LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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Abstract: The aim of this review is to explore the available literature on the subject of linguistic imperialism, specifically related to the English language and its spread around the world. In order to do so, a search was conducted using the open source search engine Google Search. Using a set of criteria, some 700 initially analysed scholarly works were reduced to a small number that were then explored in detail. The results of the search showed that the concept of linguistic imperialism was coined by author R. Phillipson in 1992 to explore how certain languages dominate others, the former often being the language of colonising entities, with the effect of undermining local languages and in some cases even erasing them. Several authors who have explored the subject of linguistic imperialism have do so through the prism of education and the teaching of the English language, while some have negated the underlying principles of Phillipson's initial assumptions, thereby refuting the very concept of linguistic imperialism.

Keywords: Linguistic Imperialism, English, English and Colonialism, Language Imperialism

1 Introduction

This review article aims to explore the subject of linguistic imperialism, with a focus on the English language, through examination of existing scholarly works on the subject. In order to do so, a search for literature will be conducted using open source search engines, and the results of that search will be outlined in this review.

In the following sections, first, a background will help explain the concept of linguistic imperialism as well as the role of the English language in the area of linguistic imperialism. Next, the search methodology that was employed will be detailed in full, including the criteria used to include or exclude results. Following that, the results of the search conducted will be explored in details to understand what they reveal about the subject of linguistic imperialism. Next, the results of the search will be discussed further, following which a conclusion will sum up some key areas of potential future research.

2 Background

The concept of linguistic imperialism was born from a work by author Robert Phillipson, who used the book to discuss the spread of the English language, in particular, through teaching, the role of English as an international language, and how and why the language has increasingly become the dominant language. In particular, the book explored how English has spread to different parts of the world, including 'third world' countries.

2.1 Linguistic Imperialism

According to Phillipson (2009) "linguistic imperialism is the notion that certain languages dominate internationally on others. It is the way nation-states privileged one language, and often sought actively to eradicate others, forcing their speakers to shift to the dominant language." (Phillipson, Linguistic Imperialism Continued, 2009) Given even its title (the use of imperialism in the phrase 'linguistic imperialism' intentional) and the above-given definition, the concept is strongly linked to colonialism and colonial issues. As countries conquered others, they also imposed their languages on the native populace, thereby erasing native languages or at least undermining them. Phillipson (1992) has argued the spread of English, specifically, is a form of neo-colonialism and linguistic imperialism. (Phillipson, Linguistic Imperialism, 1992)

An alternative definition was offered by Agyekum (2018), specifically in the context of colonization in the African continent. Agyekum argued that 'actively' eradicating and 'forcing' colonial subjects on the issue of language by colonizers may be too harsh, in terms of the language used. He states that

moreover, this was not true in the case of African colonies. Instead, he proposes that the working definition of linguistic imperialism be "a linguistic situation where the indigenous people are gradually onscientized to shun their indigenous languages and adopt foreign languages because of the benefits they expect to derive from them. They are made to believe that their languages cannot be used in any transaction in education, economics, science and technology but instead a foreign language is the best" (Agyekum, 2018).

Phillipson's definition focuses on an intentional and somewhat aggressive attempt by those speaking or teaching the dominant language to eradicate other languages and impose the dominant language over others. Agyekum, however, explores linguistic imperialism in a more organic context where circumstances are such that native populations increasingly shun their own language in favour of a dominant language due to the any benefits they may derive or prestige it may confer. However, both definitions point to situations that result in the dominance of one language, often the language of a colonizing power, over others, which has an impact on the spread and usage of local languages.

2.2 English around the World

Despite the projection and discussion in this review article about the dominance of the English language and the potential for linguistic imperialism around the world, it is not the most spoken native language in the world. However, in other ways, the language does dominate. Chinese (all dialects), with 1.39 billion speakers, and Hindi-Urdu, with 588 million speakers, are ahead of English, with 527 million speakers, when it comes to native speakers. (Noack & Gamio, 2015) On the other hand, English is spoken in most numbers of countries, with 101 countries speaking the language. The closest second is Arabic which is spoken in 60 countries. (Noack & Gamio, 2015) Moreover, the British Council estimates that there are 1.75 billion people around the world who speak English at a 'useful level', and proclaim it to the dominant international language of the 21st century (The British Council, 2013).

There are also broader dangers to hundreds of languages spoken around the world, which are at risk of disappearing entirely by the end of the 21st century. By some estimates, there are at least 7102 living languages in the world at present. (Noack & Gamio, 2015)However, only 3 per cent of the world's population accounts for or speaks 96 per cent all those languages spoken today. According to UNESCO around half of all the languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century, especially given that as many of 2000 of the more than 7000 living languages today have fewer than 1000 native speakers. (Noack & Gamio, 2015).

With the English language specifically, authors like Phillipson have particularly criticized the spread of the language through its teaching, often by compulsory means. There are some 1.5 billion English language learners around the world (Beare, 2019).

3 Search Methodology

The first step to identifying relevant literature is conducting a search. In order to do so, a number of steps were followed. These steps are outlined in this section. First, a number of key words were devised that could be input into search engines. Second, the search terms were input on an individual basis into the open source search engine Google Scholar, which was chosen in order to maximise the potential number of results.

For each individual search term, as many as 10 pages of results were given an initial examination, each containing 10 results. Based on a set of criteria that will be explained in detail later, the results were filtered down for further exploration. The narrowed down list of results were then analysed and a number were selected for review in this work.

The search terms that were employed are given below:

- Linguistic imperialism
- Linguistic imperialism + English
- Language Imperialism
- Language Imperialism + English
- Colonialism and language imposition
- Colonialism and the spread of English Language
- Impact of imperialism on language

Thus, for each of these 7 search terms, 100 results were considered, for a total of 700 results. Out of these 700, an initial examination and a list of criteria were used to include or exclude a research work, based on reading the abstract alone. These inclusion and exclusion criteria are below:

- Results in English only were chosen. Any results in other languages were not included.
- No time period criteria were applied. However, most works post-date Robert Phillipson's 1992 work on the subject of linguistic imperialism, which coined the context. Thus, works were taken from the period of 1992-2019.
- Only works that focused on the English language alone, or English among a number of other languages were taken. Any works that did not focus the spread or imposition of the English language were not included for review.
- Works that focused on the concept of linguistic imperialism and its impact around the world, specifically the English language, in part or in full, alone were included.

The search results thus narrowed are reviewed in the subsequent sections.

3.1 Linguistic Imperialism: The Case of the English Language

The most seminal work with regard to linguistic imperialism is obviously that of Robert Phillipson's 1992 paper that coined the term and explained the concept, as described in the previous section of this review. Phillipson (1992) argued that the spread of the English language, especially its teaching in the wider international context, and the prominence of English in education around the world, has served to undermine native languages everywhere, and that this was a new form of imperialism, i.e. linguistic imperialism. Moreover, this imposition of the English language has impinged on opportunities for multi-lingual education, by making English the de facto or the default language. (Phillipson, Linguistic Imperialism, 1992) Apart from this, Phillipson explicitly linked linguistic imperialism to actual imperialism and colonialism, but stating that since the 18th century, English has spread alongside the intention of those nations that spoke English to occupy and conquer other countries.

This has served not only to endanger the political and economic rights of the conquered countries, as well as their cultures, traditions and ways of life, but also their language and linguistic traditions. (Phillipson, Linguistic Imperialism, 1992) Phillipson's ultimate argument was in favour of multilingualism and the need to re-balance international orders so that English is not the dominant language, with a focus to providing resources and opportunities to other languages to ensure that they are not erased.

Phillipson's 1992 work was sharply critiqued by some academics. In particular, Davies (1996) was critical of the work. Davies believed that Phillipson's work was the product of cultural essentialism and was naïve. He also believed that Phillipson focused on the negative aspect of the promotion of English as an international language, and that was essentially born out of liberal guilt, with a hope towards colonial expansion having never existed in the first place. Davies particularly argued that it was impossible to take back colonial expansion and the increasing use of English as a dominant language, even stating that it has been a positive thing in many parts of the world for English to be dominant over native languages. Finally, Davies

argues that by coining linguistic imperialism, Phillipson has not allowed room for disagreement or debate on the subject. (Davies, 1996)

The following year, Phillipson offered his own rejoinder in a 1997 paper, rebutting specific arguments and critiques raised by Davies in 1996. He emphasized that his conception of linguistic imperialism was merely a theoretical construct, and that it was designed so that it could account for 'linguistic hierarchisation'. He in particular defended his placement of linguistic imperialism in the realm of education, stating in part that "Education is a vital site for social and linguistic reproduction, the inculcation of relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes, and therefore particularly central in processes of linguistic hierarchisation.". (Phillipson, Realities and Myths of Linguistic Imperialism, 1997).

Apart from this, Phillipson also published an update to his theory of linguistic imperialism in 2009, which served as a reflection on the discourse precipitated by his first publication in 1992. Specifically, the work aimed to evaluate how the global dominance of the English language in domains of power has been maintained, legitimized, and continued to remain entrenched in the 21st century. (Phillipson, Linguistic Imperialism Continued, 2009).

Moving away from the author of the concept of linguistic imperialism, i.e. Robert Phillipson, other scholars have attempted to tackle the subject in the years after the initial 1992 book. Canagarajah (1999) came at the issue through the prism of language education in post-colonial contexts. (Canagarajah, 1999) As a native of Sri Lanka, the author used the example of the ethnic Tamil and Tamil-speaking community in the country to explore the pedagogical challenges of teaching English in a post-colonial country. While Canagarajah pointed to Phillipson's work as his source of inspiration, he believed that rather than focusing on the macro, global perspective, as the latter did, his work was more focused on the day-to-day impacts, especially at the level of everyday experiences in the classroom.

In his conclusion, Canagarajah attempted to forge a new path between the unilateral adoption of the English language, and the complete rejection of the same. According to him, there is a 'third way', whereby the native users or 'periphery users' of the English language are allowed to become insiders and use the language on their own terms, rather than being forced to. This way, the language is used to suit their needs. (Canagarajah, 1999)

Agyekum (2018) also discussed the issue of teaching of English in his work, which is not only focused on the English language. Agyekum argues that the link between linguistic imperialism and education, as well as the continued expansion of the English language, has provided a substantial economic force when it comes to teaching the English language. According to the author, teaching and learning the English language is a significant part of the economy of the United Kingdom, with the language itself becoming a commodity that is sold. (Agyekum, 2018).

Apart from this, Agyekum also illustrates how English is a means of gatekeeping in many countries for those aspiring to education. Using Ghana (which is one of the case studies in the paper), Agyekum points to how students in the country cannot enter high school or tertiary educational institutions without passing English language tests. Higher education is quite simply inaccessible to those without competency in the English language. (Agyekum, 2018).

An alternative viewpoint is provided by Ljungdahl (2004), who likened linguistic imperialism as a type of Trojan horse, specifically with respect to English. (Ljungdahl, 2004) In this scenario, the language may have originally been invited or welcomed by a native population, but in the end had ended up 'killing' local languages and dominating local cultures. Ljungdahl too explored the pedagogical implications of English in the classroom; in particular trying to understand what 'type'

of English should be taught in classrooms in countries where English is not the native language. Here, the author offered the example of the English spoken by Aboriginal people in Australia, where the language had been adapted into what can be referred to as Australian Aboriginal English (AAE) (Ljungdahl, 2004).

4 Discussion

The results of the search revealed a number of articles, that when explored further, revealed some themes that are of note. These themes are discussed in greater detail here. It was most evident that author Robert Phillipson dominated the discourse on the subject of linguistic imperialism. As he originated the concept, that too in recent years, all the work on the subject is either by him directly, or in response to his original or subsequent works, or mentioned his work as a starting point.

It was also interesting to note that there wasn't any argument or counter-points amongst the research on whether or not English was a dominant international language. This is also borne out by the statistics outlined in the earlier sections that show the extent of the spread of the English language. However, there was a difference of opinion and points of view on whether this spread of English was negative or positive, and also whether it is the result of force and imposition, or a more organic evolution. For example, authors Alan Davies (1996) and Robert Phillipson (1992, 1997) did not disagree on the fundamental point that English in British colonies was the result of colonisation, often at the expense of native languages.

However, they disagreed on whether this was a negative and whether this was done forcefully or through aggressive imposition. Similarly, author Agyekum (2018) disagreed with Phillipson (1992), stating that colonizing countries' languages have become more organically intertwined with native countries, and that Phillipson's description of aggressiveness and eradication was too harsh.

The researchers also found that in some cases, 'periphery' English speakers, i.e. non-native English speakers in the countries where English has become more important, either through forceful imposition, or through more organic evolution, now prefer to speak in and learn English. There is a sense of prestige conferred to being able to speak English, as outlined by Agyekum (2018) and it can often be the means through which people can obtain higher education, or better jobs.

Finally, one clear through-line for much of the research was the placement of linguistic imperialism in the context of teaching of the English language. Almost all of the researchers focused on how English is being taught and the impact of colonialism on teaching of the English language. Moreover, they explored how teaching of the English language is closely linked to linguistic imperialism as education is a vital site for linguicism. Here also, it is interesting to note that the British Council, for example, has aimed to consistently increase English speaking as a part of its key work in many countries, as pointed out by Agyekum (2018).

5 Conclusion

While there has been a fair amount of research on the subject of linguistic imperialism, with a focus on English speaking and teaching, it cannot be said that it is adequate. There is room for further research, especially on aspects beyond the educational and pedagogical. There is also room to move away and evolve from the original author on the subject, i.e. Robert Phillipson and his assumptions and theory.

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Primary Paper Section: A

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