

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN THE WORLD  
AND IN JAPAN:

NEUTRAL, IMPERIALIST, OR  
DEMOCRATIC?

Paul Raine

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## Introduction

English is now a global language with over 1.5 billion users (Crystal 1997, p.6). The role English plays in the world is an issue of paramount importance. This paper aims to examine three suggested roles of English in an international context: neutral, imperialist and democratic. These roles will be examined not just in a global context but also in a local context: that of Japan. In doing so it will be seen how the global impact of English is experienced in one country, and whether the roles alleged of English in an international context hold true in the case of that specific country.

In the first part of this paper, I discuss and define, with reference to the literature, the meaning of 'English as an International Language' (EIL), a term which has become synonymous with the role of English in an international context. I explain how this term has been developed and informed by the various other concepts of English which have been propounded in the attempt to reclassify and redefine the language in light of its international significance.

In the second part, I present a literature review of the concepts of 'imperialist', 'neutral' and 'democratic' as they relate to the role played by the English language in an international context.

In the third and final part, I present my argument for the accuracy or erroneousness of each of the labels – 'imperialist', 'neutral' or 'democratic' – for the role played by English in the international context, particularly in respect of and relation to Japan.

## 1. English as an International Language

I would like to discuss and explain how the concept of 'English as an International Language' (EIL) has been developed and informed by the ideas of English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English as a Global Language (EGL), World Standard Spoken English (WSSE), and World English (WE). In *Table 1*, below, I define each of these concepts. Then, I explain how they, along with other ideas, have contributed to the development of the concept of EIL.

### 1.1 EIL: DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE CONCEPTS

The term EIL is used to describe both the status quo of current international phenomenon of English, and to prescribe an emerging or imagined future phenomenon. EIL is therefore both a descriptive and a prescriptive concept. It is an attempt to describe the multifarious ways English is currently used and regarded in an international context; and also an attempt to prescribe the ways in which it could or should be used and regarded.

**Table 1: Definitions of different kinds of English in an international context**

Term	Definition
English as a Second Language (ESL)	English as “an official or societally dominant language needed for education, employment, and other basic purposes” (Saville-Troike 2006)
English as a Foreign Language (EFL)	English “not widely used in the learners’ immediate social context [but] which might be used for future travel or other cross-cultural communication situations” (Saville-Troike 2006)
English as a Native Language (ENL)	English as it is spoken by native-speakers living in English language countries such as the US, or the UK. A wider definition has also been suggested, which includes those speakers of ESL who are “functionally native” (Yano 2001)
English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)	English used as “a contact language used only among non-mother tongue speakers” (Jenkins 2006). A wider definition, which includes speakers from the inner circle (Kachru 1985) participating in intercultural communication has also been suggested (Jenkins 2006)
English as a Global Language (EGL)	Crystal (1997) suggests that a “global language” is one which has “a special role that is recognized in every country”, either by being made the official language of a country, or by being prioritized in a country’s foreign language teaching curriculum.
World Standard Spoken English (WSSE)	Crystal’s (1997) envisagement of a future spoken language which he likens to an international dialect.
World English (WE)	English as “a language (for want of a better term, that is) spoken across the world... in the corridors and departure lounges of some of the world’s busiest airports...during multi-national business encounters... [at] international trade fairs, academic conferences, and so on” (Rajagopalan 2003) .

### 1.1.2 EIL: A DESCRIPTIVE CONCEPT

EIL in its descriptive guise is a hotchpotch of the varieties of English in *Table 1*: it is spoken across the world and has a special role in every country; it is used to communicate between native speakers and non-native speakers of English; it is needed for education and employment in countries where English is an official or national language; it is used for communication between native speakers of differing languages as a lingua franca; and some variety, ‘dialect’ (Crystal 1997), or ‘basilect’ (Yano 2001) of it is used to communicate between native speakers of English themselves.

The descriptive version of EIL is a heterogeneous mixture of all the ways English is used and regarded across the globe. There is no homogenous international variety of English yet. Crystal’s (1997) WSSE is one possible future manifestation of a variety of English understandable

and usable by everyone in the world. Quirk's (1985) insistence on a 'single monochrome standard' of English is prescriptive. It doesn't acknowledge the reality of the situation highlighted by Kachru (1985), whose own position both acknowledges current sociolinguistic realities in a descriptive sense, and also suggests ways in which English should be used and regarded internationally in a prescriptive sense.

### 1.1.3 EIL: A PRESCRIPTIVE CONCEPT

Rajagopalan (2003, above) acknowledges that using the term 'language' to describe WE is not entirely appropriate. Neither is this term entirely appropriate to describe the prescriptive version of EIL. The prescriptive version of EIL does not yet exist in a substantive sense. No feature of L2 English has yet passed into standard US or UK English (Crystal 1997, p.188). Those who propound the prescriptive version of EIL argue that it should contain lexis and grammatical forms from other varieties of English. They also suggest that lexical or grammatical 'deviations' from native varieties of English should not be regarded as 'errors'. On the contrary, such deviations, if systematized in an L2 variety of English, should be accepted and incorporated in the variety of English that is used internationally (Jenkins 2006). Some suggest, however, that native varieties of English – particularly US English – will remain the dominant influence in any future standard of English as an international language (Crystal 1997, p.188).

EIL is therefore a term at the center of the debate about the role English does and should play in an international context. Three significant characterizations of its role – 'imperialist', 'neutral' and 'democratic' – are discussed next.

## 2. Possible roles of English

### 2.1 THE 'IMPERIALIST' ROLE

The seminal work discussing the perceived imperialist role of the English language is Robert Phillipson's (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*. Phillipson (1992) himself bases his theory on the work of Johan Galtung (1980). He claims that linguistic imperialism is a sub-type of cultural imperialism, and argues that imperialism is driven by the exploitation exemplified by asymmetric interactions (e.g. trading relations) between Center and Periphery countries.

The Center-Periphery concept was developed by Galtung (1980) and is a model of the division of the world into a dominant center, i.e. developed Western countries, and dominated peripheries, i.e. underdeveloped countries. Both Center countries and Periphery countries have their respective centers and peripheries. The peripheries of both the Center and Periphery countries are exploited by their respective Centers; and the centers of the Center countries also influence and exploit, respectively, the centers and peripheries of Periphery countries.

Phillipson (1992) tracks the development of imperialism to neo-imperialism, then neo-neo-imperialism. In the first iteration of imperialism, Center elites were physically present in the Periphery as colonizers, exploiting the resources and workforce of the Periphery to the benefit of the Center. In the second iteration, after the colonies had supposedly gained independence, elites of the Peripheries' own centers continued the pattern of exploitation, aided and abetted

by international organizations and the elites of Center countries, interested in maintaining and prolonging the exploitative relationship established in the first iteration of imperialism.

In the third iteration, which Phillipson (1992) argues is now becoming a reality, such interactions between Center and Periphery countries will be increasingly characterized by international communications, utilized to control people's consciousnesses, and strengthen power over the means of production. He suggests that the method of control has moved from the 'sticks' (i.e. brute force) of imperialism, to the 'carrots' (i.e. asymmetrical bargaining) of neo-imperialism. In the next wave of imperialism, the method of control, he argues, will be 'ideas'.

As language is central to the communication of ideas, the success of this process, he claims, requires the Center's linguistic penetration of the Periphery. This is achieved firstly by means of the Center countries' relentless promotion of English (Phillipson 1992, p.136), and secondly by ELT professionals of those countries, in his terms 'interstate actors', propounding the following five tenets: that English is best taught monolingually; that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker; that the earlier English is taught, the better; that the more English is taught, the better; and that if other languages are used, standards of English will drop (Phillipson 1992, p.185).

Fundamentally, linguistic imperialism is, according to Phillipson (1992) a system whereby:

“the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (Phillipson 1992, p.47)

According to Phillipson (1992), the most profound effects of linguistic imperialism are:

1. the displacement of native languages;
2. the causation of a deficiency in pupils' command of their native languages;
3. exacerbation of social stratification, or a failure to deliver increased equality;
4. further empowerment of ruling elites;
5. an increase in dependence on Western aid; and
6. the violation of language rights.

## 2.2 THE 'NEUTRAL' ROLE

A key proponent of the claim that the role of English in an international context is neutral is Ronald Wardaugh (1987). He claims that the English language is independent of any particular cultural, social, political, economic or religious system and that “English belongs to everyone or to no one” (Wardaugh 1987, p.15).

Crystal (1997) adopts a similar view, stating that: “nobody owns [English]... or rather everyone who has learned it now owns it” (Crystal 1997, p.2). This “pluralistic view” (Matsuda 2003) is central to the idea of English in an international context being 'neutral'.

McKay (2003) citing Smith (1976) lists three essential characteristics of an international language:

- learners to not need to internalize cultural norms of native speakers of the language
- the ownership of an international language becomes denationalized
- the international role of learning the language is to enable learners to communicate their ideas and culture to others

English as a 'neutral' language in an international context, therefore, is a variety of English which is detached from cultural norms, owned by everyone who uses it, and whose purposes include "the proactive promotion of distinct cultural identities" (Sergeant 2009, p.78).

Also relevant to the issue of the neutrality of English is the principle of linguistic relativity, or 'Whorfianism' (Whorf and Carroll 1964), according to which an individual's world view is constructed and restricted by the lexico-grammatical structure of their native language. As Wardaugh (2010) explains, in Whorfianism:

"...language provides a screen or filter to reality... it defines your experience for you; you do not use it simply to report that experience. It is not neutral but acts as a filter". (Wardaugh 2010, p.233)

Whorfianism suggests that no language can be truly neutral, and all languages will inevitably influence the world-view of their users. The strong version of the hypothesis goes even further, and implies that the language one speaks not only influences one's world view but also limits it, i.e. "you only perceive what your language allows you, or predisposes you, to perceive" (Wardaugh 2010, p.232).

Whorfianism has been discredited by the likes of Pinker (1994), who claims that Whorf's (1964) ideas were based on anecdotal evidence and have never been proven. Whorfianism, however, still raises some interesting points relating to the discussion of whether any language, including English, can truly be neutral.

### 2.3 THE 'DEMOCRATIC' ROLE

The notion of English as a democratic language has been put forward by Crystal (1997) who suggests that:

"...the absence in English grammar of a system of coding social class differences... make the language appear more 'democratic' to those who speak a language... that does express an intricate system of class relationships" (Crystal 1997, p.9)

There are two distinct strands to the purported democratic role of English which must be delineated. The first, as Crystal (1997) observes, relates to the *structural aspect of the English language*, and suggests that the words and grammatical forms of English do not, in any significant way, contribute to the demarcation of boundaries between individuals of different social status or class. On the contrary, those who suggest that the structure of English is democratic believe that the language goes some way to alleviate distinctions of rank, status and social class by vir-

tue of the fact that – in a Whorfian sense – it lacks the appropriate grammatical forms and lexical items to make such distinctions.

The second strand relates to individuals' *actual or perceived competence in the English language*, and suggests that competence in English either increases the democratic character of the society of its users, or allows access for its users to democratic societies. Phillipson (1992) suggests that competence in English for some and not others compounds unfair class distinctions, while Wardaugh (1987) maintains that English is not tied to any particular social or economic system. The question of whether improved competence in English democratizes or divides is an important one, and is explored further, particularly in relation to the role of English in Japan, in Part 3.

### 3. What role does English play?

#### 3.1 IS THE ROLE OF ENGLISH 'IMPERIALIST'?

*Figure 1*, below, shows a Venn diagram of countries mentioned by Phillipson (1992) in relation to the purported effects of linguistic imperialism. The 'effects' referred to here are those listed in Part 2 (above), and have been marshaled by Phillipson (1992) as evidence of linguistic imperialism.

In examining the data in *Figure 1*, several conclusions can be drawn regarding Phillipson's (1992) model of Center-Periphery linguistic imperialism, and hence his argument about the role of English in the international context. These conclusions can be enumerated as follows:

1. The effects of linguistic imperialism are most strongly felt by: ex-colonial and ESL context countries;
2. Some Center countries have been able to lessen or negate the effects of linguistic imperialism, even where they are also ex-colonial countries;
3. Notwithstanding 2, above, some Center countries have not been able to lessen or negate the impact of linguistic imperialism, even where they have no colonial past.

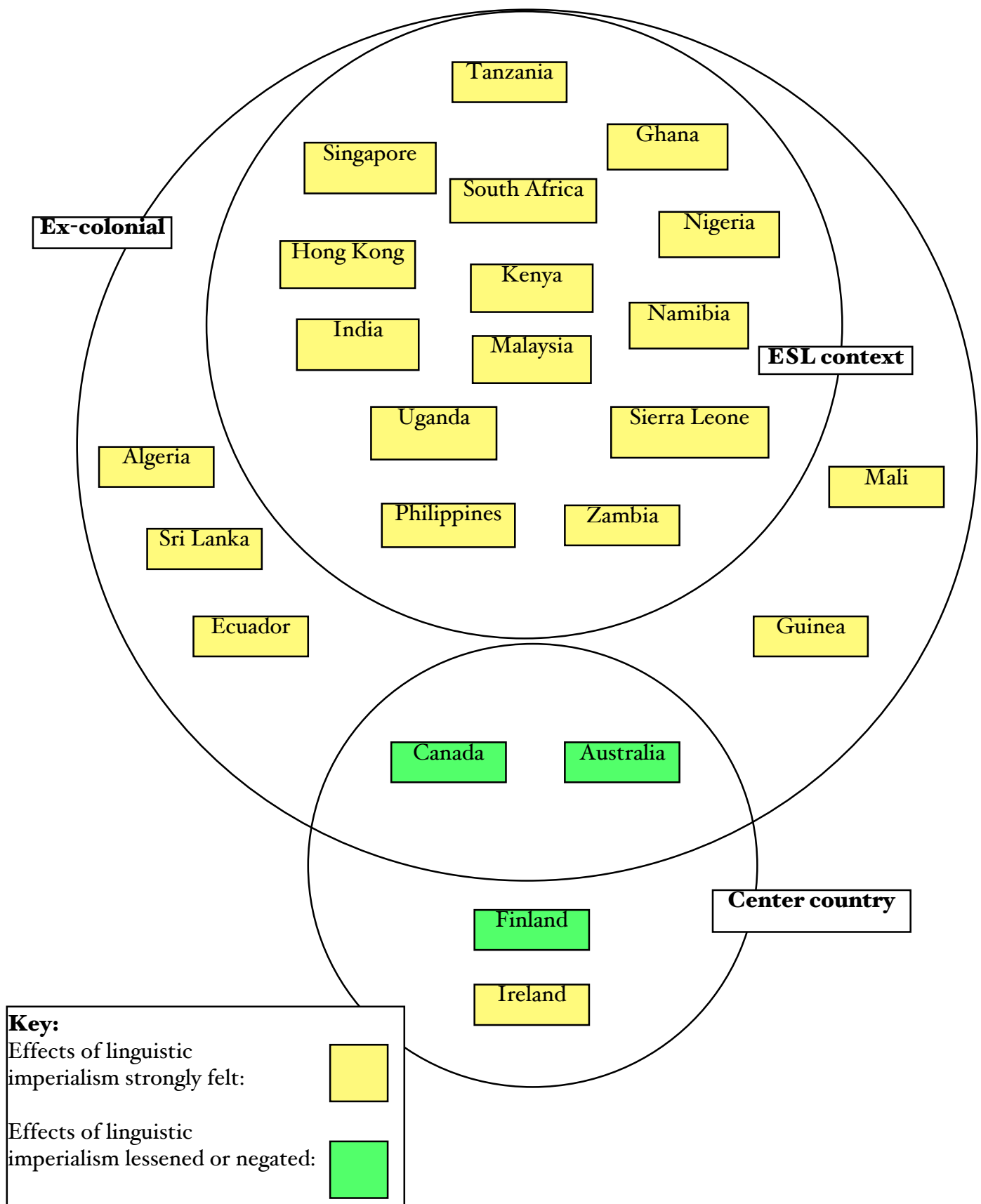
Phillipson (1992) notes that Japan is an EFL context, i.e. English is not an official or national language, although its study at school is compulsory (Phillipson 1992, p.24). He also mentions Japan's economic prowess, which suggests that Japan should be considered a Center country (Phillipson 1992, p.319). Finally, he goes almost so far as to put Japan and other EFL context countries outside the scope of linguistic imperialism as defined in his treatise, conceding that linguisticism may not be in operation in adult EFL contexts; that there is no risk of 'subtractive bilingualism' in such contexts; and that English study in such contexts may be of 'personal and professional benefit' (Phillipson 1992, p.303).

These three points suggest that the phenomenon of linguistic imperialism described by Phillipson (1992) has little or no effect in Japan. Furthermore, it seems that other non-ESL, Center



**Figure 1**

A Venn diagram to show the relationship between a country's ex-colonial status, English language learning context, Center/Periphery membership, and strength of impact of linguistic imperialism alleged by Phillipson (1992)



countries – with some possible exceptions, e.g. Ireland, where the effects of linguistic imperialism were ‘devastating’ (Phillipson 1992, p.18) – with or without a colonial past are immune to, or at least have some power to resist, the effects of linguistic imperialism.

Each of the purported effects of linguistic imperialism (Part 2, above) will now be examined in order to assess the extent to which they are experienced in Japan.

The first purported effect of linguistic imperialism is the displacement of native languages. The question to be addressed is whether English is displacing the Japanese language. It is estimated that up to ten percent of the daily vocabulary in Japanese is English-based (Stanlaw 2004). However, this statistic does not tell the whole story, as Stanlaw (2004) explains:

“...almost all of the high-frequency English words in everyday use in [Japan] are either ‘made-in-Japan’ or undergo such modifications that we may argue that they are *re-made* in Japan” (Stanlaw 2004, p.22)

If the suggestion that English ‘loan words’ in Japan are, or become, more Japanese than English is valid, then the claim that English is displacing the Japanese language can be rejected, notwithstanding the fact that such a claim has generated some anxiety among Japanese government ministries (Stanlaw 2004).

The second question is whether the spread of English has caused a deficiency in Japanese students’ command of Japanese. As Phillipson (1992) himself notes, subtractive bilingualism is not a documented problem in EFL contexts. There is no evidence to suggest that the study of English is eroding Japanese students’ competence in their first language.

The third question is whether the spread of English has contributed to social stratification in Japan, or empowered ruling elites. Japan is often thought of as a ‘nation of middle class people’, and the notions of ‘social stratification’ and ‘ruling elites’ seem to be the antithesis of this popular conception. However, such a notion may be outdated. It seems that there is a widening gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in Japan, with the top ten percent of Japanese male wage earners making over three times as much as the bottom ten percent (Wiseman and Nishiwaki 2006).

However, as the reasons suggested for this phenomenon – increased competition, restructuring of banks, cuts in public construction spending, aging population, use of immigrant workers (Wiseman and Nishiwaki 2006) – do not include the spread of English, the claim that linguistic imperialism is contributing to increased social inequality in Japan would seem baseless, and can therefore be dismissed.

The two remaining purported effects of linguistic imperialism can also be summarily dismissed in the case of Japan. Japan clearly does not depend on Western aid: in 2008 Japan was in the world’s top five *donors* of aid (OCDE 2009). Finally, with over ninety-eight percent of the population of Japan ethnic Japanese, and with over ninety-nine percent of the population literate in the Japanese language (CIA 2011), the violation of language rights by the spread of English does not appear to be applicable. On the contrary, the ubiquity of the Japanese language in Japan may itself be responsible for violating the language rights of some minority groups, e.g. the Ryukyuan people of Okinawa (Heinrich 2004).

### 3.2 IS THE ROLE OF ENGLISH ‘NEUTRAL’?

That the role of English in the international community is ‘neutral’ is an idea which has rapidly been gaining ground among EFL scholars and researchers. However, it is another issue entirely as to whether non-native speakers of English have adopted and embraced the ideals which embody a neutral conception of English in an international context.

In Matsuda’s (2003) study, although Japanese high school students acknowledged the international role of English, they did not see that they had any influence over, or ownership of it. Furthermore, speaking English with a Japanese accent was considered to be undesirable; and Japanese English was not perceived to be ‘real’ English, which was a label reserved for American and British varieties, with true ‘English speakers’ being speakers of those varieties.

In his discussion of the ‘McPal’ English teaching venture in Japan, where English lessons were incorporated into a having a meal at a McDonald’s restaurant, Sargeant (2009) argues that English in Japan cannot be neutral:

“The English language in this context cannot be seen as a neutral communicative system... if that were the case the flawed pedagogical nature of such a venture would render the enterprise absurd. Instead, the language has to be viewed as having a particular sociocultural meaning.” (Sargeant 2009, p.20)

In this case, socio-cultural values were not divorced from the English language, as a neutral conception of English suggests, but firmly annexed to it, packaged, and sold as part of an American fast food dining experience.

Phillipson (1992) argues that the concept of English as a ‘neutral’ language “obscure[s] the processes by which the global linguistic hegemony of English is created and maintained, and how English serves social stratificational purposes internationally” (Phillipson 1992, p.244). He rejects the claim that English is neutral, and suggests the label of “English as a language of wider colonization” (Phillipson 1992, p.244) in order to reveal what he considers to be the true character of English in an international context.

He insists that any argument promoting the neutrality of English “disconnects the means from ends or purposes, from what English is being used for” (Phillipson 1992, p.287). But while Phillipson (1992) maintains that the sociocultural values English is inseparably annexed to are those which sustain Western hegemony, Sargeant (2009), in his more nuanced view, suggests that “different cultures construct their own profiles and purposes for the English language” (Sargeant 2009, p.89)

In Japan, English does not necessarily act as a vehicle for the promotion of Western ideals – although as the ‘McPal’ case shows (above), it can do. In Japanese society, English has several other functions too. One such function is ornamentalism (Sargeant 2009), where English words and phrases emblazoned on T-shirts, and pasted across billboards, are virtually divorced from meaning, and exist only to convey an image of ‘chic’ or sophistication. Another is the promulgation function, mentioned previously (Part 2), whereby

“the native community adopt English language practices for their own specific cultural purposes, and in the process adapt them to their own needs, thereby ‘owning’ the language” (Sergeant 2009, p.79)

In the case of Japan, such a function is embraced by government ministries and individuals alike, either as a way of ensuring Japan’s economic prosperity while maintaining its own identity, or as a means to educate the rest of the world about Japanese cultural practices (Sergeant 2009).

Another function entails ‘artistic reconfigurations’ of the English language, for example by putting it to use in rap songs after it has been phonetically nativized, or incorporating it into sculptures which spell out words and phrases (Sergeant 2009).

As we can see, English in Japan does not primarily act as a vehicle for the promotion of Western ideals. However, it is not ‘neutral’ either. This lack of neutrality can be perceived both positively and negatively. Advocates of international ownership of English will be dismayed by findings which suggest that the younger generation in Japan do not recognize the right to assert any ownership over the language (Matsuda 2003). Conversely, evidence to suggest that ownership is asserted through artistic and promulgation functions (Sergeant 2009) will be of some consolation.

### 3.3 IS THE ROLE OF ENGLISH ‘DEMOCRATIC’?

Crystal (1997) cites Javanese as an example of a language which is characterized by a structural – i.e. lexical and grammatical – dependence on class or status. The same can be said to be true of Japanese, which has three levels of politeness (*teineigo*, *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo*) as well and many gender differences in language usage.

In comparison with Japanese, then, English would certainly appear more linguistically democratic, as it ostensibly lacks the status-dependent forms and styles of the former. However, it may just be that Japanese learners of English lack the ability to adequately express such deference in English (Sergeant 2009).

There is some suggestion that Japanese women in particular consider English to be a more democratic language than Japanese. One such Japanese woman in Sergeant’s (2009) study explains how:

“...women in Japan are still oppressed by men... if women speak English they might feel more open and express their true feeling” (Sergeant 2009, p.129)

Although some have disputed the relevance of gender to the use of polite Japanese (Hori 1986), there is undoubtedly more deference to status in the structural organization of Japanese than in English.

As discussed above, there are two strands to the alleged ‘democratic nature’ of English: that which is embedded in the structure of the language, and that which arises from having (or lacking) competence in the language. English also appears to be viewed as ‘democratic’ in this latter sense in Japan.

This point is highlighted by Seargeant (2009) who notes how Japanese women perceive the American education system:

“a democratic approach to opportunity centered on the potential of the individual”  
(Seargeant 2009, p.119)

as opposed to the Japanese system:

“the hierarchy of prestige that ranks Japanese universities means that it is very difficult to transcend the expected career path that comes with the institution one attends”  
Seargeant (2009, p.118) citing Nakane (1998)

Acquiring competence in English, therefore, ostensibly grants Japanese women (and men) access to a more democratic form of social mobility. However, while competence in English may allow access to more democratic societies, it does not seem to have the effect of democratizing Japanese society, as Seargeant (2009) notes:

“Japanese society is currently organized in such a way that the social capital gained from English language skills is often more meretricious than material” Seargeant (2009, p.121) citing Kobayashi (2007)

In fact, gender, age and alma mater seem to be far more significant in determining one's socio-economic position in Japan than competence in English (Seargeant 2009).

There is some evidence to suggest that English is perceived to be structurally democratic in Japan, and may be adopted for such reasons. Stanlaw (2004) notes how the Japanese National Debating Team conducts all of their contests in English as a means of “circumventing [Japanese] linguistic and cultural constraints” (Stanlaw 2004, p.18), which prevent women from expressing themselves on an equal footing with men.

There is also evidence to suggest that while competence in English may be perceived and adopted as a way to access to more democratic societies, it does not have the effect of democratizing Japanese society itself (Seargeant 2009).

## Conclusion

I set out in this paper to assess the role of English in an international context, particularly with regard to and in respect of Japan.

I have argued that the role of English in Japan is not imperialist. This is not to say that English plays no imperialist role in the world, or that linguistic imperialism is an overblown conspiracy theory, as some have suggested (Rajagopalan 1999). The effects of linguistic imperialism are not felt in Japan either because it is an EFL context, or because it is a Center country (in economic terms). I believe that the effects of linguistic imperialism are real, and felt strongly in some countries. The extent to which they are felt is a question which must be answered on a country-by-country basis.

I have also suggested that the role of English in Japan is not entirely neutral. Ownership over English is asserted only indirectly. Japanese learners of English do not need to internalize the

cultural norms of native speakers of the language, but such norms are strongly associated with the language. The English language is also seized upon as a means to promulgate Japanese cultural norms and values. None of the foregoing necessarily means that English does not or can not play a more fully realized 'neutral' role in other countries. Indeed, such cases have already been documented (McKay 2003).

Finally, I have suggested that the role of English in Japan is not entirely democratic. Some individuals and organizations perceive the English language as being structurally democratic, and adopt it as such. However, competence in English for the majority has had little effect in promoting equality in a society which has become increasingly divided. This finding may not apply in other countries, which would have to be examined individually for a fuller understanding of the role of English in an international context.

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