

Assignment SO/02/05

Linguistic Imperialism:

The Role of English as an International Language

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1 Introduction

Alastair Pennycook, in his article entitled “English in the World/The World in English” (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 78) states that what is lacking from the predominant paradigm of investigation into English as an international language is a broad range of “social, historical, cultural and political relationships.” He goes on to argue that it is important to understand the relationship between the English language and its position in the world in such a way that “neither reduces it to a simple correspondence with its worldly circumstances nor refuses this relationship by considering language to be a hermetic structural system unconnected to social, cultural and political concerns.” Critical frameworks employed to examine the English language in a global context often portray its spread as natural, neutral and beneficial and somehow free of economic, political and ideological constraints. Yet, as many critics have argued, language is never a neutral vehicle for communication and contextual factors are inextricably tied to it. The imposition of one country’s language on another along with its cultural, social and political models is what Robert Phillipson (1992: 17) describes as a movement from the “core” (the country which imposes the language) to the “periphery” (the countries in which language is imposed or promoted as a second language). As a consequence, language acquisition results in a certain level of cultural ‘imperialism’ as knowledge from one culture is transferred to another. In the discussion presented below the global spread of English and its imperialist influence on other languages and cultures will be examined as will its role in the development and maintenance of ‘society’ and ‘culture’ in the countries where it is used. In particular, the influence of English and its relationship with regards to the predominantly

French-speaking province of Quebec in Canada will be explored.

2 Review of the Literature

2.1 English in a Global Context

Throughout its history the English language has displayed an ability to adapt to new situations and environments. And, like certain other world languages, it has evolved and played a major social and cultural role in the countries where it has been introduced. However, some observers have proposed that the English language, and the teaching profession which promotes it (ELT), carry imperialistic influences. Its imposition on native languages, for instance, has often resulted in their allocation to a secondary status along with the cultures they represent. At other times, the teaching of English has been seen as a way of disseminating the economic, cultural or religious values of dominant world powers. Countering this have been others who claim that what was once historically considered the imperialist spread of language by certain cultures and countries must now be thought of in more altruistic terms.

2.2 Linguistic Imperialism/Expansion

Some critics see English as playing a fundamental role in the promotion of global inequalities and structures of dependency. This is what Phillipson (1988: 339) refers to as *linguicism* – “the ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and

non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of their language (i.e., of their mother tongue).” He goes on to say that this condition is best seen within the broader context of *linguistic imperialism* - “an essential constituent of imperialism as a global phenomenon involving structural relations between rich and poor countries in a world characterized by inequality and injustice” (ibid. 339). According to Galtung (in Phillipson 1992: 52) imperialism is a type of relationship whereby “one society or collective in more general terms can dominate another” and which manifests itself in a variety of ways: economically, politically, militarily, culturally and socially. For Galtung, the world can be divided into two domains: the Center (the powerful Western countries) and the Periphery (the developing ones). Language is the medium through which the elite of the Center regulate the Periphery and plays a crucial function by providing the link between the dominant and the dominated groups and is representative of the basis upon which the notion of linguistic imperialism is built.

Integral to the notion of linguistic dominance is the continued *expansion* of language within an imperialist framework. Language expansion is considered an essential part of a core country’s policy of extending its power and influence in order to achieve its imperialistic strategies. Phillipson (1992: 47) holds that the legitimization of English linguistic expansion has been based on two notions: ethnocentricity and educational policy, with ‘ethnocentricity’ being the “practice of judging other cultures by standards of its own.” These two practices have been used to impose a distinction between languages. It has also been a way to promote the notion of the assumed inferiority of secondary languages with respect to the norms determined by the dominant culture. And central to such notions has been the devaluation of native

languages through the colonial spread of English. Pennycook (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 78-87) states that:

the extent to which English is involved in the political, educational, social and economic life of a country is clearly a result of both the historical legacy of colonialism and of the varying success of countries since independence in warding off the threats of neo-colonialism.

Phillipson takes this notion one step further with ethnocentricity transformed into that of 'anglocentricity' with the consequence that the dominance of English is justified in terms of such oppositions as superiority/inferiority, civilization/backwardness, progress/regress, the first element of which is constantly attributed to the dominant English language.

2.3 Functionalism and Identification

Theo van Leeuwen (in Coulthard et al 1996: 55) observes that the English language allows us to "make a choice between functionalism and identification, and that the use of this choice in discourse is of critical importance." Graddol (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 27-8) adds that English has two main functions in the world: it provides a vehicular language for international communication and it forms the basis for constructing cultural identities. According to Pennycook (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 79) the global spread of English is today commonly justified by recourse to a functionalist perspective, which stresses choice and the usefulness of English, and that consequently its diffusion is:

natural (although its spread was initiated by colonialism, since then it has been an accidental by-product of global forces), neutral (unlike other, local languages, English is unconnected to cultural and political issues), and beneficial (people can only benefit by gaining access to English and the world it opens up).

Countering such notions have been claims that language can never be entirely divorced from culture and, despite having beneficial functions as a means of communication, carries with it imperialistic influences of the culture it represents. Despite the fact that ‘society’ and ‘culture’ may ultimately be shaped and governed by linguistic market forces, one language imposed on another under such circumstances can never be entirely natural, neutral or beneficial. Where individual countries are represented by their own unique political, economic and religious systems it is unrealistic to expect one imposed language to meet the needs of all cultures and their varying social agendas.

3 Linguistic Imperialism – Cultural Context

3.1 Providing a Need vs. Imposing Culture

Linked with the expansion of free market practices and laissez-faire economics of the West – and therefore imperialist in nature – English has demonstrated its role outside the confines of the political and economic elite and flourished in such diverse areas as advertising, music and the Internet. This is what critics such as David Crystal (1997) consider evidence of the English language’s ‘democratic’ qualities. Even when proposals to legislate it as a country’s official language have been waylaid (as in the United States), English has continued to flourish and fill a need in society. In such

circumstances it has functioned primarily as a linguistic commodity subject to the laws of language market forces.

One way of measuring a language's global influence is the 'Engo' model outlined in Graddol (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 31). The model generates a league table among languages that weights them "not only by the number and wealth of their speakers, but also by the likelihood that these speakers will enter social networks which extend beyond their locality" and makes its calculations taking into account various economic and demographic factors. English has clearly demonstrated its role as a language of influence in terms of the criteria established by the engo model by expanding its borders linguistically. Yet, at the same time, it has imposed its culture - sometimes at the expensive of the local native languages. In the discussion below the relevance of such linguistic measurements is of consequence with regards to the English language's dominant place in Canadian society. In particular, the effects it has had on the development of the French language both inside and outside Quebec will be investigated.

3.2 Maintenance and Development of Society and Culture

Janet Holmes (1992: 76), discussing the factors involved in language maintenance, claims that where a language is "rated as high in status by its users, and yet also regarded as a language of solidarity to be used between minority group members" it is much more likely to be maintained. She adds that where it is regarded as appropriate for expressing "referential as well as affective or social meaning, and

where it is able to be used in a wide range of contexts both formal and informal,” it can also successfully sustain itself. Maintaining such demand for English has been a key focus of educational policies of the English-speaking core countries and reflective of imperialist strategies. With the case of bi-lingualism in Canada, for instance, English has had the role of substituting or displacing the French language and imposing new ‘mental structures’ in a manner Phillipson (1992) regards as an intrinsic part of ‘modernization’ and ‘nation-building.’

English speakers have long considered the French Canadian language – known as ‘Quebecois’ – as secondary in importance to their own. Despite the fact that French has a longer lineage in Canada than English (dating back to the first Jesuit missionaries of the 16th century) friction has been generated between speakers of the two languages, in part over issues of language maintenance. French speakers claim that English has always received preferential treatment over French. Some in Quebec see this as a form of discrimination and one reason the country’s nation-building objectives have only been partially successful. Due to English Canada’s traditional economic and political superiority, the country’s government has tended to neglect promoting French as aggressively as might be expected in an officially bi-lingual nation. Quebec’s response to such perceived linguistic inequality is the focus of discussion in section 4 below.

3.3 Language, Discourse and Power

Along with political and economic domination powerful countries exert tremendous cultural influence over those they dominate. Linguistic imperialism brings

about the rise of a certain language as a dominant one and makes it a weapon for distributing power. Theo van dijk (in Coulthard et al. 1996: 85), commenting on dimensions of dominance involving language, states that:

through special access to, and control over the means of public discourse and communication, dominant groups or institutions may influence the structures of text and talk in such a way that, as a result, the knowledge, attitudes, norms, values and ideologies of recipients are – more or less indirectly – affected in the interest of the dominant group.

The author adds that we may assume that more *access* corresponds to more *social power*. In other words, “measures of discourse access may be rather faithful indicators of the power of social groups and their members.” (ibid. 86). French-speaking Canadians in Quebec, because of their limited access and involvement in political and social discourse outside their own province, have consequently had less social power. By inference, this has included reduced linguistic control over the language resources within their borders.

Loss of linguistic control, as a by-product resulting from the imposition of one language on another, helps to illustrate Phillipson’s theory concerning ‘modernization’ and ‘nation-building’ referred to above. In the case of Quebec, the Canadian government’s favoritism towards English has largely resulted from a practical realization that one of the two languages – either English or French – must assume dominance in order for the country to maintain its status as a modern state. And it is the maintenance of such power structures which support arguments by Burns and others that language use is not neutral. Elements the author cites as supporting such power

structures include: the functions and forms of language; a language's ideological features; and their uses as media for political or social control (2001: 138). He adds that language analysis should take account of the way in which linguistic exchanges are mediated as well as their social purpose and intention.

4 Language and Identity

4.1 Global Networks vs Local Identity

Wardhaugh (1987) claims that English is the least localized of all languages in the world and tied to no particular social, political, economic, or religious system, or to a specific racial or cultural group. Yet many in Canada's French-speaking province of Quebec believe that English *is* tied socially, politically and economically to the rest of the country and that it is continually imposed on their province from outside. Graddol (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 27-8) states that the widespread use of English as a language of wider communication will continue to exert pressure of these kinds towards global uniformity as well as "give rise to anxieties about 'declining' standards, language change and loss of geolinguistic diversity." Speakers of French in Quebec have found it increasingly difficult to enter social networks which extend beyond their locality as English mental structures are constantly reinforced. As a result, the provincial government has found itself having to legislate rules to maintain and preserve what remains of French language and culture within its borders.

4.2 Case Study: Canada vs Quebec

The province of Quebec serves as one localized example of the English language's influence on an area which is primarily a French speaking region of the country. Even though Canada is officially bi-lingual (English-French), in practice English has always been the language of dominance. Phillipson's (1988: 339) notion of 'linguicism' described in 2.1 above - encompassing the ideologies and structures used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups defined on the basis of their language - closely mirrors the relationship between English and French-speaking parts of Canada. This situation of inequality has led to the country being divided linguistically and culturally with Quebec resorting to demands for special constitutional status as a 'distinct society.' This has also included legal action seeking to control immigration into its territory to help maintain the province's French-speaking character.

Historically, Canada's constitution has always been under the control of the British Parliament. However, in 1982 the British government finally gave up their right of control and all of Canada's provinces and territories, except Quebec, signed a new constitutional agreement. Quebec's refusal to sign was due to the fact that the new constitution did not protect Quebec's distinct linguistic and cultural heritage. Today, French-speaking people living in Quebec are particularly concerned about their province's exclusion from the constitution and what consequences this may have for them in the future. Immigration and a current drop in the birthrate have threatened to diminish the province's French-speaking status and cultural influence to a minority level

not only within Canada, but also within its own regional borders.

4.3 Quebec's Language Policy

The view of many French-speakers that their province deserves recognition and particular powers because of its French-speaking identity is opposed by most English-speaking Canadians. Most outside Quebec feel that all provinces in Canada should be constitutionally equal. The most controversial of Quebec's demands has been its insistence on special status within the constitution. Yet many in English Canada believe that the provincial government would use such constitutional guarantees to further the interests of Quebec and, in particular, its language policy.

Much of Quebec's political maneuvering in recent decades has been in response to what it considers to be English-speaking Canada's imperialist stance towards the province. Quebecers argue that there is an overwhelming imbalance between the rights and privileges afforded English over French: for instance, English speakers visiting Quebec expect service in their own first language and yet French speakers traveling outside the borders of their own province could never expect similar treatment. In reaction to this perceived threat of English hegemony, Quebec has resorted to calling referendum votes to debate the province's eventual separation from the rest of Canada.

Carol Numrich (1994: 126), in her article on Canadian bi-lingualism, poses the question: is an official language policy the best solution for a bilingual nation? One

negative by-product of the Canadian government's attempt to right the balance between French and English has been the breeding of a form of French language imperialism, or reverse discrimination, within Quebec's borders. Numrich states that "several laws have already been passed to maintain, or as some see it, 'impose,' the French language in Canada." For example, all new immigrant children to Quebec must, by law, attend French language schools, regardless of their country of origin, despite a federal statute which states that all national institutions in Canada are obliged to offer services in both French and English. Another law, known as Bill 178, prohibits outdoor signs and billboards in Quebec to advertise in any language but French; only indoor signs can be in English. As a result, the French Canadian language has been localized and preserved and virtually contained within the province's borders, despite the fact that it is the first language of virtually one-third of the Canadian population. The language laws of Quebec have not been received favorably by all Canadians, particularly English-speaking people of Quebec (known as 'anglophones'). Yet these measures have been its extreme response to what the province sees as its victimization under the imperialist linguistic practices of English Canada.

In the final analysis the question becomes: is English Canada guilty of linguistic imperialism regarding Quebec? The answer is undoubtedly 'yes', with the qualification that this has been partly the result of historical factors (British forces defeated the French in Canada in 1759 – a conquest Quebec has never accepted) and demographics (in 1842 half the people in Canada were of French origin, but by 1990 that half had been reduced to a quarter). All national institutions in Canada are obliged to offer services in both French and English yet it is overwhelming English that

functions as the lingua franca for residents of the country and visitors alike.

5 Linguistic Imperialism and Education

5.1 Educational Factors

At present, English is the world's most influential language and its promotion is one of the prerogatives of the U.K. and U.S. educational policies. Their strategies of spreading the use of English rely on their former colonial dominance and the resultant demand of knowing English. Widdowson (in Hedge and Whitney et al. 1996: 76-8) states that:

English as an international language can be taken, on the one hand, to refer to the language as a common denominator in communication within secondary superimposed cultures of business, technology, and other international, multinational domains of use and power where the standard language is institutionally appropriate. But the phrase English as an international language can also refer to the spread of the language into smaller communal corners, the demotic diaspora which develops different varieties and dialects to express the primary socio-cultural identity of smaller communities all over the world.

He adds that “we need to recognize this distinction and to acknowledge that both kinds of international use have their proper place in the scheme of things” (ibid.). He considers both of crucial concern in English language education. Yet others have argued that the extent to which the propagation of English as a medium of education, commerce, and government has impeded literacy in mother tongue languages has thwarted social and economic progress for those who do not learn it (Ricento 1994:

422). Pennycook (1995) points out that English carries a set of ideologies, values, and norms based on the history of its development and use and that the spread of English privileges certain groups of people (including native speakers and non-native elites who have the opportunity to master it well) and may harm others who have less opportunity to learn it.

According to Phillipson (1992: 47) education serves the imperial center by having three functions: ideological, economic and repressive. The ideological function serves as a channel for transmitting social and cultural values. In this role English is regarded as a “gateway for better communication, better education and higher standards of living.” The second function – economic – legitimizes English as a means of qualifying people to contribute to their nation and operate technology that the language provides access to. The third function – repression – serves to dominate indigenous languages. Linguistic imperialism calls attention to the potential consequences of English teaching worldwide when center country ideologies are embedded in instruction, having the effect of legitimizing colonial or establishment power and resources, and of “reconstituting cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (ibid. 47).

5.2 Standards and Codification

Cem Alptekin (in Hedge and Whitney et al. 1996: 58) states that in the case of English it is virtually “impossible to think of its native speakers as the only arbiters of grammaticality and appropriacy and consequently as its sole owners, given the lingua franca status of the language.” Yet it has been the native English speaking countries,

somewhat predictably, who have attempted to maintain the status quo regarding the conventions of the language. Kachru and Nelson (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 16-7) claim that the codifying agencies of English have been a:

matter of convention, and perpetuation of convention, through dictionaries, grammars, rhetoric handbooks, and pressures of various other types – the makers of all these being unwilling to stretch very far beyond the reach of their immediate predecessors in what they deemed acceptable form and usage – and through the newspapers and other widely disseminated popular media that use those sources for their style sheets and usage manuals.

They hold that in addition to these tangible influences the extremely powerful agencies of social and psychological pressures of various sorts must be factored in. This codification has taken place almost exclusively in the inner circle countries and has made it necessary for the outer and expanding circles to look to these sources when in need of citable authority. This has ultimately functioned as a deterrent to their setting up authorities of their own.

Contributing to the discussion of world standards of English is Graddol's prediction (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 28) that second-language countries are likely to develop their own curricula, materials and teaching resources which they will seek to export to neighbouring countries. In some parts of the world, this may help to bring new, non-native models of English – supported by dictionaries and pedagogic materials – into competition with the older standard varieties. This will inevitably lead to a tremendous clash of value systems that will ultimately have a bearing on linguistic diversity, cultural pluralism, ethnicity, race, power, status, politics, economics, etc. While continued restrictions on language rights has historically led to segregationist

tendencies in society, language legislation “rarely results in a unified society speaking solely the mandated language(s)” (Thomas 1996: 129). The resulting paradox has led to controversy in countries like Canada where bi-lingual policies dictate that both the English and French languages must be promoted and respected equally despite the considerable linguistic and cultural friction generated. In the sociopolitical domain of second language acquisition and maintenance, Canada’s dilemma encompasses questions ranging from the language of education of children to what the country’s linguistic policy internationally should be.

6 Implications for Teaching

6.1 Policy and Management

Brown (1994: 195) advises that “at every turn in our curricula, we must beware of imposing a foreign value system on our learners for the sake of bringing a common language to all.” Yet others have argued that there is no need to choose between an *integrative discourse*, which views English as a door to international commerce, tourism, technology and science, and an *empowering discourse*, which views English as an ideological instrument of unequal power relations (Cox & Assis-Peterson: 1999). They hold that views of language and its role in maintaining society and culture in the countries in which it has been introduced need not be deterministic. Crystal (in Burns and Coffin et al. 2001: 63) states that the chief task facing ELT is how to devise pedagogical policies and practices in which the need to “maintain an international standard of intelligibility, in both speech and writing, can be made to comfortably exist

alongside the need to recognize the importance of international diversity, as a reflection of identity.”

In addition to the strict imperialist methods used for maintaining English language standards and codes of the inner circle countries there have been efforts to apply prescriptive limits to those varieties on the periphery. Lyons (1970: 20) warns that we must be careful not to disregard, or condemn as ‘incorrect’, more informal or colloquial usage both in speech and writing. He adds that standard language is, from a historical point of view, merely “that regional or social dialect which has acquired prestige and become the instrument of administration, education and literature.” Because of its wider use, by a greater number of people and for a wider range of activities, the standard language may have a richer vocabulary than any of the co-existent ‘substandard’ dialects, but it is not intrinsically more correct. He claims that the important point is that the regional or social dialects of a language, say English, are “no less systematic than the standard language and should not be described as imperfect approximations of it.”

6.2 Resisting Linguistic Imperialism

Control over policy and management of ELT has included considerable discussion about the potential for English teaching to be used as a vehicle for western capitalist hegemony. But in the English teaching profession there is also the awareness that students have ways of resisting this and, though the teaching of English can never be entirely neutral, its dominating tendencies do not have to be necessarily intentional

or mechanistic. What English teachers teach is processed by students and appropriated by them in ways that suit their needs.

Yet this fact does not diminish the concerns of French speakers in Quebec that the high priority placed on the maintenance of English and its related mental structures in society and culture puts them at a disadvantage. In this inferior position they consequently feel that they are no longer stakeholders in a global society where English dominates. Subsequently, it becomes even more important to promote the legitimacy of the French language and its own mental structures in order for Canada to achieve some kind of linguistic compromise.

7 Conclusion

The global spread of English is fundamentally an imperialistic process. Some emphasize the fact that English is not imposed by force as it was during early colonial times but its spread is determined by the demand for it. This is the basis upon which English is nowadays “traded” to the effect that it is a highly profitable “commodity” throughout the world. However, this has not lessened the effect it has had on marginalizing certain native languages and even eliminating others. Canada’s continuing experiment as a bi-lingual nation serves as an example of how equality and preservation of two languages is ultimately untenable under the country’s current political, economic and social circumstances. Even greater political will on the part of the government to empower Quebec and its French-speaking population is likely to have little effect on curbing the spread and influence of English. Paradoxically, however,

it is unrealistic to expect one language (in this case, English) to meet the social, political and economic needs of the entire country. The imposition of a language on other cultures under such conditions can only be considered imperialist and damaging to national and, ultimately, global linguistic diversity.

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