Global English: an Imperialist Agenda?

Walter Carpenter, Asia University

Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and English as a Global Language (Crystal, 1997) examine the same social reality: the phenomenal, world-wide growth of the English language.

This paper considers these two books in the context of the differing worldviews expressed by the authors. It is intended, in part, to serve as an introduction to some of the political and ideological points that have been put forth in opposition to the position of English as a global language.

Crystal and Phillipson discuss the subject of World English in quite different ways. When first considering the books it seems as if the primary topic is the same. However after reading the books, one could fairly judge that both their approach and their analysis are radically dissimilar. Indeed, the authors differ so markedly in their overall treatment of the same topic, it seems the one issue both books agree upon is that—indeed—English has become the world’s dominant language:

David Crystal (1997, 1): It has all happened so quickly. In 1950, any notion of English as a true world language was but a dim, shadowy, theoretical possibility…. Fifty years on, and World English exists as a political and cultural reality. How could such a dramatic linguistic shift have taken place, in less than a lifetime? And why has English, and not some other language, achieved such a status? These are the questions which this book seeks to answer.

Robert Phillipson (1992, 1): This book explores the contemporary phenomenon of English as a world language and sets out to analyze how the language became so dominant and why . . . whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British Empire has given way to the empire of English. This book attempts to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which English rules, who makes the rules, and what role the English teaching profession plays in promoting the ‘rules’ of English and the rule of English.

Together with their agreement that English is currently the predominant language on a global scale, it is interesting to note how often Crystal and Phillipson refer to the notion of power. However, the manner in which the books discuss and analyze power—and the various manifestations of power—is strikingly different.

Crystal states that various types of influences, or power—political, military, economic, cultural, among others—best explain why English has become dominant throughout the world.

Phillipson, on the other hand, locates power within a larger more expansive concept, that of imperialism. Power—says Phillipson—the power which is expressed in the English language
and is then reinforced by English language teaching professionals around the world, can be more exactly and scientifically identified as **linguistic imperialism**.

Crystal’s explanation of why English has become a global language is fairly simple, and straightforward. The dominance of English is due to power (of various types) and to perceived success. He looks to history, to the Latin and the Roman Empires, to help explain the present (1997, 5):

> Latin became an international language throughout the Roman Empire …not because the Romans were more numerous than the peoples they subjugated. They were simply more powerful. …when Roman military power declined, Latin remained for a millennium as the international language of education, thanks to a different sort of power—the ecclesiastical power of Roman Catholicism. There is the closest of links between language dominance and cultural power…. Without a strong power-base, whether political, military or economic, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication. Language has no independent existence, living in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it. Language only exists in the brains and mouths, and ears and hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails.

Thus, the key to the popularity and the success of a language is simple, as Crystal (1997, 7-8) mentions:

> The history of a global language can be traced through the successful expeditions of its soldier/sailor speakers. And English…has been no exception. But international language dominance is not solely the result of military might. It may take a militarily powerful nation to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it.

These quotes from Crystal present a summary of his entire book. The book is replete with various statistics and citations as well as numerous examples from history, all intended to provide evidence to support the basic ideas and concepts expressed in these quotes.

Phillipson’s basic thesis is, likewise, fairly easily summarized: Imperialism, more exactly, linguistic imperialism, best accounts for why English is so dominant in the modern world.

However, beware. Though it is not difficult to easily summarize the basic thrust of *Linguistic Imperialism*, it is another matter entirely to grasp and easily follow Phillipson’s reasoning offered in support of his assertions. The reasoning and the theoretical framework he advances in support of his statements are not easily summarized. States Phillipson (1992, 65):

> …imperialism theory provides a conceptual framework within which English linguistic imperialism, the dominance of English worldwide, and efforts to promote the language can be understood. Scientific imperialism, media imperialism, and educational imperialism are all sub-types of cultural imperialism. So is linguistic imperialism. Linguistic imperialism also permeates all the other types of imperialism, since language is the means used to mediate and express them. Each is a theoretical construct forming part of
imperialism as a global theory which is concerned with the structural relations between rich and poor countries and the mechanisms by which the inequality between them is maintained. Each type overlaps and interweaves with the others and must be seen as aspect of imperialism as an over-arching world structure.

Therefore, argues Phillipson:

- Global English usage is “evidence of linguistic imperialism and dominance….” (p. 35)
- In order to understand linguistic imperialism, one must understand cultural imperialism which is one of “six mutually interlocking types of imperialism: economic, political, military, communicative…cultural, and social….” (p.52).
- Linguistic imperialism is a sub-type of cultural imperialism. (p.65)
- English linguistic imperialism is similar to--yet different from--other types of imperialism.
- Accordingly, “for our purposes it is necessary to establish linguistic imperialism as a distinct type of imperialism, in order to assess its role within an imperialist structure as a whole.” (p.53)

To explain the current dominance of English in the world Phillipson utilizes ideas, concepts, numbers and theories from a wide range of topics and subjects (including but not limited to) professional conduct, ethics, matters of race, philosophy and science, political, economic, linguistic, social and cultural theories, history, educational policy, pedagogy, psychology, international relations, and technology. All of which, he argues, are closely related to—and help to elucidate—the world-wide linguistic dominance of English. Near the end of the book he considers the evidence to support the following assertions:

- Language pedagogical practices and language specialists have contributed to the “hegemony” of English. This is a vital topic for the book, the author says, because English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals are one of the key factors, one of “the forces…which have propelled English forward.” (p.6)

Phillipson attempts to connect his concept of linguistic imperialism with a number of other “isms” including racism, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism (of at least six types). He proposes a new word: linguicism. Linguicism, is intended to convey and summarize how varying isms are reflected and used in the English language when it is employed—as he repeatedly us—as a tool of imperialism.

One could say that Phillipson’s analysis involves the use of a “causal” explanatory approach to the topic. That is, the current world-wide dominance of English is caused by the imperialistic impulses of the “center” (capitalist) countries. Therefore, the dominance of English is clear “evidence” of linguistic imperialism. In turn, linguistic imperialism is the offspring of political, economic, and cultural expansionism (imperialism).

In the final analysis, linguistic imperialism is clear evidence to explain the unjust division of goods and resources in the world. Thus, economic injustice in the world is, ultimately, perpetuated by the “neo-neo”… “world wide structure” of imperialism.

Phillipson suggests that both power and ideology reside (apparently, innately) in the language of English.
Thus, among the most problematic assumptions advanced by Phillipson are:

1) the definition and the nature of power, and
2) the definition and nature of ideology.

These two constructs, power and ideology—and the manner in which Phillipson defines and applies them to language and language usage—are among the two most commonly cited criticisms of the Phillipson book.

Crystal’s perspective is that ideology, power and success (perceived or real) are not innate to any language. These qualities must be considered within a larger context in order to be understood and discussed.

That is, says Crystal, the language being discussed needs to be understood within the history, the culture, the ideology and the politics of the speakers of that particular language. Matters of power and of influence—political, military, cultural, religious or economic—cannot be fully understood without considering the peoples who wield that power and influence. When a certain people or nation are perceived as powerful and successful then the language spoken by that nation or people will, likewise, become influential.

One of the benefits of revisiting these two books is the appreciation gained from the many issues and concepts that can be connected, directly or indirectly, with language. The study of language and language policies, especially when done so from a comparative and historical perspective, helps remind us that language is not static. Issues connected with the spread of, or decline of, a given language can become—and often are—controversial.

Upon revisiting these books and the arguments advanced by the respective authors, it is the opinion of this writer that Crystal explains more—with less.

Both books have been cited in numerous articles and books. The authors and their books have also been topics of discussion at a number of conferences.

References

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


