

ROBERT PHILLIPSON. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. Pp. 321.

Reviewed by JOHN HONEY

Most linguists would probably agree that the preoccupation of linguistics is with the richness of language rather than with a single standard of correctness. Thus, practitioners of this specialism will tend to be flexible rather than prescriptive on the issues of standard vs non-standard language which currently beset Britain's educational system and which indeed are never far from the surface of language teaching there and in many other states.

But what of those other kinds of linguistic richness involved in working between English and other languages? Most specialists in English linguistics are professionally engaged in the teaching of English, and of these a good proportion teach the language and its literature to speakers of other languages. They are thus deeply implicated, according to the author of this book, in the scandalous practice of linguistic imperialism.

The scandal is that English has become the dominant international language (p. 4), and thus a 'world commodity' (p. 4) and indeed the 'cornerstone of the global capitalist system' (p. 10). This dominance 'is asserted and maintained by the continuous creation of cultural inequalities between English and other languages' (p. 47), essentially by hogging an unfair share of teaching resources (p. 47). A crucial weapon in this domination is Phillipson's concept of *linguicism*, by which he means, in effect, attributing to one language (e.g. English) favourable attributes and denying similar attributes to another. Linguicism has 'taken over from racism as a more subtle way of hierarchising social groups' (p. 241) and promoting inequality. From the theory advanced in this book, the late Kwame Nkrumah, who argued strongly for the use of English as a means of promoting his new nation state and for combating what he saw as the evils of tribalism (cf. D. Birmingham 1990), must now be condemned both as a 'linguicist' and as a racist ('tribalism' is treated by Phillipson, on totally unconvincing grounds, as a politically incorrect, indeed racist, term).

Phillipson gives copious examples of the domains in which English has become predominant, as the language of international communications, science, technology, etc., as a direct result of the

creation of myths about its special usefulness etc. Those who teach English are usually the unwitting stooges (p. 308) of neo-colonialism, indeed of what he calls 'neo-neo-colonialism', whose true nature he feels impelled to 'unmask' (a favourite word: e.g. pp. 196, 198). As an armchair critic of the dire effects of all this on the Third World, his own qualifications to assess this guilt are impeccable: he has been a teacher of English to foreigners for 30 years, most of them in the relative luxury of Scandinavia, so this book is a prolonged exercise in biting the hand that has fed him so well: a real piranha job.

Nevertheless, given his eagerness to 'unmask' the hidden motives and presuppositions of others, he is curiously coy about his own. Most of those who are implicated in the teaching of English have some idea of its special value to their students, and some indeed are impelled by a feeling of urgency in giving them access to specific functional advantages which they perceive as unparalleled in the modern world. Not until seven-eighths of the way through this book does the author reveal his own starting-point: 'Linguists are trained to see any language as potentially fulfilling any function, hence not intrinsically superior or inferior to any other language' (p. 276). The crucial word here is potentially: what processes does the language of a preliterate Third-World community have to undergo in order to be able to perform for its speakers the range of functions in (e.g.) modern science and technology or any other aspect of modern thought? What kinds of elaboration or 'development' (his word) are necessary in order to create the vocabulary, the range of stylistic genres, and all the other features that make possible its use as what some scholars (cf. Gonzalez and Batista 1986) now term an 'edulect'? What is the time-scale, and the cost, of all this? We know, of course, that to some extent it can be done: Swahili, Hebrew, Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia, and Tagalog have made the attempt. Arabic, Russian, Japanese, starting from a high base-line and all backed by huge financial resources, have had to struggle to try to keep up, and the textbooks now used for advanced degrees in some Japanese universities are in English – there is no other economic way of keeping abreast of world knowledge.

But for *every* language and dialect? In Papua New Guinea, there are over 800, spread among 38 million speakers. Namibia is a favourite example of Phillipson's because he was a consultant to SWAPO in its guerrilla period but snubbed when the decision, applauded by other African leaders, was taken at independence to

adopt English. Of around eight 'main' indigenous languages, the one that used to be called 'Bushman' has, in its present form, massive phonological, lexical and stylistic limitations for use for purposes of extended education. How much money is available to produce secondary school textbooks in (say) physics and chemistry for those speakers? How rational is it to give priority to that exercise over the thousand other pressing needs of an underdeveloped country? These sorts of question are simply not touched on. Nor does he seriously attend to the problem that to take resources away from English teaching and put them into the development of a local language simply creates a different kind of linguistic imperialism, with attendant inequalities as between (say) Swahili and a score of East African languages, between Hindi and many Indian rivals, between Tagalog and numerous major and minor languages of the Philippines, or between Oshiwambo (his favourite) and other Namibian languages, including 'Bushman'. As John Swales put it in *Genre Analysis* (1990), 'decisions to use a particular language inevitably confer advantage on some and disadvantage on others'. (Revealingly, Swales's book, with its balanced discussion of the functions of English for academic writing, although published two years before Phillipson's, does not feature in this bibliography, yet an earlier paper by Swales is cited in the text but omitted from the bibliography.)

Other presuppositions of the author's are closer to the surface. The (usually pejorative) use of terms like 'capitalist world order'; 'literary colonialism' (US firms publishing in Africa); 'consumerist' textbooks; the 'profits of capitalism'; the 'promotion of free enterprise'; 'dialectical adaptation'; 'hegemonic beliefs' (i.e. typically 'common-sense' but ideologically incorrect ideas which the underprivileged, supposedly because they are amazingly stupid, readily accept) – all these give easy clues to the ideological origins of this analysis. It must be a moot point whether the academic community of the 1990s can still view this kind of simplistic Marxism – complete with deference to Lenin as a 'key theorist' of imperialism (p. 45) and the use of highly uncritical sources for the language policies of the former USSR – with the same degree of tolerance as we used to, in view of what nobody now disputes about the close causal connexion between this ideology and the crimes of Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Ceausescu, Kim Il Sung and others.

It is surely not good enough nowadays for academics to use

blanket terms like 'imperialism' without attempting to distinguish between the relatively benign and the unremittingly awful forms of such domination – between (say) British, US, French, Dutch, German, Italian, Japanese, Indonesian, Soviet, Chinese, forms of imperialism. For Phillipson, imperial powers must never be credited with good intentions: if they created mass education systems using their own languages they must have wanted to obliterate the local language and culture, while if they chose instead to nurture a future political elite through a European language it must be because they wished to ration access to that language and culture in order to prevent contamination. That modern democratic capitalism, treated throughout as an ogre, might in fact be an efficient and relatively humane form of wealth-creation, is a possibility never considered. And many readers may feel that to liken Britain's project of collecting surplus textbooks for Third World countries to the dumping of poisonous chemicals, as Phillipson does (p. 60), is merely contemptible.

Alongside all this is another set of assumptions, this time about modernisation, about which Phillipson is profoundly ambivalent, and usually hostile. Though he gives no detailed description of what is implied in this term, the process by which underdeveloped societies are helped to 'catch up' with the rest of the world may be a form of 'creeping cancer' (p. 11) and no more than a mechanism to create new forms of dependency (p. 235). Worse still is the moral contagion implicit in exposure to the values of the Western world. Thus every argument for English becomes an argument against, if you hate modernisation, and in this sense he supports the contention that education in Africa and Asia today is an obstacle to development (p. 239): teachers should be taught to make paper from banana leaves rather than to write syllabuses for their students (p. 239). The deplorable growth of demand for English is because of 'the new gods of efficiency, science and technology, modernity, etc.' (p. 247). How stupid are all those Third World citizens who do not realise they would be so much better off without any of these! Those who want to conquer diseases resistant to traditional local medicine, to evolve political, legal and social systems which embody 'modern' conceptions of human rights and the status of women, to befriend and control the environment, are all implicated in this stupidity.

Parts of this argument strike a chord. Other cultures are indeed put 'under siege', as he rightly states, by the spread of English. Many

teachers of English are concerned about the value-system that is implicit in the teaching of both language and literature, and much attention has been paid to the uses of English as a voice for writers from non-British cultures. Like so many issues in this book, it cries out for balanced discussion. Is cultural imperialism inevitable? Or is it possible that, globally, the more people speak English, the less it remains culturally the exclusive property of one group? If Westerners were once arrogantly convinced they had all the answers and had little need to learn from the cultures of Asia and Africa, they have for decades been finding plenty of features from which to learn in humility. But like other topics on which Phillipson has passionate views – including bilingualism and the value of early mother-tongue education in multilingual communities – the issue of clarifying relations between the value-systems which English language teaching appears to promote, and those of the cultures it invades, is in danger of being denied proper consideration because of the prejudiced terms in which this book is argued.

This, then, is a highly polemical book, whose case rides on the back of some deeply flawed assumptions, several of them barely explicit. Some of those whom he interviewed while writing it – including 'chief protagonists in the English Language Teaching drama' like Quirk, Widdowson, and Brumfit – may well wonder at the uses to which their comments have been put. Its main value is in forcing those who teach English and those who theorise about the forms of the language to re-examine the bases of their own convictions about the function and value of their work. It has certainly reinforced mine.

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