

RESPONSE  
to John Honey's review of  
ROBERT PHILLIPSON. Linguistic imperialism. Oxford: Oxford  
University Press, 1992 (date misquoted in the review)  
(RASK 1, 117-22)  
by  
Robert Phillipson

A colleague who kindly offered to review my book commented that book reviews often reveal more about the reviewer than about the book itself. He went on to write a review that partly summarised the text for the benefit of readers who are unfamiliar with it, and then took the argument further in ways that were stimulating and constructive. John Honey does neither, and shows none of the detachment that is a *sine qua non* for a sober, scholarly review.

He consistently misrepresents my position by suggesting that the book is a selection of personal statements based on hidden assumptions or presuppositions. I am accused of not revealing my true motives in writing such a book until 'seven-eighths of the way through the book', which is quite false, as the introductory chapter makes clear.

The book also contains two substantial chapters reviewing earlier work in the field and attempting to elaborate an adequate theoretical apparatus for coming to grips with issues of language dominance, the spread of English, the role of language in reproducing social inequality, and applied linguistics in this arena. As Honey's reaction to the book makes manifest, though he fails to make the point, there is a real need to establish solid foundations to support necessary debates about language policy, national and international, so that personal impressions can be put into a more informed, not least theoretically-informed framework. Substantial efforts to achieve this are currently being made worldwide, as anyone familiar with the relevant scientific literature would know, often in tandem with ongoing struggles for language rights. This is the case in southern Africa, North America, Europe et al.<sup>1</sup> There is also currently a lively debate on language policy in Japan, where Honey works, (see for instance the Japanese Association of Language Teachers, JALT, newsletter), in which the theoretical concepts linguisticism and linguistic imperialism are apparently of use both in relation to the spread of English and also Japanese as an international language.

Honey does not attempt to assess whether the book advances theory formation in the field of language policy. Instead it is claimed that my 'theory' would brand Nkrumah as a linguicist and racist. In making such a claim, Honey apparently fails to distinguish between a theoretical construct, empirical data and conclusions. He accuses me of a simplistic approach, but nowhere in the book are there crude generalizations of the kind that Honey makes.

Honey attempts to create the impression that I have got it all wrong by failing to report that the book draws on a large volume of scholarship (the bibliography is substantial), on the work of scholars at both donor and receiver ends of educational aid. Thus my comments on 'tribe', which upset Honey, are explicitly based on the statements of scholars from both North and South.

Honey commits the classic error of going for the man rather than the ball. He impugns my personal motives ('biting the hand that feeds me'), rather than addressing the vastly more serious issue of North-South injustices, linguistic hierarchies, and the accountability of educational 'aid', all of which the book deals with (and which donor organizations like the World Bank are increasingly taking on board), and ethical issues in applied linguistics, which the profession is increasingly addressing (see, for instance, the thematic number on this topic of *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1993).

He also goes after the wrong man when quoting from the book, for instance attributing Joshua Fishman's words to me (creeping cancer), and inventing men of his own creation, for instance when referring to 'unwitting stooges (p. 308) of neo-colonialism', where Honey's brackets and inverted commas imply that I have used these words. This is pure misrepresentation.

Honey even resorts to hoary anti-Marxist rhetoric, crudely juxtaposed with a line-up of dictators, and falsely suggests that I use 'uncritical sources for the language policies of the USSR'. That again is sheer fabrication. It fits into the classic mould of stooping to a political smear when arguments are weak. In addition to misrepresenting what I write (for instance the paragraphs on imperialism and on arguments for modernisation are a travesty), and to bolster his own position, he resorts to subjective comments ('contemptible', 'stupidity') of a kind that do not belong in scientific journals, and certainly reveal more about the reviewer than the book.

I am glad that the book has touched an existential nerve, but amazed that a new scientific journal can be launched with a book review that makes such swipes below the academic belt.

Honey insinuates in his final paragraph that the distinguished people whom I interviewed may not be happy about the use I make of their comments in the book. That is surely their affair rather than Honey's, and a reading of my 'Acknowledgements' and chapter 1 makes Honey's comments redundant and dishonourable. I can assure him after reading over 20 reviews in scientific journals, most of which, I am happy to say, have been extremely favourable (and several by heavyweights in the sociology of language, language planning and language pedagogy), that he is the only one to cast aspersions on my integrity.

The reception of the book can be gauged by the fact that it has already been reprinted. People have offered to translate it in Japanese, Korean and French, and produce a local edition in India. The book was also 'commended' by the judges of the annual book prize of the British Association for Applied Linguistics, 1993. Readers of RASK have been misled.

As Honey's demonization of me is achieved through misrepresentation, there is little that I can dialogue with constructively. I am however fully aware of the need to elaborate and improve theories and undertake more empirical analyses of the issues that I take up, and many of the other reviewers have usefully prodded my thinking. I would far prefer to use my energies not for a defensive response but for tackling the real issue of the linguistic imperialism that surrounds us. I will close with a quote from the final page of my book, which could be contrasted with Honey's text.

Nothing that I have written here disputes the fact that the English language can be used for good or bad purposes, both by native speakers and second language users. It is a truism that English can be used to either promote or fight capitalism (which is itself full of contradictions), to liberate people or oppress them. But this argument ignores the structural power of English nationally and internationally.



These words, written in 1991, already appear a little dated. The need to explore the power of English and our role as teachers of the language, which is what the book attempts to do, remains a pressing one.

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#### Note

1. See Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove, and Robert Phillipson (eds.), 1994. Linguistic human rights: overcoming linguistic discrimination. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter (Contributions to the Sociology of Language 67). The 1993/94 number of the Annual Review of Applied Linguistics (14) is on language policy and planning. For an approach inspired by Foucault and critical pedagogy, see Alastair Pennycook's 'The cultural politics of English as an international language', Longman, 1994. Several scientific journals regularly address these issues, e.g. International Journal of the Sociology of Language, Language, Culture and Curriculum, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, World Englishes. There is also a tendency for journals with a more micro-linguistic or language pedagogy approach to engage with wider issues of language policy, e.g. Applied Linguistics, TESOL Quarterly.