolonial approaches towards the linguistic liberation of the third world countries. While doing so, the role of the former colonial languages is particularly analyzed in terms of its usefulness for interacting with the international community, during the process of the state formation and for gaining and

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maintaining the national unity within former colonies. Moreover, the role of the former colonial languages in achieving Western interests is further analyzed under linguistic imperialism and whether the dominant language is still used as a continuation of the global system of marginalization and exploitation, or, why, if not.

Imperialism has been traditionally related to political and cultural types of dominance. According to the cultural imperialism theory (Galtung, 1981) the world is divided into "center" and "periphery," the idea is extended to military, social, communication, and cultural as well as linguistic modes of imperialism where the underlying structures and ideologies connect the powerful countries, the center, with the powerless countries, the periphery. Thus, the layers of exploitation not only exist internationally but also live internally where the class system is maintained as the result of unequal distribution of resources. Linguistic imperialism, therefore, is regarded as a subcategory of cultural imperialism which goes side by side with educational imperialism (focusing on Westernized educational systems for teacher training and syllabus designing), media imperialism (maintaining the world information order), scientific imperialism (disseminating paradigms and methodologies from the center to the periphery), and others. English for example, is considered to be the language of science and technology and is allowed to marginalize other languages by growing into *lingua tyrannosauria* for other languages (Phillipson, 1992). Other ways of linguistic imperialism include when nation-states decide to privilege one language and deliberately focus on educational policies and other governmental systems in such a way that other languages are ignored and, thus, create a deeper level of linguistic penetration either in a settler context (e.g., New Zealand and Canada) or within a colonial setting (e.g., India, Nigeria, and Malaya).

Linguistic imperialism, an overreaching structure of unequal, asymmetrical exchange of language dominance is consciously created, which dovetails with political, economic, cultural, military and other types of dominance. For example, the relationship between language teaching and multilingual education has been described as the most important tool for linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). According to this theory, this process is ultimately leading towards local languages being killed and, as a result, linguistic diversity slowly disappearing. This system results in a broader level of unequal resource allocation defining communicative rights on the basis of the linguistic competence of people in one specific language, which further results in unequal benefits for the stakeholders legitimizing and naturalizing a range of other exploitations (Phillipson, 1992).

Linguistic imperialism is viewed as linking linguistics with colonialism in many other ways like promoting specific linguistic racism and covertly promoting economic and political agendas of the center countries in the name of educational aid, and so on. This type of imperialism is exhibited in the continuous struggle of the British government to increase the English language teaching (ELT) business as a market opportunity for benefitting greatly from education-related activities (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Thus, the significance of the ELT business is also demonstrated in the British government's investment in ELT-related

activities where the need for English dominance is realized in the shift from colonial and postcolonial to contemporary patterns and which is maintained in a more subtle and complex way of dominance internationally. Another unique type of imperialism is exhibited in the form of communicative imperialism when communication skills are promoted as a global product based on the communication style and genre of the dominant consumerist American culture.

### **Making the Case**

Linguistic imperialism is deeply rooted in the ideology of power in a society. The decision to adopt a language as the national or official language in a country is based on the sociocultural conditions and the political ideologies of the country. An ideology is based upon long-existing norms, values, and assumptions of a community or a group in a society. The imposition of ideas or ideology by a group on communities or societies politically seeks to maintain hegemony through various tools including language and culture. As a mode of practice, a particular language or culture is made popular by promoting specific ideologies. For example, the major justification given in favor of English in many countries (e.g., Pakistan, India, and Americas) is that it is equipped with the technical vocabulary, terms, and jargons—a necessity for transferring knowledge from one nation to the other. However, in such a situation, not only language but certain other cultural notions are also promoted. As a result, a huge reservoir of knowledge, culture, and specific social thought is also transferred, which is sufficient to invade the host culture and language. In this process, the hegemonic language, being the strongest component of culture, is also transferred from the center (powerful) to the periphery (weaker) creating linguistic inequality which ultimately leads to inequalities in economics and politics (Phillipson, 1992). Scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) go further to explore whether the independence from the centre by the periphery countries was actually translated in independence or not, and, if not, why not. So, like linguistic imperialism, it also becomes the reason for the state of linguicism.

Linguicism (like racism, ethnicism, and sexism) is a concept which makes a particular language so powerful and hegemonic, or a “killer language,” that it sucks the blood of the periphery countries through its focused ideology (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). It further refers to the unequal allocation of language rights of the countries in the expanding circle, a term given by Kachru (1986) for the second language speakers’ countries where English is used as the second language. In such a situation, an unequal division of power is produced and maintained according to the groups on the basis of their language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988) so that a kind of discrimination is maintained and the difference is maintained through the dominance of a particular language, especially English (Phillipson, 1992). Scholars are of the view that the greatest exponents of proliferation of the dominant countries are the countries which belong to the centre or with imperialistic tendencies. These countries have supported the English language in particular through educational institutions and a range of other institutions like the World Bank. For

example, the British Council earns £20 billion per annum directly or indirectly from the short- and long-term courses it offers to foreign students. This is a way in which the rich countries exercise their political and social influence over the poorer countries or the countries of periphery status.

Through the construct of linguisticism, various types of features are associated with a particular language in a society. For example, a high level of prestige is attached to one language (e.g., English). In this way, linguisticism plays a sort of gate-keeping effect where one variety is allowed to flourish and others are discouraged in one way or another. Moreover, the failure to learn a specific variety may lead to psychological problems, as by failing to speak the prestigious language (in this case English), learners are treated as having a lower status, especially in countries like Sri Lanka, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Moreover, the prestigious varieties are given special status and their speakers are given prestige over the speakers of other varieties.

Another notion that has been overemphasized in the context of language is “native speakerism.” As an ideology, this notion gave an impression that the so-called “native speakers” from the Anglophone countries are the best practitioners and that they have the central position in the language and linguistic competence. As a pervasive ideology within ELT, this idea was characterized by the belief that native English speaking teachers represent a Western culture from which sprang the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology. This discussion of native speakerism highlighted many aspects of professional life, from employment policy to the presentation of language and even included some underlying themes such as *othering* of students and teachers from outside the English-speaking West (Holliday, 2006). But the idea was later refuted by a number of scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999) whereas they stood against the term *nativism* or *native speakerism* as they thought that it did not suit many communities. Having taken this new shift, the discussion on native–non-native speakerism is now realized as an important concept to be seen through a new lens focusing on the neutral, harmless side of the idea which is free of any prejudice linked with native speakerism.

In addition to linguisticism and native speakerism, the concepts of colonialism and postcolonialism have also contributed to the discussion of English as an international language. Colonialism is taken as the ideology of economic and political exploitation of the countries of the centre. It is more than the mere continuation of exploitation; rather it is a cultural process as well. It has developed a complete culture of the West and as a mark of modal is used for the periphery countries idealization and imposed; language is the best vehicle. Such a culture is imposed so far as the concept of postcolonialism is concerned and it is regarded as the continuation of colonialism, that is, it is just rewriting colonial history. So, the new terms of humanism, human rights, and human nature have become only the new manifestation of the old concepts, having little value especially for the periphery countries; as a result, they are developing a sense of resistance against such terms. This discussion has further led to resistance against the hegemony of English.

But this resistance against the hegemony of English is not simple and straightforward (Pennycook, 1994). Take the example of the postcolonial status of English in countries like Singapore and Malaysia where the sentiments of nationalism have emerged. However, these sentiments of nationalism are not very productive as they fail to reduce the hegemony of English overall. The inclusion of English is considered to be a Trojan Horse, which was welcomed in the beginning but ultimately proved lethal for the community as it brought with it some unwarranted and undesirable cultural ideas, which proved detrimental to the host culture (Pennycook, 1994). Experts are of the view that the elements of hegemony are still active even in present times (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999) and that is why the wave of imperialism is still going on with certain different techniques.

Scholars (e.g., Pennycook, 1994) have also highlighted a different version of linguistic imperialism. The English language imperialism is considered as a dangerous example as it can be argued that this is a deliberate effort dictated by the West to establish it as a superior language over other non-Western countries. However, scholars consider it a language of capitalism which goes hand in hand with exploitation of other linguistic communities and, thus, has serious implications creating debates on imperialism against the so-called concept of globalization. In response to this type of imperialism, among other things, the concept of World Englishes has emerged.

The concept of World Englishes was initially introduced to highlight the features of the locally emerging varieties of English which were found in the countries that were part of the Commonwealth states. Such varieties have, in particular, a cultural and sociolinguistic common base. Presently, there are many varieties of English like American, Australian, South African, and Canadian in the context of the standard (or the Received Pronunciation) English (Kachru, 1986). Scholars, such as Kachru and Nelson (2006), have been vocal against the widespread use of English. They argue that Asian and African nations have excessively made use of the English language especially in “grammatical innovations and tolerances, lexis, pronunciations, idioms, and discourse” (p. 72) which gave birth to new varieties of the language. They are of the opinion that such an invasion through language erodes the local varieties and thus results in a lot of cultural loss. This discussion has even given new names to English as a language such as Cinglish (Chinese English) and Pinglish (Pakistani English). These varieties are the tokens of the English imperialism providing new directions and notions to the ongoing discussion on the role of English in the so-called globalized world. Among these notions, an emerging concept is related to the linguistic human rights.

Scholars have now attached a lot of importance to linguistic human rights. Among others, an important linguistic right is the right to seek education in the mother tongue and particularly to receive primary and elementary education in the mother tongue. The idea further denotes equal rights for smaller and major languages of the world. This concept has given birth to ideas such as *language shift*, *language death*, and *linguistic genocide*. The idea is to create an opportunity for smaller and lesser-known languages to promote and flourish in line with other important languages of the world. The concept of linguistic human rights has

started creating a very positive influence on the overall linguistic diversity and the chances are increased for smaller communities to use their languages for everyday communication and actively pursue bigger projects for their languages. There are a number of organizations working alongside UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) for smaller endangered languages across the globe. This concept is an extension of other human rights laws which advocate that discrimination in color, creed, race, gender, and language is unjustifiable and it is the moral and legal duty of the states to protect the oppressed, especially in the case of language in order to protect the indigenous languages.

### Changes over time in linguistic imperialism and its treatment

The issue of linguistic imperialism has changed since the initiation of the concept in the early 1990s as there have been some signs of resistance against the powerful language in some societies. Now many local varieties are found in South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, which are responding to the local needs and planning language courses according to the regional languages, and the states and provinces have made their mother tongues a compulsory subject in their schools. Moreover, African countries are following and are planning to favor their own languages. Thus, we see Tanzania, Eritrea, Kenya, Brunei, and Hong Kong making policies to accommodate Swahili and other such languages. The shopkeepers, Internet users, and fashion icons use English with code mixing to facilitate them and rely less on English. Thus, this new emerging variety is named as "globalization from below" (Canagarajah, 1999). It is the result of this resistance that there is now less dependence on CNN and the BBC as the sources of standard language because there are the new techniques of media war which are giving a strong resistance to accommodate the geopolitical situations against the powerful centre. Because of the powerful impact of China on the world economy, a parallel policy is also introduced and developed to teach Mandarin and Chinese to the neighboring countries. Thus, new economic corridors are developed and Chinese is taught to the neighboring countries like Pakistan in contrast with the rhetoric developed by the centre or core circle states. Thus, linguistic imperialism leads to full or partial assimilation depending on the context. When the relationship between the language and national identity is considered, it can threaten the existence and future of nations. Since a dominant language offers some advantages and opportunities to its speakers among the speakers of the dominated languages, the need or demand is created to learn the dominant languages at the expense of the mother tongue.

This situation leads to the idea that it is a requirement to be critical about knowledge produced by the dominant countries. Knowledge is a product of a particular content. Social, political, cultural, and economic factors determine the production of knowledge. It reflects the values, ideas, and beliefs of certain content. Hence, it is impossible to talk about politically, culturally, and socially neutral knowledge (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). Similarly, language teaching is a social process and the dominant methods and materials carry the ideology of those who



produced them. Thus, English language teaching, is dominated by center countries, namely the United States and the United Kingdom. They evaluate the fields by using the Western Anglophone standards in the name of professionalism, create the norms, and impose their ideas on the periphery countries—all the other countries—which the center dominates. Ideological, political, and social messages are expressed and exported to the periphery, which has become dependent on the center (Canagarajah, 1999). Therefore, it is possible to use language as a means of imposing desired behaviors and attitudes on other groups of people.

The effects of linguistic imperialism can also be observed in foreign and second language education. Former colonies provide examples of how a dominant language can be used to maintain colonial ties. Although they became independent, colonial institutions continue to exist, controlled by the elite social class who were educated in those institutions and speak the language of the colonizers. Thus, the retention of the colonizers' language maintains socioeconomic discrimination in the society. The language of the colonizers, therefore, is used in those institutions and has become the key factor for social mobility, power, and prestige. In this respect, the hegemony of the colonizers continues and former colonies depend on this flow of information from the dominant society. Generally, they do not create or produce anything; they just consume the ready-made prescriptions prepared by their colonizers. This dominance affects their self-confidence and creativity, and always keeps them in the dominated position.

Since the dominant language is geographically far (or at least there are borders) from the dominated language, its influences are limited in comparison to second language education. However, in this case there is also unequal competition between the dominant and dominated languages. The dominated language cannot compete with the dominant language powered with rich, sophisticated linguistic means to fulfill any kind of function. The dominant society typically produces new technology, science, waves in fashion, music, sports, and arts and consequently generates a new terminology and concepts that do not exist in the dominated language. As a result, this leads to lexical invasion of the dominated language by the dominant one. Because of this process, the dominated language cannot adequately fulfill the needs in these fields, and it leads to a linguistic gap between them. Since the dominant language is usually the language of science, technology, music, fashion and art, governments often make plans to teach it to their citizens, and people feel the need to learn it. This linguistic power facilitates a one-way flow of information from the dominant to the dominated language, and the dominated one becomes the borrower of new concepts and lexical items. Therefore, as Pennycook (1994) points out, it is far from enriching the dominated one, but responsible for keeping it in its present lower, impoverished condition.

In addition, foreign language education is a way of maintaining ties with the dominated society and influencing it in various ways. A dominant foreign language, at least, affects the attitudes of its speakers positively in the dominated society. Through foreign language education a dominant language can easily reach a lot of people all over the world and help present the beliefs and attitudes of a dominant culture to attain global support. Therefore, as in the case of second

language education aiming at creating a monolingual society, foreign language education seeks to create a world in which the dominant language can be used as a *lingua franca*, and by which the dominant culture retains its benefits all over the world.

Linguistic imperialism also affects language teaching such as teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). The periphery assumes a subordinate and dominated role, which is the center-oriented EFL teaching process in accordance with their established norms. In other words, the minds of EFL community are colonized, and they are not proactive in regards to developing new ideas and producing teaching materials relevant to their local needs. In fact, there is no apolitical, universal knowledge applicable to all contexts (Pennycook, 1994). The dominant groups control the dominated ones or seek to maintain the inequality between them because there is no value-free knowledge, and it carries the characteristics of the context in which it is produced.

### Pedagogical Implications

The traditional concept of linguistic imperialism conceptualizing the dominance of one powerful language over other weaker languages has been debated for more than two decades (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999). Such a debate has mainly focused on the ideological and cultural exploitation of English for some political and economic advantages by the dominant English-speaking cultures. The past history of colonialism by the United Kingdom and the English-speaking trend in newly liberated countries during the current globalization have been used as two major examples of this phenomena. This description of linguistic imperialism expanded the paradigm and gave birth to other many relevant policies and practices such as *linguicism*, *audism*, and the *denial* of linguistic rights (Rose & Conama, 2017).

Linguicism as a term was originally used to refer to “the ideologies, structures, and practices that are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups defined on the basis of language” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016, p. 583). The concept of linguicism was also defined as “discrimination based on language that unfairly treats certain linguistic communities, or unfairly advantages some languages over others” (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. 255). In severe cases, the concepts of *language shift* and *language death* were also linked with linguicism labeling them as various forms of “linguistic genocide.” However, proving linguicism as a form of linguistic imperialism is always very difficult as it is hard to link linguistic imperialism with imperialist, exploitative, and unjust structural forces (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016).

This limitation on linking linguistic imperialism with other exploitative forces has further reshaped the discussion on the concept of linguistic imperialism. As a result, the notion of linguistic imperialism has been challenged by latest contributions in language policy literature (Spolsky, 2004; Ferguson, 2006). Now the spread of English is examined as a *global language* and it is argued that this spread



is taking place as a *bottom-up* movement and the same is driven by its speakers rather than by the official policy on the language. It is further maintained that the spread has naturally favored the English speakers by creating further advantages for them due to its ever growing need as a global *lingua franca* which portrays a positive connotation for regional and global communication. This lingua franca status of English has gained a great deal of acceptance and it seems to be a better option to reduce the hegemonic aspect of ELT because as a world language, it is now becoming difficult for any specific group of people to monopolize. The new identity of English, as a tool for international communication, helps it break out of its boundaries and encompass the globe. When this new role of English is reflected in ELT, it leads to new or alternative perspectives in ELT philosophy, methodology, and materials. Therefore, ELT cannot imitate any specific native speaker model nor be founded on any culture-specific topics. This would free English learners from any imposed target values. Rather, a wide variety of topics, intercultural contexts, and varieties of English can be used in ELT. Hence, there is no need to impose culture-specific elements and native speaker models on them. Not only does this foster language education, but it strengthens the international identity as well. While dealing with international topics presented within international contexts, EFL learners may feel that they are the members of an international community. This change in attitude has lessened the severe connotation related with the role of English as linguistic imperialism but has been viewed as a neutral language policy.

Among these points, the concept of linguistic imperialism has also been developed as a framework to analyze a linguistic situation and provides evidence of imperialism and linguisticism. Now, the current trends are viewing linguistic imperialism not only as a theory of the dominance of a powerful language (such as English) over other weaker languages but are also using it as a framework to evaluate and examine the roles of different languages in a setting. In a recent work, Phillipson (2012, p. 214) has given the following defining factors of linguistic imperialism as a framework:

- as a form of linguisticism which manifests the favoring of the dominant language over another along similar lines as racism and sexism;
- as a structurally manifested concept, where more resources and infrastructure are given to the dominant language;
- as being ideological, in that it encourages beliefs that the dominant language form is superior to others, and thus more prestigious. He also argues that such ideas are hegemonic and internalized and naturalized as being 'normal';
- as intertwined with the same structure as imperialism in culture, education, the media and politics;
- as having an exploitative essence, which causes injustice and inequality between those who use the dominant language and those who do not;
- as having a subtractive influence on other languages, in that learning the dominant language is at the expense of others; and
- as being contested and resisted, because of these factors

These criteria are used to determine the roles of different languages and the setting of one under linguistic imperialism and proving the superiority of one language over others.

Studying linguistic imperialism as a framework helps to clarify whether the winning of political independence led to a linguistic liberation of third world countries, and asks 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)?

Since 1992, the debate about linguistic imperialism has been subsumed into a much broader discussion about *global*, *world*, or *international* English(es), with heated discussion centering on issues of language rights and language *ownership* and the role and status of regional varieties alongside discussions about whose standards and norms should be applied. In contemporary debates, speakers of World Englishes are no longer portrayed as “helpless and passive victims of some international conspiracy of linguistic imperialism but active participants who use English for their own ends, and in the process actively contribute to the development and spread of World Englishes” (Jenkins, 2006, p.112). In the contemporary global world English users have access to English language resources from both the centre and the periphery and thus “in its emerging role as a world language, English has no native speakers” (Jenkins, 2006). These works have also helped to create a greater awareness of the importance of positioning English within a much broader global economic picture than had previously been the case.

There are diverse views of the source of linguistic imperialism. It may take a militarily powerful nation to establish language, but it takes an economically powerful nation to maintain and expand it (Crystal, 2003). To resist linguistic imperialism, many countries are acting by sending language teachers abroad and supporting native language (mother tongue) education. Also, UNESCO has stressed the significance of maintaining language diversity, calling for joint efforts of different countries, regions, and races to maintain a world of diverse languages.

### Future directions in research, theory, and methodology

The recent trends in applied linguistics have paved the ways to explore novel aspects of linguistic imperialism by relating it not only to basic human rights but also taking specific initiatives to create awareness for maintaining linguistic diversity globally. The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (also known as the Barcelona Declaration) signed by the International PEN Club and some non-governmental organizations in 1996 is viewed as a milestone towards achieving equal rights for languages spoken by small communities. The focus is now slowly shifting along with maintaining major languages to revitalize, maintain, and document

local languages raising arguments in favor of giving people their right to choose the language or languages for communication in a private or public atmosphere. Today there are many organizations and institutions working globally to help revive indigenous and local languages, thus promoting the languages which go in favor of the languages of smaller communities. Particularly, the British Foundation for Endangered Languages is an active organization vigorously working for the revitalization of smaller unwritten languages. There is now a growing concept of the mother-tongue education and research in rich linguistic environments. In this connection, the importance of the mother-tongue-based schooling is not only being considered for quality education but the funding agencies are also encouraged to facilitate the process of shifting from foreign-language-based education to native-language-based under the umbrella of UNESCO. Simultaneously, there is a trend towards training locally influential educationists as language activists who can actively contribute towards the maintenance of linguistic diversity. The impact of such initiatives for observing linguistic imperialism and shifting the change from within, however, is yet to be evaluated and analyzed systematically.

**SEE ALSO:** Discrimination and Discriminatory Practices Against NNESTs; Identity and the Ownership of English; Sociocultural Aspects of English Language Teaching Through World Events

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