

Book Review Section

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Linguistic Imperialism

Robert Phillipson. 1992. Oxford University Press. 365 pp.

Reviewed by Patrick H. Smith¹

... whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British Empire has given way to the empire of English. (1)

Recognition of English as the language of international communication and study is commonplace in and outside the field of TESOL and other areas of applied linguistics. Much recent work on second language acquisition, pidgin and creole studies, language planning, bilingual education and teacher training, to mention only a few areas, has come about as a result of the unprecedented use of English in communities where it was previously unimportant. Indeed, scholarly and more general treatments of the spread of English and the consequences thereof have been so commonplace recently that the publication of another book on the subject might be better celebrated with a yawn than a book review. Robert Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* is a refreshing contribution to a strand of work that was becoming rather staid.

The initial chapters on the status of English around the world and the subsequent theoretical discussion of "linguistic imperialism" are well-written and well-documented, but offer little new. Phillipson breaks new ground, however, in arguing that attributing the dominance of English to social, political and economic factors is not sufficiently precise. Specifically, he attempts to demonstrate the important role that British and U. S. governmental agencies have played in the spread of English and ELT over the past fifty years. Based on government documents and interviews with leading British English Language Teaching (ELT) figures, including Henry Widdowson, Christopher Brumfit and Randolph Quirk, *Linguistic Imperialism* provides an objective account of English language promoting policy and activity by institutions like the British Council and the United States Information Service. While it remains to be seen if and how such institutions will respond to charges of having promoted English as a tool in their respective national interests, Phillipson has created an interesting case for

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language hegemony. Particularly relevant here are accounts of similar efforts (although nowhere near as successful on a global scale) behind languages like French, German and Spanish.

Despite pulling together a remarkable diversity of sources and issues, Phillipson's case for the linguistic imperialism of English would be strengthened had he relied less on examples from the British world of ELT and incorporated more from the U. S. perspective. Phillipson acknowledges the difficulty in accurately describing a field that has grown out of these largely separate traditions, and (Chapter 6) does a good job of distinguishing between British and American promotion of English. A subsequent section on the academic base for ELT document formation of the British Council but does not mention TESOL, its American English counterpart, arguably an equally important force, albeit one with a shorter pedigree, different structure and, I would add, greater concern with the effects of English on other languages and their speakers (witness TESOL's "Interest Sections" on bilingual education and socio-political concerns). Despite the relative imbalance, Phillipson has provided a model against which the U. S. experience can now be measured.

Phillipson is absolutely right, I think, in tracing the initial impetus for promotion of English and ELT to the colonial legacy. Unfortunately, this historical focus obscures two relevant questions for the linguistic imperialism of English today, the first being "What do teachers and other English language professionals think about their role in the spread of English?" Without teachers there can be no ELT. In neglecting to include teachers as actors in the process of the spread of English, Phillipson's analysis presents them (unintentionally, perhaps) as pawns in a chess game of national language planning. The second point Phillipson misses is that, in contrast to the book's international focus, a great deal of what might pass for linguistic imperialism or state-sponsored English dominance takes place inside the borders of what he terms "core" nations. Is the "English Only" movement in the United States not a prime example of linguistic imperialism? In Britain, should we not include government positions (e. g. the Swann and Cox Reports) in which English is promoted over other languages?

Despite these weaknesses, *Linguistic Imperialism* is an ambitious beginning to the study of links between English and linguistic imperialism. It is food for thought for teachers in and administrators of ESL/EFL programs and anyone with an interest in language planning.