

# [Impact of linguistic imperialism](https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-linguistic-imperialism/)

The imposition of the colonizers’ language on the natives has been instrumental in the colonial process. In this essay, my aim is to explore how the English language was intrinsic to the expansion of the British Empire and its culture in India and in the African continent. I will also examine two very different attitudes towards the dominant status of English in former African colonies. Furthermore, I want to elaborate on how the current notion of English as a “ world language” impacts both our post-colonial society and the language itself.

In order to explain the characteristics of imperialistic language policies, we must first define the concept of ‘ imperialism’. Former empires sought to “ civilize” the other on the grounds of a supposed moral and intellectual superiority; this was used as an excuse to achieve the political dominion of the territory. Thus, the imposition of the empire’s religion, culture and language primarily served the purpose of expanding the metropole’s power. This aspect of imperialism, the system by which the metropole exerted full political control on its colonies disappeared after the decolonization movements of the mid-twentieth century. But imperialism can also be conceptualized from an economic perspective: the exploitation and control of a country’s resources by a foreign power regardless of whether the country is under its full political control or not (Phillipson, 1992).

Phillipson (1992) provides a tentative definition for English linguistic imperialism: it takes place when ‘ the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and the other languages’ (Phillipson, 1992, p. 46). That is, English rules over other minor languages for both material and ideological reasons: more resources are devoted to English than to other languages, and those who are proficient in English enjoy more benefits in society. He also describes English linguistic imperialism as a type of linguicism, the ‘ ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources […] between groups which are defined on the basis of language’ (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47).

Western European powers understood the importance of language for the expansion of their nations even in the early stages of colonialism. In his Gramática de la lengua castellana , Antonio de Nebrija articulated the idea that language and empire are inseparable entities. With the victory of the colonisers over the natives comes the introduction of the metropole’s laws and language on ‘ the barbarous peoples and nations of alien languages’ (Evans and Fernandez, 2018, p. 271). An early example of this linguistic conquest is the British colonization of Ireland. Even though British settlement in the island started in the 12 th century, it was during the reign of the Tudor dynasty in the 16 th century when the British attempted to fully Anglicize the country. Henry VIII was keenly aware of the problems that the existence of several languages in the same country supposed for the creation of a single national cultural identity. Thus, he tried to supress the use of Irish in Ireland with the 1537 ‘ Act for the English Order, Habit and Language’. The British colonization of Ireland was significant because it influenced the later colonial experiments of other countries, and of Britain itself.

According to Phillipson (1992), English-speaking countries could be classified in two main groups: core-English speaking countries, where the dominant social group are native speakers of English (i. e. Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia), and periphery-English speaking countries, where we can include those countries in which English has been imposed as a result of colonialism (i. e. India, Nigeria). There are many different attitudes towards the English language within the periphery-English speaking countries. In India, where 462 different languages are estimated to be spoken (Simons et. al., 2018), English was adopted as an official language along with Hindi in 1950 to avoid disputes between Hindi and non-Hindi speaking states. It remains one of the official languages of India up to this day and is the means of communication between non-Hindi speakers and the government.

The undervaluing of the native people’s culture and the exaltation of the colonizer’s was crucial to the success of any colonial policy. Education, being the main tool for the transmission of values and modes of thought from one generation to the next (Phillipson, 1992), was key to successfully impose the colonizer’s culture. British educational policies in India consisted in the undermining of indigenous education. Traditional education in Sanskrit and Persian, languages of prestige in India, was replaced by an Anglocentric curriculum, fully taught in English. With the English Education Act of 1835, the British aimed for the creation, as politician Thomas Macaulay stated in his “ Minute on Indian Education”, of ‘ a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect’ (Khubchandani, 1983, p. 120, cited Phillipson, 1992, p. 110). A ‘ learned native’ was an Anglicized colonial subject who had to ‘ enrich [the vernacular] dialects with terms of science borrowed from Western nomenclature, and render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population’ (Sharp, 1965, p. 116). The logical result of British educational policies in India was that ‘ English became the sole medium of education, administration, trade, and commerce, in short of all formal domains of a society’s functioning’ (Misra, 1982, p. 150, cited Phillipson, 1992, p. 111).

Whereas the British recognized some level of sophistication in Indian culture and grudgingly acknowledged the value of education in Sanskrit and Persian in India, they completely dismissed traditional African educational models. British educational policies in Africa were modelled after the ones imposed in Sierra Leone, the first British colony in the continent. They were decidedly ethnocentric and linguicist: local languages were regarded with contempt, and Africans were considered to have no history of their own. The linguistic history of the African continent in the past century was characterized by the struggle between the African people’s longing for independence and the French, British, German, and other European powers’ imperial interests. ‘ The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment […] Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century’ (wa Thiong’o, 1986, p. 4).

The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 sealed the fate of the indigenous African languages, with the imposition of French, English, German and Portuguese on the newly-formed states. Africa was therefore politically, economically, culturally, and linguistically divided between the European powers. English started to be seen as the natural language for communication between people living in African British colonies, and for some, such as South-African writer Ezekiel Mphalele, it had the advantage of uniting people from widely different linguistic backgrounds from the same country against white oppression (wa Thiong’o, 1986). However, wa Thiong’o (1986) sees English as the vehicle for the spiritual subjugation of the African people. After the anti-colonial Mau Mau Uprising of 1952, British authorities in Kenya declared a state of emergency. Speaking Kikuyu, Meru or any other indigenous language was vilified and regarded with suspicion. At the same time, the linguistic importance of English increased: proficiency in the language was necessary to climb up the ladder of the colonial system. This way, it was not only the elites who benefited from their knowledge of English, but also the masses, who acknowledged that learning the language was key to attaining power and resources.

On the other hand, Chinua Achebe (1975) thought that the status of English as a national language in many African countries could prove to be positive for the African people. Achebe affirms that English is a national language in Nigeria, Kenya or Sierra Leone because the nations themselves are British inventions. The creation of these larger political units from small, segregated tribes proved to be generally positive to African culture, economy and politics. Achebe does not disregard the horrors of colonialism, neither the British supremacist policies, but Africans should not reject the positive aspects of the legacy of colonialism just because they were accompanied by oppression, racism and discrimination. The most important colonial legacy of British rule is the English language: it has the capacity to join peoples from vastly different ethnic backgrounds. Achebe remarks that if colonial languages were to be abolished in Africa, the people would lose an important means of communication. The indigenous African languages, powerless against the all-encompassing influence of English, are destined to only fulfil a minor role in society. Achebe later affirmed to regret defending the ‘ fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English’ (Achebe, 1975, prologue) in Africa. Yet at the same time he laments that he is unable to see an effective way of contesting the supremacy of English in the continent. In 1963, the Organization of African Unity stated in its charter that the official use of colonial languages would only be provisionally tolerated. Nonetheless, the privileged position of English has not changed much up to this day. Its dominance remains uncontested, being the official language in the countries in which nearly 60 per cent of Africa’s population live. Only very few national languages in Africa, such as Swahili or Zulu, are official.

Let us now turn away from Africa and consider the role of English in the post-colonial world of the 21 st century. English is currently spoken worldwide, ‘ as a result of British colonialism, international interdependence, revolutions in technology, transport, communications and commerce, and because English is the dominant language in the USA, a major economic, political and military force in the contemporary world’ (Phillipson, 1992, p. 24). Western countries no longer impose their language through military might and cultural hegemony on their colonies. Supranational unions, the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations, and international corporations are the new metropoles in our globalizing world. English plays a central role in this process, but the language does not follow the interests of the United Kingdom or other nations. For Phillipson, in postcolonial societies ‘ language policies continue largely unchanged’ (Phillipson, 2009, p. 57) and education in former colonies ‘[has] tended to give priority to the former colonial language and a marginal status to local languages’ (Phillipson, 2009, p. 57), especially in recent times due to the influence of the World Bank.

Today, English is the lingua franca in most international contexts, which leaves non-native speakers of English in a clear disadvantage. Phillipson (2009, p. 58) points out the inequalities that stem from the supremacy of English:

Is it fair that some should be able to communicate, negotiate, trade, and be culturally productive in their mother tongue, whereas others have to use a second or foreign language? […] Is it fair that the USA and UK can avoid investing substantially in foreign language education, whereas virtually all other education systems are obliged to in order to access the global economy and cultural industries?

## It goes without saying that many factors contribute to the current dominance of the language. These factors are classified by Phillipson (2009) in two main groups — they can be structural, like the connection between English and modern economics and finance, the investment in English education in non-Anglophone countries, etc. Other factors are ideological, such as English being seen as a ‘ cool’ language to learn, or as necessary for entering and advancing in the workforce.

## Our colonial past has given way to a globalized, neoliberal order. Phillipson (2009) believes that in the contemporary world ‘ there are major unresolved tensions between national and international languages, and in reconciling participation in the global economy with maintaining national sovereignty, linguistic diversity and personal freedoms’. But English can also be employed as a tool for the liberation of the oppressed and the disenfranchised. In fact, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o describes in Decolonizing the mind, ‘ when the peasantry and the working class were compelled by necessity or history to adopt the language of the master, they Africanised it without any of the respect for its ancestry’ (wa Thiong’o, 1986, p. 23), so totally as to have created new forms of English. By appropriating the colonial language, the people undermine the supremacy of the English language and maintain their indigenous languages and culture alive in the rhythms of these new forms of English.

## List of references

##          Achebe, C. 1975. Morning yet on creation day: essays . London: Heinemann Educational.

##          Bureau of Education. 1965. Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839) . Sharp, H. ed. Delhi: National Archives of India.

##          Crowley, T. 2018. Language and colonialism/postcolonialism. ENG2024 Language in Society. 15 October, University of Leeds.

##          Evans, J. and Fernandez, F. eds. 2018. The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Politics . London: Routledge.

##          Phillipson, R. 1992. Linguistic Imperialism . Oxford: Oxford University Press.

##          Phillipson, R. 2009. Linguistic Imperialism continued . New York; London: Routledge.

##          Simons, G. F. and Fennig, C. D. eds. 2018. Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Twenty-first edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International.

##          Wa Thiong’o, N. 1986. Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature . London: James Currey.