The role of international English: neutral, imperialist, or democratic?

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The following quotations may be seen as representing a range of opinion in a debate about the role of English as an international language:

i) 'English is neutral'

...since no cultural requirements are tied to the learning of English, you can learn it and use it without having to subscribe to another set of values […] English is the least localized of all the languages in the world today. Spoken almost everywhere in the world to some degree, and tied to no particular social, political, economic or religious system, or to a specific racial or cultural group, English belongs to everyone or to no one, or it at least is quite often regarded as having this property.

Ronald Wardhaugh (1987)

Languages in Competition: Dominance, diversity and decline. Blackwell

ii) 'English is imperialist'

What is at stake when English spreads is not merely the substitution or displacement of one language by another but the imposition of new 'mental structures' through English. This is in fact an intrinsic part of 'modernization' and 'nation-building', a logical consequence of ELT. Yet the implications of this have scarcely penetrated into ELT research or teaching methodology. Cross-cultural studies have never formed part of the core of ELT as an academic discipline, nor even any principled consideration of what educational implications might follow from an awareness of this aspect of English linguistic imperialism.

Robert Phillipson (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*. OUP

iii) 'English is democratic'

there have been comments made about other structural aspects, too, such as the absence in English grammar of a system of coding social class differences, which make the language appear more 'democratic' to those who speak a language (e.g. Javanese) that does express an intricate system of class relationships.

David Crystal (1997) *English as a Global Language*. CUP

What is your opinion? Discuss, with reference to the roles played by language in the development and maintenance of 'society' and of 'culture'. You may refer to any non-English speaking society with which you are familiar, in order to exemplify your points.

Contents

1. Introduction

*"And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language;
and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they
have imagined to do."*

Genesis 11: 6

English is the native language of 378 million people (Statista 2018), slightly over 5%
of a world population of roughly 7 billion. This figure, however, belies a dominant
influence internationally in realms including science, media, and business. For instance,
it is not uncommon for Members of the European Parliament to converse in English
though for none it may be a mother tongue (Klimczak-Pawlak 2014: 16). English is
taught as a second or foreign language from Andorra to Zimbabwe, and is an official
language in over 50 nations, though in some such as Namibia and South Sudan only a
tiny minority of the population actually speak it as a first language.

This paper addresses an influence that extends far beyond the borders of the supposedly
"core" English-speaking nations (Kachru 1985), and adds to sharp debate within and
without sociolinguistics on the role of English as an international language and its
influence on society and culture. I begin with an analysis of three quotes by Wardhaugh
(1987), Phillipson (1992), and Crystal (1997) seeking to define the role of English as an
international language, and demonstrate how these interpretations are dependent upon
the aspect of English being discussed, and what weight is given to each aspect. I then
discuss other possible interpretations, showing that any and all of these interpretations
are valid and reconcilable with each other.

2. English as an international language

*"Our language is the most important language in the world. I say that unashamedly and
with no feeling of linguistic chauvinism, for I believe that at the end of the second
millennium it is a fact."*

Wardhaugh (1999: ix)

English is used worldwide as both 'mother-tongue' and as *lingua franca* - a language
"used as a medium of communication by people who do not speak the same first
language" (Kirkpatrick 2013: 155). It is truly an international language, and two models
will be used to frame our discussion.

2.1 Kachru's three circles of English

Braj Kachru developed probably the most commonly cited sociolinguistic model of international English with his three circles; the **inner circle** comprising the UK, USA, and other 'traditional cultural and linguistic bases of English' (Kachru 1985: 366); the **outer circle** comprising countries such as Nigeria or India where English is of 'institutionalised non-native varieties' (ibid.); and the **expanding circle** of nations developing English skills for reasons of international trade and communication.

This model has notable limitations, including the question of what delineates an inner circle nation from an outer circle one when people in the latter may have been speaking the language, with their own codifications, literature, and linguistic characteristics, for multiple generations. Therefore, we should consider a further model in our discussions.

2.2 World languages as constellations

The Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan describes a 'global language system' that is one dimension of the international system; a "multitude of languages…connected by a lattice of multilingual speakers" that constitute a "coherent language constellation" (De Swaan 2001: 3). There are four categories within this constellation:

Peripheral languages	Languages of ***conversation*** and ***memory***, not written or read
Central languages	Used in ***elementary and secondary education***, used for communication between speakers of peripheral languages
Supercentral languages	Used for ***long-distance*** and ***international communication*** – include Arabic, Chinese, French, Spanish…
Hypercentral languages	The language of ***global communication*** - English

De Swaan's 'galaxy of languages' (2001: 5-7)

This 'constellation' is a web of languages connected by multilingual speakers. Languages may rise and fall through levels – De Abraams gives the examples of the

now "barely supercentral" German, Russian, and Japanese (De Abraams 2001: 11) - but English is the only "hypercentral" language, holding the entire system together (Morris 2004: 620).

De Abraam's argument includes the key formula of a "Q-value," the potential communicative value of a language determined by prevalence and centrality, but this paper will not describe this in depth as our focus is on English *within* the web of languages, not on the formula behind this web. We will, however, use De Abraam's description of a languages as constellation as a counterpoint to Kachru's English circles operating as if in isolation from other languages.

3.0 The role of English as an international language

3.1.1 English is neutral

The first quote addressed by this paper, professing the neutrality of English, was written by Ronald Wardhaugh[1] in 1987, and quoted by Robert Phillipson in *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992: 275), the source of the second quote in question. However, the choice of this quote may demonstrate some cherry-picking, as it is apparent from Wardhaugh's own writings that he does not consider *any* language to be truly neutral, accepting at least the weak Whorfian view that language has some influence on the perception and representation of reality (Holmes 2013: 342). In 1999 Wardhaugh denied that language can be neutral when he asked the rhetorical question "can any language, except that of pure mathematics, be thoroughly neutral?" (Wardhaugh 1999: 9). Similarly, Kachru (1994: 141) talks of the *perceived* neutrality of English; a perception, not a reality.

Yet even though the author of this statement may not entirely agree with it, we should look at how English can be considered neutral.

3.1.2 In what ways is English 'neutral'?

Wardhaugh's description of English as a 'neutral' language is not speaking linguistically, but rather socially. Indeed, the idea of a linguistically neutral language is

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[1] The original Birmingham University question misspells Wardhaugh's name as 'Wardaugh.' This has been corrected for this paper.

a fiction in our present day: languages are socially constructed and socially constructive. The very language used in this paper is an example of how language cannot be neutral – its style is *academic*, implying the "Western" academic style. Examples of bias within English abound, from the 'maleness' of the language and the sexualisation of words referring to women (e.g. Spender 1985) to lexical units such as 'score an own goal' or 'throw in the towel' assuming understanding of a specific cultural domain; in this case, specific sports. There is no 'neutral' society and so there is no 'neutral' language, as language reflects the society it is embedded in.

English can, however, be neutral *in relation to other languages within a certain geographical region.* Crystal gives examples including Ghana and Nigeria, where English was chosen for "political expediency" (2003:85) due to a colonial history of English-language use, and there is the further example of Namibia, a nation formed in 1990 that had little history of English use in public or private circles yet chose English as the national language due to the extreme difficulty of selecting any of the multiple local languages, or the previously dominant Afrikaans. English was seen as neutral in these nations because of what it was *not* – it was not the language of a minority who might unfairly benefit from the adoption of their language, nor the language of historical oppressors (Tötemeyer 2010: 10) – rather than because of any inherent quality of the language. This is how Wardhaugh can state English is "tied to no particular social, political, economic or religious system." In some regions of the world, English may be an alternative to far more culturally-loaded options.

3.2.1 English is imperialist

"Take up the White Man's burden,
And teach the Philippines,
What interest and taxes are,
And what a mortgage means."

Ernest Crosby (1902) *The Real 'White Man's Burden'*

At the start of this section it is important to emphasise that, just as Wardhaugh focused on a social aspect of English, Phillipson's argument and evidence derives not from the English language but rather English Language Teaching (ELT) and the *spread* of the language. When he states the spread of English imposes "new 'mental structures' through English," he is not stating a strong Whorfian proposition that language itself reshapes the mental processes of those learning it, but that ELT inculcates certain ways of thinking and dismisses others *through English promotion.* A student may technically be in a 'discussion' class, yet that class may be based upon neoliberalist assumptions. An activity may be 'grammar-based', yet represent gender in a certain way (a way that may not be the social-norm in the region in which it is taught). Additionally, an educational institute may only receive educational materials upon implementing a specific methodology or approach.

Phillipson (1992: 62) is concerned that Periphery nations are trapped in a dependence upon the Centre, forced to replicate the methods and institutions of said Centre. His use of the terms "Periphery" and "Centre" correlate well with both models described in **section 2**, and he sees this relationship as "asymmetrical and the resources available to each party unequal" (1992: 64). To Phillipson, English dominance causes 'linguicide' that would be, in De Swaan's model, the destruction of the periphery by the super/hypercentral. We will now discuss what evidence to support this claim can be found.

3.2.2 In what ways is English 'imperialist'?

The term 'imperialism' has different meanings across different disciplines, but in essence is one state's dominance over another state or territory: dominance that may be

asserted militarily, economically, politically, or otherwise. Modern imperialism is not the empire-building of the 18ᵗʰ and 19ᵗʰ centuries, though the Collins COBUILD dictionary online shows the term stems from this era, and as we are discussing Phillipson's work we shall use his own working definition of *linguistic* imperialism: that "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: 47). Phillipson makes his point succinctly (and sardonically) when he speaks of the "educated native-speaker's burden" (ibid: 274), directly comparing modern ELT rhetoric with the 'white-man's burden' propagated at least to some extent by imperial, and racist, European powers during the aforementioned age of empire-building.

Phillipson makes a powerful and cogent argument in his book, and subsequent writings, showing that the structural realities underlying international ELT are in many ways similar to the structural realities underlying the modern global economy. For example, he shows how 'aid' sent by English-language institutions may be likened to the transfer of technology (Phillipson 1992: 64), imposing a specific organisational structure on educational systems in the same way exports may be permitted by dominant international actors only after specific political/social concessions are made. He is empirically correct when he states that, in ELT, the relationship between participants is asymmetrical: there is nothing comparable in size to the ELT industry promoting non-English languages in inner-circle/English L1 nations, and asymmetrical relationships are critical in maintaining a dominant position in the international system – an imperialist position.

Phillipson provides substantial evidence for this, including the British promotion of ELT to increase foreign trade (Phillipson 1992: 146-7) and of ELT as a US foreign policy instrument through the Project for a New American Century (Phillipson 2008: 6), and it is not only in Phillipson's writings that such evidence can be found. Even within the borders of the UK modern accounts can be found of Scots speakers who found their language suppressed, even ridiculed, by the education system of their own government (Zaltzman 2018).

Phillipson states correctly that the promotion of English is intertwined with economic and political forces. However, he further states that it is elites that dictate national language issues, and "in present-day neo-colonialism, the elites are to a large extent indigenous" (Phillipson 1992: 52). He speaks of the "'self-colonisation' of elites who are enamoured with English," (Phillipson 2009a: 94) and these statements are revealing. Phillipson sees the modern world in terms of a neo-colonialist system that is inherently dangerous and of which ELT is a tool. Though especially in later writings (e.g. Phillipson 2009b) he avers the existence of a direct UK-US coalition to ensure English hegemony worldwide, he claims not conspiracy, but rather the structural inevitability of English dominance through the capitalist, free-market system promoted by Western governments: a system furthered by local elites through either infatuation with Western society or a desire to dominate their own people.

3.2.3 Issues with Phillipson's English imperialism

Phillipson's assertion that the spread of international English furthers imperialist processes has elicited both praise and criticism. Such criticism includes criticism of his conclusions, and criticism of his academic approach.

Those who argue that Phillipson's conclusions are flawed generally counter that no language can be by itself hegemonic (e.g. Widdowson 1998), or that Phillipson is propagating an unproven 'conspiracy' (Spolsky 2004). The first two of these criticisms have been addressed by Phillipson himself, and deliberately ignore key points of his argument. As stated above, Phillipson takes care to state that it is not language, nor conspiracy, but structural realities that create an imperialist environment, and the evidence already discussed above can indeed be seen as evidence of an imperial world order. However, the extent of this order and how large a role English language promotion plays in maintaining such an order is essentially unfalsifiable and highly debatable.

If we accept Phillipson's perception of a world order based upon the dominance of certain nations, in this case specifically the USA and English-speaking allies, where the propagation of the English language is a Machiavellian tool used to reinforce this

dominance, then his evidence supports this. We can also, however, find contrary evidence in nations as far apart as Namibia and Japan, where the language has been chosen (in one as an official language, in one as a foreign language) by domestic authorities, with little or no obvious pressure from some inner-circle cabal. Kubota (2002) has even shown how, in Japan, English language learning has been turned to nationalist ends, used to promote an 'essential' Japanese culture excluding ethnic diversity within the nation. I have personally noted this in my time in Japan - and Saudi Arabia - often encountering controlled activities in texts that force students to represent themselves in specific ways. There is no reason to believe this does not, or could not, occur elsewhere.

Additionally Joseph Bisong (1995) has responded that, were English spread malevolent, Nigerian teachers of English would not be dismayed by their student's lack of progress, and that local languages were not at threat. However, a 1999 study did indeed show that English was coming to replace at least the Emai language in southern Nigeria (Schaeffer and Egbokhare 1999).

Phillipson's statement is essentially a sociopolitical one, not a sociolinguistic one[2]. Criticism of his use of *ad hominem* attacks on scholars such as David Crystal (e.g. Waters 2013) are valid in both fields, but debating the assertion "English is imperialist" requires comparison with social models such as De Swaan's constellations, introduced for this very reason in section **2.2.** These two models both describe an international system of languages and English's place within, but give weight to extremely different factors and create contrasting pictures of how languages dominate or are dominated. In my own opinion, Phillipson's argument is an extremely convincing one, and extremely important to consider when working within ELT, but it is not the *only* one. It is one of multiple motivations behind, and a ramification of, English-language spread.

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[2] Though some strands of thought, including certain strands of Marxism, see the distinction between political and linguistic theory as a false one (e.g. Holborow 1999)

3.3.1 English is democratic

Of the three quotes in question, this is by far the least convincing. Indeed, David Crystal does not claim this as his own view but attributes it to unspecified – and unreferenced - others, and he states only that English may "appear" more democratic, not actually *be* more democratic. The statement is immediately followed by a dismissal of such a claim as "incidental" to his argument (Crystal 2003: 8), and later in the same book he only states that "language is an immensely democratising institution" (Crystal 2003: 172), without any specific reference to English.

3.3.2 In what ways is English 'democratic'?

Crystal's comment contrasts English with Javanese, and notes the lack of coding for social class in the former may be seen as a democratic feature. Japanese (among other languages) also codes for social status, and I regularly use honorifics or 'humble' forms of address in this language. I therefore have a personal understanding of this view: it takes some time to acclimatise to using different forms depending on whom you are addressing. However, this does not mean a language is 'undemocratic' (see section **3.3.3**).

As with Phillipson's quote regarding imperialism, there is a sociopolitical argument to be made for English's 'democraticising' influence. English *could* be seen as a language of liberation: during the social unrest across the Middle East known as the Arab Spring, demonstrators from Egypt to Tunisia held placards written in English as well as Arabic, French, or other official languages, and English is used as a language of resistance against indigenous regimes worldwide (Kirkpatrick 2013: 180). In Japan English learning is not important only so that Japan may understand the world, but so that the world may understand Japan. To learn a language is to express your own culture and experiences, not merely to listen and experience. English (and any other language) may be a tool to dominate, but also a tool to end domination.

Finally, English may be democratic as it is pluricentric: that is, the norms of the language are derived from various locations and various peoples. With the recognition of 'World Englishes' (e.g. Kirkpatrick 2013), we can identify a variety of Englishes

emanating from different centres of power, from the Indian subcontinent to African-American Vernacular English to the traditional 'inner-circle' nations, each with its own rules and characteristics. This discussion continues in section **4.3.**

3.3.3 Issues with English as 'democratic'.

"From lab to classroom, democracy to autocracy, researchers can and do communicate well in a language accepted as a kind of universal currency."

Montgomery (2013: 7)

The major issue with the statement "English is democratic" is the implied linguistic discrimination, even racism, in claiming English is more democratic than other languages due to certain syntactic structures. To take Crystal's example of Javanese, to believe English is more democratic is to ascribe an autocratic character to Javanese: yet as early as 1968 it was predicted that the switch from an agrarian, feudalistic society to a democratic one would change the language, not be resisted by it (Poedjosoedarmo 1968), and Javanese continues to be a major language in many areas of the now-democratic Indonesia, despite 5 decades of major societal change. By the same token, Japanese could be labelled as less 'democratic,' with its emphasis (in comparison to English) on social position and hierarchy, yet the late 19th/early 20th centuries saw Japan swing from feudalism to democracy to totalitarianism and back to stable democracy (Kennon 2012), all whilst maintaining the same national language - and similarly powerful societal changes occurred across German-speaking Germany during this period. Conversely, Fiji, where English is both an official language and one important for interethnic communication and government (Siegel 1989) has been in and out of military dictatorships since 2006. I use these examples to demonstrate the weakness of the claim that any language is 'democratic' due to syntactic features. If different languages were somehow truly democratic/feudalistic/autocratic, these features would be reflected in their societies, and I can identify no society that has maintained a generally static culture for as long as they spoke a specific language. Language is immensely flexible, and can evolve to reflect different ideologies and societies at an astonishing rate: the way scientific discoveries altered our daily language is proof of this, my use of 'evolve' in the previous sentence now an unremarkable term

of clear meaning yet a marker of a major shift in beliefs and worldview less than two centuries ago.

4.0 Other interpretations of English

This paper has looked so far at three interpretations of English, and shown arguments both for and against each one. I shall now note some alternate interpretations, to demonstrate that there is no single "correct" answer, and no need for one.

4.1 English is capitalist/neoliberalist

This argument follows the same lines of reasoning as "English is imperialist." We saw in section **3.3.2** that the British Council justified English-language promotion for reasons of trade, and it is notable that the most powerful of Phillipson's 'imperialist' powers, the USA, is also a society that promotes free-trade and private ownership worldwide. Capitalist terms can be found embedded in the language: we are 'consumers' of products, not users, and studies have shown a large shift in English literature towards "individualistic" terms (e.g. Greenfield 2013) in recent centuries. However, such shifts can also be seen as evidence of society influencing language, not vice versa, and the same criticism used against imperialist arguments can be made: capitalist structures may not have been imposed but adopted, exist outside the English-speaking world, and the role of English in supporting them is difficult to quantify.

4.2 English is the language of science

Anywhere from 70% to 90% of international scientific publications are today written in English (Montgomery 2013: 90). National symposiums from Asia to Latin America may be held in a regional language, but it is in English that research findings are primarily published. Phillipson argues that English promotion is linguicism, but it is necessary in the scientific age that findings be broadcast as widely as possible, for understanding, experimentation, and refutation. This is not the globalization of English for nefarious ends, but for vitally important ones. Montgomery, in his discussion on scientific English, forcefully argues that English should not be seen as a language-killing monolith (ibid: 171), and his point has merit. There have been numerous holders

of the title "language of science," such as Arabic and French, all used to transmit the 'mental structure' of scientific thought, and English is a further step in this path.

4.3 English is international

In the 1990s Kachru distinguished inner circle English from outer, but it is now better to talk of 'emerging Englishes,' as Kirkpatrick (2013) does. Varieties from "Singlish" in Singapore to Jamaican patois are all established forms used by entire populations, as well as Indian, African, and other forms. These is clear evidence of English being adopted and transformed for local contexts, a statement true of many pluricentric languages such as French and Arabic, but it is the seeds of English that have sprouted most around the world. Whether these become a flower or competition-killing weeds is concerning, but I would contend that many of these varieties are no longer 'emerging,' but emerged. In the same way that American English became the dominant form of English due to economic and geopolitical factors, other forms could in time become regional *lingua francas*, or even dominant in their own right. Furthermore, EFL nations like Japan cannot be prevented from adopting any specific form they choose, should the incentive, political/economic or otherwise, exist.

5.0 Conclusion

"What if, in our own time, a worthy alternative to Babel has emerged, lacking in arrogance, extending not merely to the empyreal realm but deep into the atom and as far as the distant galaxies?"

(Montgomery 2013: 3)

The premise of this essay was to offer an opinion on whether the role of English as an international language was neutral, democratic, or imperialist. However, as we have seen, international English is all these things, and more. Phillipson himself identified other interpretations of international English, from *lingua academica* to *lingua bellica* (Skutnabb-Kangas et al 2009: 92). English does not have any single role, but is rather an important component of numerous contrasting processes within the international system. The spread of the language both represents a threat to other languages and

cultures through the imposition of societal change, and a way to further intercultural understanding. It may be used for democratic ends, or to justify tyranny. In certain regional contexts English may be the neutral choice, yet it may also be the language of dominance and elitism elsewhere. It can both strengthen and weaken cultures, and such effects will always be debatable and difficult to attribute. English's spread has the potential to damage as well as aid, and this danger must be understood and taken into account by educators and organisations involved in the export, and import, of English.

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