

'LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM' 10 YEARS ON

An Interview with Robert Phillipson

By Sohail Karmani

KARMANI: Robert Phillipson, a very warm welcome to the United Arab Emirates. It's been said about your work that it is patronising because it treats vast areas of the non-English speaking world, not least Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as somehow being passive recipients of English linguistic imperialism. How do you respond to that charge?

PHILLIPSON: I think that's a disturbing claim and I certainly have only taken it upon myself to try to influence my own group. I do regard them as my primary audience. If other people can use my work in other contexts, obviously that's great but I think that some of the people who've claimed that I am in some way implicitly operating with agentless victims would have difficulty in documenting that in the text itself. And quite obviously a lot of my analysis is inspired by people from colonised countries meaning Ngugi and Neville Alexander in Africa, or Pattanayak and Khubchandani and Probal Dasgupta in India. So I think a lot of my sort of basic position is having learnt from people who have been at the receiving end of linguistic imperialism.

KARMANI: Yes, but I'm also thinking of the thousands of parents in the UAE, the Arabian Gulf and in the wider Muslim world who are very eager for their children to have an English-medium education in the belief that it will somehow improve the quality of their lives. Don't you think there's a risk here that your work might be construed as suggesting that these parents are somehow lackeys of the English-speaking countries of the West?

PHILLIPSON: You're right. And I think that this is where somebody from Hong Kong whom I met a couple of years ago, David Li, has also tried to look into it very carefully in what he designates as the demand side of English as opposed to me concentrating on the supply side. So a lot of my analysis is of British government policy and American philanthropic foundation policy as they formulated them at various points in time, particularly in the 50s and 60s in the pioneer phase of the expansion of English teaching as a global activity. And that obviously has to do with the supply. It has to do with the motives of the West in pushing funding into English teaching in post-colonial educational systems, and trying to influence the way English could maintain its eminence locally as well as globally. So certainly there is not a great deal on the demand side, meaning why people are rational in wishing kids to get the sort of benefits that speakers of English have worldwide, whether they're mother tongue speakers or whether they're elites say in West Africa or in the Sub-continent. And I think that one of the things that came through very strongly when my wife and I were in India in March for a one week conference in Poona was that there is definitely an identification with English as a language that opens doors. And this is well documented by the Mysore Central Institute for Indian Languages on research into slum dwellers where impoverished people were saving up their tiny earnings in order to get their kids into English medium schooling. It appears that what has happened now with the shift in power away from Congress to more nationalist Hindu-oriented governments at state level, and now in the central government as well, is that the generation who are now in power are typically people who didn't have English-medium education and who got power through some sort of a populist appeal, and they are now absolutely determined that their own children should have the same benefits of English-medium education as the earlier elites.

And this means that in states like Orissa and Maharashtra they decided by a sort of overnight decision that a lot of the state education will be through the medium of English, even though the teachers are totally under-qualified to deliver that and even though culturally appropriate teaching materials don't exist and even when the thing has not been thought through in terms of a healthy balance between the learning of English and the mother tongues and other languages in the communities. So it's very much a view which derives really from the mid-1980s seeing things as "either or" meaning either English or Urdu medium or Marathi medium that has always snarled things up rather than led to a fruitful bilingual plan.

KARMANI: So what would you like to see happening in this region? There's clearly a dominance of English, and it's not always in the immediate interests of the people who are seeking it. Are you suggesting that they somehow sever their links with English and start adopting Arabic or giving Arabic more prominence?

PHILLIPSON: Well, you're in the right sort of position, along with lots of people who have grown up here, to assess whether English in any way represents a threat to Arabic. It seems very improbable that English can in any way challenge the position of Arabic in this sort of culture.

KARMANI: Well, actually it is threatening the role of Arabic and there are conservative elements in this part of the world who are concerned that the prominence of English is attacking or eroding the culture and traditions here in the region.

PHILLIPSON: Curiously enough that's very similar in Western Europe at the moment, with conservative elements in many Western European cultures. There's very definitely at the moment a feeling that the expansion of English is taking place at the expense of even big languages like French, German and Swedish in ways that one would have thought were totally unthinkable. How on earth could they be threatened? They have the language of the state behind them, everything has been done through those languages for the last fifty, hundred to two hundred years. They're used for all scientific activity, for all administrative activity in servicing the public, in terms of maintaining and developing the cultural heritage and so on. So one would have thought that secure languages could not in any way be at risk from English, but I think that there's definitely a feeling that this is no longer the case. But you're quite right that my *Linguistic Imperialism* mainly deals with English in post-colonial and British Empire contexts largely as the examples, but now it's also being read very actively in post-communist countries including China where the invasion of English has really hit people and even in Western Europe, where Germans are now reading it and saying what can we learn from this in terms of understanding what's now happening in this balance of power between English and German. So very definitely some of the underlying supply factors seem to be making people aware that certain cultural values and certain linguistic practices are at risk.

KARMANI: On the question of cultural values, there's obviously a very clear value orientation in your work and I think it's fair to say that *Linguistic Imperialism* was based very much on a neo-Marxist view of reality, a view rooted in contemporary Western philosophy. I wonder if there is a risk of you yourself being accused of cultural imperialism if all you're simply doing is putting forward an alternative way of looking at the status quo albeit from an alternative set of Western values.

PHILLIPSON: Definitely and I don't intend when I'm in this country to prescribe anything - far from it. I wish to try to diagnose some of the causes of some of the problems that there may be. It's not my task to sort out what is done in Kenya or

India or the Arab World. I'm reluctant to in some way be an advisor who barges in and after two weeks or two months or whatever, and who is supposed to 'sort out' anything locally, because there's too much of that happening still and it has always happened, and the World Bank is still doing that all over the world with disastrous consequences. On the other hand I think I'm certainly influenced by working with my wife, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, an ardent feminist, who's been an activist as well as a scholar all her working life with minority language groups, particularly her own group. I mean her own source of identification is working with Finnish migrant workers in Sweden who are the blacks of Sweden if you like. Visibly they are just the same as locals; linguistically they speak a non Indo-European language and therefore as soon as they open their mouths they can be identified as being "them" rather than "us". And granted that she then worked through analyses of bilingualism, of conditions where bilingual education can work for minorities, and she put this in writing very early, I think that sort of analysis is hopefully what I'm trying to achieve in my work where some of the relevance of it can be adopted by people who know what they're doing in given contexts worldwide.

KARMANI: For the past 10 years I've been following the debate on English linguistic imperialism with great interest. Some of the key figures in the debate have been people like David Crystal, Henry Widdowson, David Graddol, Alastair Pennycook, Adrian Holliday and others and I think you can see what I'm driving at. There's a clear pattern here. They're all white, middle-class British males...

PHILLIPSON: You didn't mention Suresh Canagarajah...

KARMANI: Yes, I'm going to come that. It's just interesting that they're all talking about their perceptions of the socio-cultural and socio-political implications of English for mainly brown and black peoples in Africa and Asia. There are other people, you're right, although they sort of seem to be at the periphery in the debate. Canagarajah, in all fairness, is responding to or extending your work in *Linguistic Imperialism*. His work may simply not have been possible if your work hadn't been published...

PHILLIPSON: And he's using it for his purposes locally...

KARMANI: He might well be but my point is, do you not concede that the debate about English linguistic imperialism is often very much a white privilege? I know these are very awkward questions...

PHILLIPSON: Yeah, sure. I think it's very healthy and productive to hear you articulating that sort of position, because clearly one of the problems within the Western academy is that it may just become an intellectual game, and that means it doesn't really change very much because it doesn't slot into activism or into educational change that can in some way try to remedy some of that Western dominance.

KARMANI: But it's not just Western dominance. It's also tied up with issues around race. I say that because I don't know of any Black or South Asian British or American nationals that have had any significant impact on the debate.

PHILLIPSON: Not really, no. Have you ever heard of Chris Mullard? Because he was the first British Black sociologist to get a chair first with Basil Bernstein at the University of London and then in the University of Amsterdam. And my *Linguistic Imperialism* would never have become a doctorate without Chris chairing the doctoral committee. All sorts of other people were brought in as well. But it was Chris having the independence to take on board something that was eminently

political and being able to see the potential of it and steer it through the very complex procedures for getting that kind of thing accepted in at a continental European university. So certainly I've been strongly influenced by Chris' analysis of racism.

KARMANI: Why do you think it has taken so long for a work like *Linguistic Imperialism* to eventually get published and to begin to have an impact in mainstream English language teaching? What do you think happened? I mean your work also coincided with Alastair Pennycook's at roughly the same sort of time in the early 90s.

PHILLIPSON: Well, I think there is a good deal of openness or repressive tolerance, depending on how one chooses to label it and the guardians of the English teaching profession approved of works like Pennycook's and mine being published. However, the grandees of the profession were convinced that we had got it all wrong and that the book would go away within a couple of years, which fortunately hasn't happened, and that's exactly why it's very important to analyse the works of people like David Crystal and Janina Brutt-Griffler because I think that they're trying to wind the clock back again, despite the fact that both of those people who I've named there think that they're on the side of the angels just as much as I hope I am.

KARMANI: It's now been over ten years since the book was published. Have you shifted in emphasis in any respect in regard to your work in *Linguistic Imperialism*? Do you still subscribe to everything you wrote back in the early 90s?

PHILLIPSON: I think that many people have pointed out gaps, implications, and applications, and the need also to focus on the demand side for English, the way that demand for English is fluctuating year by year in all sorts of countries because of changes of government or of new pressures from globalization or whatever form globalization takes in regions like the Americas at the moment with the new trading agreements or the European Union where language is a very hot issue at the moment. Some of the people who have worked in more depth with specific studies of colonial education like Brutt-Griffler are trying to bring things up to date. Fine. We do need many more people doing more empirical work. Clearly Alastair Pennycook's work is trying to get a difference of focus, a difference of emphasis, more of an attempt to analyse discourses or the way decisions are worked through. I suppose he thinks that my system is too rigid. That many of the concepts are too general, that they are too big as labels to do justice to the complexity of many of the contexts. I think that all of that is a very healthy debate. I think that Tom Ricento's book, *Ideology, politics and language policies: focus on English*, where there are papers by Suresh, Alastair and several others including myself is a useful attempt to tie some of these things together. I do find that when people accuse me of factual errors in linguistic imperialism, or errors of interpretation on the basis of statements that I make are unjust. I cannot see that anything in the original book has been fundamentally wrong. Brutt-Griffler certainly claims that I draw from my evidence a conclusion that English was pushed as being the sole language of education in countries like India from Macaulay onwards. There may be one or two sentences which are open to that sort of interpretation. But nobody reading the book as a whole can then accuse me of saying that when I use the term linguistic imperialism this means you only teach English. Obviously English was an elite language in all colonies. No colonies were democratic. The idea that somehow Westminster parliamentary government would be wheeled in when the governor general was removed from Ghana or Nigeria or whatever was absolute rubbish. The tiny elite that had competence in English has obviously misused that in most post-colonial governments to maintain their privileges and where English does serve as a

mechanism for keeping the privileges of a few and keeping the rest away from enjoying the fruits of their own labour, and as we all know, developments in the global economy have made conditions for the poor far worse in most of the countries of the world

KARMANI: Just briefly, about your latest book, *English-only Europe?*; I was a little surprised when I saw the title. I mean *Linguistic Imperialism* as far as I was concerned was very much about oppressed people in Africa and Asia and your latest book seems to be about the language policy issues of the relatively more privileged nations of Europe. Don't you see a conflict here in your work between an increasingly powerful capitalist Europe and an increasingly marginalised Africa?

PHILLIPSON: That's a worrying reflection and certainly I have written it because I think that language policies issues are not being handled confidently within Europe and therefore in order to influence things in a constructive direction it needs book-length treatment. But it's not a very radical treatment perhaps even within Europe, in the sense that I feared that if I started waving around labels like linguistic imperialism early on, then I would not enter into dialogue with policy-makers who might be frightened off by that sort of terminology. The French use it of course in relation to English, but they don't see the privileged position of French earlier or still in many former French colonies as anything to do with linguistic imperialism. They have a sort of very divided self when it comes to that.

KARMANI: You seem to have adopted a very clear white Christian framework in your book. I mean, you have a table here and you talk about the European language family. I was struck by the fact that Punjabi did not feature in your book, which is spoken by 1.3 million people in the UK as well as Arabic which is spoken by 5-6 million people in France. You seemed to be more concerned about the future of Breton or Scottish Gaelic. So I got this impression that your book was based on a notion of Europe as a white Christian enterprise. Was that deliberate?

PHILLIPSON: It's a fair question and I suppose I could well, and should have devoted more space to that because immigrant cultures tend to be marginalized. On the other hand I think that the way in Britain this has been handled, where you adopt a few of the immigrant languages as foreign languages in the mainstream curriculum and where you don't distinguish between people for whom it's a mother tongue and those who may be keen to learn it as a foreign language and assume that the same audience can be accommodated within the same classroom is a totally unjustifiable way of dealing with the immigrant languages. They are monstrously marginalized in mainstream education right throughout Western Europe. I'm sure if you look at my wife's latest book, you will see that she deals with the full range of languages worldwide, because she looks at figures and diversity without the prism of the European union and the state through which I suppose I have actually looked at most of those things. I'm glad you've said that. The issue of maintaining and according rights to immigrant languages is well documented in a number of books, though progress in this area is minimal.

KARMANI: Arabic is one of the languages of the UN. Do you believe it is entitled to have a role in the EU given the large numbers of speakers in Europe?

PHILLIPSON: The UN is a different case because they only run diplomatic affairs basically and in any case English and French have traditionally been the working languages whereas Arabic came in because of the oil crisis in 1973. Chinese was there as well always. Nobody has ever investigated what the status of the six working languages is in the UN and whether the money is well spent at all. So it

tends to be a fix where clearly the UN's legitimacy is no better when it comes to the administration of languages than it is in terms of the representation of states in the security council or even the extent to which the Americans can bash the organization into whatever shape they want more or less or at least try to, even by withholding funds for years and sabotaging it in all sorts of ways quite apart from acting irrespective of a mandate from the UN when they have the urge to do so. No, the EU is much more complex because so many parliamentary state functions are coordinated in the parliament and particularly in the commission where the ministry is set up and at present the system has been for it to be the main language of any given state to be upgraded to the supranational only and obviously even the big local languages like Catalan, let alone smaller ones like Welsh or Frisian don't have a look in there. The number of speakers of a language is not a principle that is followed: Catalan has far more than Danish or Finnish, and these have far more than Latvian or Estonian, which will be official languages when those countries join the EU. So that even the fact that there may be 2.3 million speakers of Arabic in linguistic Europe is not an argument that will cut ice within the existing EU framework. This confirms a picture of them being neglected nationally as much as internationally. Do you see any signs of that changing in any context?

KARMANI: No, I unfortunately don't. And certainly not in Britain if you take for instance David Blunkett's recent public comments on ethnic minority languages in Britain.

PHILLIPSON: Those people are so impervious to argument. I read several letters by people of your background who are highly articulate in at least one of the heritage languages plus English saying how appalled they were at that approach. The British Association of Applied Linguists wrote a very detailed response with lots of input from minority language communities. I think they never got a reply from Blunkett, let alone a change in policy.

KARMANI: Thank you very much. We're going to have to end it here.

END.



Robert Phillipson is a world renowned authority in the field of English applied linguistics. He is particularly well-known for his ground breaking book 'Linguistic Imperialism' published by Oxford University Press, 1992. He has published extensively in a wide range of academic journals on issues related to language policy and the role of English as a global language. His most recent book is 'English-Only Europe? Challenging Language Policy' published by Routledge, 2003. For full details of his publications see homepage:

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