Realities and Myths of Linguistic Imperialism

Robert Phillipson

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This is a response to Alan Davies's review article 'Ironising the Myth of Linguicism' (1996). It summarises principles for the analysis of linguistic imperialism and demonstrates that the phenomenon is far from mythical. The theoretical anchoring is followed by a response to some of the specific points raised by Davies so as to show that his fairly sweeping generalisations are not justified. In conclusion, issues of educational aid, its myths and realities, are raised and some pointers for future action indicated.

> … scarcely any attention has been paid to what I believe is the privileged role of culture in the modern imperial experience, and little notice taken of the fact that the extraordinary reach of classical nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European imperialism still casts a considerable shadow over our own times … direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices. (Said, 1993: 3–8)

Linguistic Imperialism

Part of the cultural sphere that Edward Said alludes to is the linguistic legacy that imperialism has bequeathed to us, and the ways in which this inheritance is being enjoyed down to the present. Linguistic imperialism is not a simple matter, which is why it needs book-length treatment (Heath, 1972; Mühlhäusler, 1996; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992a), so that claims and analyses can be stringently and validly grounded, publicised and assessed. My book is controversial, as it asks awkward questions, and challenges the established order to which I belong by background and experience. I am fully aware of the need for more refined analytical tools for coming to grips with linguistic imperialism, and many more aspects of the problem need to be explored. The reception of my book (reprinted twice in four years; plans for translating it into Chinese, French, Japanese and Korean; over 30 reviews, many of them enthusiastic) suggests that the issues are of increasing interest and that in the judgement of many people I seem to be on the right track.

In my usage, *linguistic imperialism* is a theoretical construct, devised to account for linguistic hierarchisation, to address issues of why some languages come to be used more and others less, what structures and ideologies facilitate such processes, and the role of language professionals. My book primarily concentrates on English, and specifically on applied linguistics and educational aid. Far from wishing to 'escape' history, as AD suggests, it attempts to bring into sharper

focus the hidden past of English Language Teaching (ELT) worldwide, its aetiology and archaeology.

Linguistic imperialism is a subtype of *linguicism*, a term which Tove Skutnabb-Kangas coined (1988) to draw parallels between hierarchisation on the basis of 'race' or ethnicity (racism, ethnicism), gender (sexism) and language (linguicism). Just as racism studies were revitalised in the 1970s by Black scholars speaking from a Black perspective, linguicism studies attempt to put the sociology of language and education into a form which furthers scrutiny of how language contributes to unequal access to societal power and how linguistic hierarchies operate and are legitimated. Drawing on the perspective of minorities, of speakers of dominated languages, is important, since somehow speakers of dominant languages such as English and French tend to see the expanded use of their languages as unproblematical. Terminology such as 'language spread' and 'language death' contribute to a mythology of such social changes being attributable to agent-less natural forces. The historical record tells a different story (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1996).

Much of my inspiration comes from Western scholarship, work in peace and development studies, education and social theory, and work on language in the French empire. Other sources are thinkers and authors who have been at the receiving-end of imperialism. Many African and Indian sociolinguists have specifically contributed to identifying the mechanisms and ideologies of linguistic imperialism.

Another source of inspiration is human rights law which decrees that discrimination on the basis of such features as race, gender and language is morally unjustifiable and that states, therefore, have a duty to ensure the rights of speakers of 'smaller' languages, for instance indigenous languages (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994).

Linguicism can be intralingual and interlingual. It exists among and between speakers of a language, when one dialect is privileged as a 'standard'. Linguicism exists between speakers of different languages in processes of resource allocation, of the vindication or vilification in discourse of one language rather than another — such as 'English as the language of modernity and progress', Cantonese as a mere dialect unsuited for a range of literate or societal functions, and any of the ubiquitous formulae for stigmatising, downgrading or invisibilising a language.

'Linguistic imperialism' is shorthand for a multitude of activities, ideologies and structural relationships. Linguistic imperialism takes place within an overarching structure of asymmetrical North/South relations, where language interlocks with other dimensions, cultural (particularly in education, science and the media), economic and political.

For example if an aid project provides funds for language X, and not for language Y, when both X and Y are central to the linguistic ecology of a given country, there may be linguistic imperialism at play, especially if X is associated with the donor country, is the former colonial language, and is being used as a medium of education (for instance French in Senegal or English in Nigeria). Empirical validation of a hypothesis that linguistic imperialism is in operation requires study of the nature of the local linguistic ecology and linguistic hierarchies, the purposes which language X serves, whose interests are promoted

by the specific language policy, and the likely outcomes of any proposed activities.

Education is a vital site for social and linguistic reproduction, the inculcation of relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes, and therefore particularly central in processes of linguistic hierarchisation. Unlike the brute force of the colonial period (imposition of the master language, corporal punishment for using your mother tongue, whether in Wales or Kenya), in postcolonial days language policy is much more a matter for negotiation and persuasion. It requires legitimation, and may well be contested. The key actors in such processes are 'experts' from the North and elites in the South. Resort to the explanatory power of the concept of hegemony does not indicate any prejudging of the issue — there is room for choice. Analysis must identify the constraints and pressures influencing particular linguistic hegemonies, and link language to broader societal aspects of the functions that particular languages serve in the local ecology of languages.

Linguicism may be overt or covert, conscious or unconscious, in that it reflects dominant attitudes, values and hegemonic beliefs about what purposes particular languages should serve, or about the value of certain pedagogic practices. For instance educational language policy choices may be conflated and distorted into being a choice between education through the medium of language X or language Y, as opposed to bilingual education. The prevalent political and professional discourses are likely to be saturated with such hegemonic beliefs.

Thus linguistic hierarchies reminiscent of the colonial period still underpin World Bank and IMF education policies, which currently set the tone for 'aid' alongside notoriously antisocial, poverty-inducing structural adjustment policies:

> the World Bank's real position … encourages the consolidation of the imperial languages in Africa … the World Bank does not seem to regard the linguistic Africanisation of the whole of primary education and beyond as an effort that is worth its consideration. Its publication on strategies for stabilising and revitalising universities, for example makes absolutely no mention of the place of language at this tertiary level of African education. (Mazrui, 1997: 39)

A set of agenda-setting World Bank reports on basic education in eastern African countries barely refers to local languages (see Phillipson, 1992b). The ensuing educational 'aid' reflects the linguicist belief that only European languages are suited to the task of developing African economies and minds, the falsity of which many African scholars have documented, Ansre, Bamgbose, Kashoki, Mateene, Ngugi (references in Akinnaso, 1994; Djité, 1993; Phillipson, 1992b). The list of those who have inspired me and whom I quote is long, a fact that some reviewers of my book seem to have conveniently forgotten, so that their criticism has been directed not merely at the messenger rather than the message, but actually the wrong messenger.

Myths about a Book

Alan Davies's critique does not lend itself to a comparison between alternative paradigms in the study of language dominance or educational aid. If it had, there

might have been a surer basis on which to assess claims or counter-claims, the contribution of various scientific disciplines, and the connections between expertise, experience and a 'liberal' vs. 'critical/radical' scholarly approach. Rather than pointing out in detail the many ways in which I feel he over-simplifies or misreads my position, I will focus on a few general points.

(1)   AD interprets my book as indicating that I am on a guilt trip, whereas in my view what is significant, irrespective of how guilty or naive or utopian any of us may be, is to specify and implement accountability and ethics in development aid. Several reviewers of my book recognise this, e.g. Kachru, 1993; Ricento, 1994; Tollefson, 1994; Bloor, 1995; for a proposed code of conduct for development workers, see Hamelink, 1997.

(2)   I do not accept AD's claim that I over-rate the importance of language in the overall picture of North-South relations. My purpose has been to attempt to identify some of the largely hidden links between the substantial ELT/applied linguistics profession and broader societal developments. If language had not been perceived as a vital North-South link, the governments of the USA, Great Britain and France would never have invested so heavily into it over the past 40 years. Currently privatisation and commodification lead to World Bank educational projects being sub-contracted to higher education institutions of the kind AD has been professionally associated with.

(3)   AD's account of the goals of British aid and his own experience seems to indicate that he happily does the British government's bidding, but found himself in an untenable position in Nepal both before and after his expert advice was given and rejected. His recognition that the problems are 'intractable' ought to lead to more reflection about the nature of the aid relationship and whether professional goals and means have been appropriately conceived. His example in no way provides counter-evidence to my overall argument about the aid relationship. There are plenty of cases where one can document that North advice has been followed. On the other hand I fully agree that such a general concept as linguistic imperialism needs to be broken down into its many constituent features, deconstructed and operationalised, so as to avoid the risk of determinism (for comparable work in cultural imperialism, see Golding & Harris, 1997). This is precisely why my book adopts a historical approach, makes its theoretical base clear, and goes into some detail with the mechanisms of linguistic imperialist professionalism and with key issues such as the five tenets that have underpinned ELT — and which virtually none of my critics have disputed the reality of.

(4)   In AD's defence of the Makerere report he cites recommendations that depart from the five tenets. My analysis of this document is 36 pages, not of 'polemic', but of review of a substantial body of scientific literature. AD's examples fit well into the picture of many genuine needs being identified, as in comparable reports in the colonial period. However thereafter the resources were not made available, and the policies actually implemented were linguicist. The overall agenda of the Makerere conference was how a Western language and culture could enable Us to solve Their problems (good Orientalist stuff in Said's terms): the 'representatives from about 30

countries' that AD invokes were with the exception of a couple from West Africa and the Indian sub-continent virtually all in the British colonial service. Good intentions were doubtless present, but they are not enough, and there was a unanimous intention to entrench English: local languages are seen as 'inadequate' for science; the research proposed is to focus on 'the effect on the teaching of English' of various activities, but not one line of the report considers what effect the teaching of English would have on other languages; the opening speech by the Acting Governor of Uganda makes a plea for all East Africans to use English as their common language, and to achieve this the early start and maximum exposure fallacies are trotted out. Then the invited experts got down to work!

(5) Hegemony is used in popular speech loosely to indicate dominance, but in the substantial scientific literature spawned by Gramsci, hegemony is invariably seen as non-coercive, as involving contestation and adaptation, a battle for hearts and minds. It is therefore false to suggest that in my work English linguistic hegemony permits no resistance — far from it, as Kachru's work, which I cite with approval, has demonstrated for many years, and as more radical recent work captures (e.g. Dasgupta, 1993, Parakrama, 1995). English is currently expanding in Europe in hegemonic ways, as a result of internal and external pressures, but in each western European country, whether this amounts to linguistic imperialism is an empirical question that probably would be answered in the negative (see Phillipson, 1992a: 317; Phillipson, in press; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994;).

(6) The present North-South relationship and the repressive nature of many regimes in South countries militate against ELT being actively harnessed in anti-linguicist ways. Current World Bank and British government-funded activities (ODA, British Council) lead to self-censorship on the part of South academics, so as not to exclude themselves from the patronage of the aid organisations (e.g. in Tanzania, Brock-Utne, 1993: 99). The asymmetrical nature of the aid relationship exposed in my book still holds largely true, as a recent Norwegian development studies scholar shows:

> Research collaboration between North and South is unequal in terms of resources, if not in intellectual capacity … Sensitivities run high on these matters and Southern researchers are resentful of what they see as arrogance by their Northern counterparts just because the latter tend to command the resources and thus call the shots. It is vital that collaborative research projects be formulated and designed jointly from the very start. (Tostensen, 1996: 25)

There are examples of this model being followed by Nordic aid agencies, for instance ENRECA (Enhancement of Research Capacity in Development Countries) is based on a commitment for 10–15 years by DANIDA, the official Danish aid body.

(7) AD seems to see language policy basically in an either/or, monolingual way, as in English being 'rejected' or Pattanayak being regarded as advocating Hindi as an alternative to English. The reality is more complex: all of Pattanayak's writings extol multilingualism (e.g. 1988); and educational

change has never deprived elites of the advantages that proficiency in the former colonial language bestows on them. Globalisation pressures serve to consolidate processes of 'elite closure' (Myers-Scotton, 1993) that effectively debar the masses from competence in the language of power. It is not surprising that English is known as the 'killer language' in various parts of the world, among them Burma, where the teaching of English as a foreign language has been held in a time-warp. Where else in the world, I wonder, are secondary learners of English as a foreign language continuing the colonial practice of studying 'Wuthering Heights' as a set book (Khin Hla Win, 1991)?

(8) It is not correct to state that I ignore the connection of English with values of 'openness and … modernism'. When AD refers approvingly to Penny-cook optimistically stressing 'an expanded community of English-users', he ignores the fact that Pennycook endorses insurgent discourses so as to challenge and change 'the cultures and discourses that dominate the world' (Pennycook, 1994: 326). I would add that globally this can only be done equitably by giving voice to speakers of a multiplicity of languages, and that current educational orthodoxy militates against this. 'Under the present configuration of power relations, the English language is not likely to allow Africans the politico-economic space for this kind of intellectual inde-pendence' (Mazrui, 1997: 47). Studies by several Scandinavian and East African educationalists (summarised in Brock-Utne, 1994) indicate that the implementation of the ideals of the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand is resulting in the imposition of donor wishes, for instance in Nepal, that are insensitive to local needs. *Plus ça change …*

(9) The 'fatality of human linguistic diversity' that Benedict Anderson's study of nationalism (1983) refers to has been handled very differently in Europe and in the colonial world. In the 'imagining' of Western nation states, the linguistic diversity combined with a means of production (capitalism) and a technology of communications (print) to consolidate a certain number of states from the 17th century onwards, culminating in the 19th century. In the nation states of Europe the medium of education was the dominant local language (Czech, Finnish, Norwegian, …) not only in primary education but also in secondary education (Hobsbawm, 1990). The situation in the postcolonial world is totally different. The key language of the state is not Urdu in Pakistan, Bangla in Bangladesh, Swahili, Hausa and other African languages in many postcolonial imagined communities (comparable to Japanese and Korean as dominant national languages). The legacy of linguistic imperialism means that the imagining of the elites is inextricably linked to the imperialist language. AD's faith that 'English fits on all counts' seems to reflect a belief that if English has served as the dominant language in certain parts of the globe, it merits global marketing, despite all the evidence globally that linguistic and cultural diversity is a source of richness, of uniqueness, of distinctiveness, and that feelings about language rights run high from Wales to New South Wales. If the world moves towards a pattern of global diglossia, with English as the language of the haves (including elites in South countries), while the have-nots and never-to-haves are

confined to other languages, this would represent one of the most sinister consequences of globalisation, McDonaldisation and linguistic imperialism.

The Myths and Realities of 'Aid'

For the recent volume *Post-imperial English: Status Change in Former British and American Colonies, 1940–1990* (Fishman *et al.*, 1996), 32 contributors from all over the world were asked to address the issue of whether 'the spread of English into non-English mother-tongue areas is characterisable as linguistic imperialism' (from Fishman's introduction, page 10). The book contains a wealth of documentation which can facilitate more informed judgment about the processes that globalisation and 'spreading' English involves, and the book itself shows scholars adopting a wide range of interpretations of what the facts are and whose interests determine the fate of 'post-imperial English'.

Whether an aid policy strengthens or counteracts linguistic imperialism in any given context is an empirical question. Aid is intrinsically linked to the structure of North/South relations, and as is well known, the aid of the past 40 years has not succeeded in abolishing poverty in the South (elites excluded), quite the opposite.

A recent study of British foreign policy since 1945 begins by stating: 'It appears to be a widely held assumption that Britain (and indeed the Western states as a whole) promotes certain grand principles — peace, democracy, human rights and economic development in the Third World — as natural corollaries to the basic political and economic priorities that guide its foreign policy' (Curtis, 1995: 1). His book documents in great detail how false this view is, and how the media have uncritically promoted this deceptive vision. His concluding chapter states:

> One basic fact — of perhaps unparalleled importance — has permeated a number of studies and is well understood: the mass poverty and destitution that exist in much of the Third World are direct products of the structure of the international system. Moreover, an elementary truth is that the world's powerful states have pursued policies with regard to the Third World which knowingly promote poverty. … 'free trade' and 'liberalization' … have not been adhered to by those states that have largely extricated themselves from membership of the Third World, such as the Asian Tigers, most notably Korea. These countries are more correctly understood as command capitalist regimes, in which the state has played a commanding role in the economy not only by putting in place trade and investment regimes favourable to domestic enterprises but also by engaging in production itself. (Curtis, 1995: 236)

This contradicts the World Bank mythology that has been imposed on South countries in recent years. Market forces cannot empower the ACP (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group) states, covered by the Lomé Agreement, when the European Union has halved imports from the countries since 1980 through raw deals on raw materials. Aid 'fatigue' and conditionality also lead to the increasing marginality of such countries.

These harsh economic facts also affect education systems. Most applied linguistics acts in consonance with the dominant aid paradigm. It connives in the

false representation of global power by a pretence of being non-political, by pedagogical and linguistic agendas being relatively explicit but the political agenda being banished beyond the professional pale. The political disconnection is accompanied by a cultural disconnection, which the failure of ELT personnel, 'experts' in language learning, to learn local languages epitomises (documented in a recent book by a Hungarian, Medgyes (1995)). How can anyone be an expert on the language learning needs, steps and strategies of a set of learners without in-depth knowledge of the culture and language that the learners bring with them to the classroom and the learning operation? This sort of professional competence goes without saying in foreign language education throughout the Western world but is regarded as superfluous in dominant second language learning paradigms both in the home market in the North and in its export variant. This ethnocentricity and anglocentricity, the belief that our culture and language is universally relevant, is what is patronising in language aid, not my analysis of it (as AD suggests).

There is a substantial literature on how disastrous 'development' has been, scholarly analyses and World Bank reports. The search for alternatives leads to a focus on people-centred, self-directing and self-reliant processes, for which the links between language and development need to be made clear (Robinson, 1996). Clinton Robinson's review of my book pleads for

- formulating and articulating *multilingual* strategies for education, communication, and every sector of social life,
- more closely defining that the real need for (what kind of) English (or any other LWC) is in specific contexts,
- making wider linguistic choices viable and available (in many places this means developing local languages for educational use: materials, teachers, trainers …) (Robinson, 1995: 25).

Some South scholars feel my book does not go nearly far enough. Canagarajah's first review (1995) suggests that the framework could be improved by more inspiration from postmodernist discourse analysis, mainly in order to bring more agency into the analysis, particularly the voices of the periphery, those who are using English for a multiplicity of purposes, for instance to challenge ELT orthodoxies in the classroom. Education has its own vitality in the periphery, that the establishment, including the aid business, is insensitive to:

> Nativized versions of English, novel English discourses in post-colonial literature, and substitution of vernacular in conventional contexts for English use — all these are quiet ways in which resistance against English has already begun, often challenging the values and ideologies which undergird the institutions that accompany the dominance of English. The ESL classroom itself is a site of resistance against the values and pedagogical practices of the center. A small but growing body of ethnographic studies from the periphery suggests that pedagogies and textbooks from the center are not used in the prescribed manner in local classrooms, and that strategies of resistance against the discourses and ELT pedagogies are influenced by students' own indigenous social and educational traditions. (Canagarajah, 1995: 593)

Do aid projects aim to support this kind of independent pedagogy in the periphery? I very much doubt it, and few if any studies by Western scholars suggest that this is so. Aid is not designed to rock the boat. Nor is it surprising that some scholars in the South with close links to Edinburgh or London get agitated by my boat-rocking (see Phillipson, 1996: a response to Bisong, 1995).

I would claim that we need a paradigm shift, a radical re-thinking of language-in-education policies worldwide, and how educational 'aid' addresses them. A more visionary approach is currently being elaborated in South Africa, where a linguistic human rights approach, a policy of language equity is being pursued. The policy is anti-linguicist and counter-hegemonic, entailing explicit strategies and measures for the legitimation of marginalised languages, and for counteracting discriminatory practices in education, public services or the media (see the LANGTAG report, 1996). It assumes that bilingualism and multi-lingualism are necessary and desirable societal goals.

Individual scholars or 'experts' in both South and North are in a position to attempt analytical diagnoses that can explain the weaknesses of the present system and account for its failures. I would also claim they have an ethical responsibility to articulate anti-linguicist policies that can serve to promote social justice.

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Response to a Reply

I am grateful to Robert Phillipson (RP) for taking the trouble to reply at length and with courtesy to my review of his book, *Linguistic Imperialism*, (published in *JMMD*, 17/6).

The Editor has invited me to respond. I have no wish to see this debate continue since I fear we are talking past one another, but I welcome the opportunity to suggest where I think we disagree:

(1)   We disagree about the nature of language. For RP language is essential, like race, sex etc. For me, language is non-essential, like culture, religion etc. That must be the case since change is of the nature of language, as it is of culture, religion etc.

(2)   We disagree about the choices people make about their language use. For RP such choices are typically imposed externally. For me they are typically decisions made by individuals. I prefer to view people as independent beings, capable of acting in their own best interests with regard to language use. RP sees that as hegemonic, to which, of course, I have no reply since hegemony takes no prisoners.

(3)   RP claims that 'linguistic imperialism is a theoretical construct' and that his analysis of it has 'theoretical anchoring'. But surely theories need to explain how they might be falsified. It is unclear to me how linguicism and its subtype, linguistic imperialism, could ever be falsified, To what sort of evidence would RP respond with a 'Fair cop, Guv!'?

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