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Linguistic Imperialism, Global English and Modernity

Robinson Crusoe’s linguistic imperialism

‘I likewise taught him to say Master; and then let him know that was to be my name,’ the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe narrates (Defoe, 2001, [1719], p. 163). In Daniel Defoe’s *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, teaching English defines and subordinates the other. The stranger is treated as a nameless empty vessel, without language, knowledge, history or community, until the hero inscribes a language and identity on him. The stranger is named Friday, symbolising how he only assumes an identity through that encounter. Thus begins Friday’s life of relentless servitude, not equality, under Crusoe’s claimed civilising education, which makes Friday an instrument to accumulate his wealth. For Marx, Crusoe is the ideal bourgeois capitalist subject (Marx, 1976, [1867], pp. 169–71). For James Joyce, Crusoe ‘is the true prototype of the British colonialist, as Friday...is the symbol of the subject races’ (Joyce, 1964, p. 24).

Linguistic imperialism studies examine Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as epitomising colonial and post-colonial English language hierarchies (Pennycook, 1994; 1998a; Phillipson, 1992). Teaching *Robinson Crusoe* is analysed as lessons in cultural imperialism, legitimising the ‘racial structure of western society at the heyday of slavery’ (Phillipson, 1992, p. 109). Indeed, simplified abridged versions of Robinson Crusoe were a staple of the colonial English literature curriculum (Pennycook, 1994, pp. 319–21; 1998, pp. 10–16; Phillipson, 1992, p. 109). Linguistic imperialism critiques join a longer tradition of critical readings of Crusoe as colonial mythology (Watt, 1987; 1997). Yet Defoe was also among the early writers to attack expanding British overseas power and slave trade (Defoe, 1702).

This chapter considers linguistic imperialism critiques of the English language as complicit in colonial and neo-colonial relations: ‘English is both the language that will bestow civilization, knowledge and wealth on people and at the same time is the language in which they are racially defined’ (Pennycook, 1998a, p. 4). We have already seen how Derrida’s essay on the
Tower of Babel associates universal communication with colonial linguistic violence (Derrida, 2007, [1985]). The ‘leitmotiv’ of linguistic imperialism studies is ‘the dominance of English as serving Western imperialist interests’ (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2009a, p. 327). However, there are flaws in linguistic imperialism critiques, which ironically echo colonial concerns.

**Challenging global English**

Phillipson’s influential book *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992) identifies key linguistic imperialist assumptions, underpinning policies promoting English as the dominant world language:

- capacities: English-intrinsic arguments, what English is
- resources: English-extrinsic arguments, what English has

English-intrinsic arguments suggest the language’s superiority in advancing modern culture, science and security. English, it is argued, has attained a neutral universal character, transcending particular national ties (and prejudices), and its spread as a shared world language contributes to international peace and stability (Phillipson, 1992, p. 275). Linguistic imperialism studies note the contradictory claims of the language’s neutrality against Anglo-American foreign policy aspirations to promote the English language in their national interests (Phillipson, 1992, p. 276). Phillipson pointedly observes: ‘Apolologists for English are inconsistent here: arguments for the non-ethnic nature of English rub shoulders with the “opportunity” or “responsibility” of the British to meet the demand for English’ (Phillipson, 1992, p. 276). Against celebratory accounts, linguistic imperialism studies see the English language supporting colonial and neo-colonial power relations, following studies suggesting the German language’s complicity with Nazism (Pennycook, 1994; 1998a, pp. 3–4; Steiner, 1969, pp. 136–51). Linguistic imperialism critiques draw on post-modern and post-colonial interest in language, discourse and power. Studies commonly cite Fanon’s statement on how speaking a language means ‘to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization’ (Fanon, 2008, [1952], p. 8, in Dingwaney, 1995, p. 3; Pennycook, 1994, p. 25, pp. 32–3).

English-extrinsic arguments believe in promoting English because of the access to resources it brings. Post-independence support for English language planning is linked to nationalists’ desire for rapid industrialisation (Phillipson, 1992, p. 278). Linguistic imperialism critiques see the language’s resources reflecting unequal power relations. Phillipson borrows from under-development theories to criticise how ‘the present-day imperialist structure...perpetuates the development of English and the underdevelopment