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Linguistic imperialism: a conspiracy, or a conspiracy of silence?

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ABSTRACT

The treatment of linguistic imperialism and the spread of English in Bernard Spolsky's book *Language policy* (2004) is critiqued. Robert Phillipson's *Linguistic imperialism* (1992) cannot be reduced to a conspiracy 'theory', a concept that is theoretically inadequate and often serves to deflect attention from underlying foreign policy goals and the realities of how dominance and inequality are maintained and legitimated. The interlocking of the promotion of English with wider political and economic activities is well documented: ignoring these, by detaching language from causative historical factors, amounts to a conspiracy of silence. The study of language policy and language 'management' requires more adequate theorisation, drawing on a wider range of social sciences than in Spolsky 2004, if it is to do justice to the complexity of how the power of English is constituted.

Man's mind cannot grasp the causes of events in their completeness,
but the desire to find those causes is implanted in man's soul.
And without considering the multiplicity and complexity of the
conditions any one of which taken separately may seem to be
the cause, he snatches at the first approximation to a cause
that seems to him intelligible, and says: 'This is the cause!'

Leo Tolstóy, *War and Peace*, 1865-69,
opening sentence of Book XIII

(Macmillan translation by Louise and Aylmer Maude, 1942, p. 1089).

This is a response to Bernard Spolsky's coverage of 'how English spread' in his book on language policy (2004) and his assertion that my book on linguistic imperialism (1992) subscribes to a conspiracy theory.

Branding scholarship as doing this implies that it lacks an account of the 'multiplicity and complexity' of the real world that Tolstoy portrays in his monumental analytical narrative of a society at war and peace. Tolstoy rejects simplistic understandings of historical events, and debunks the idea that great victories or policies were clinically executed top-down, an observation that tallies well with Spolsky's scepticism about whether language management actually succeeds. Tolstoy stresses human fallibility and multiple bottom-up influences, so that outcomes tend to be unpredictable and under the influence of forces beyond human control.

Accusing anyone of buying into conspiracy as an explanation is a serious allegation, since the concept implies activities that are covert and 'for an unlawful or reprehensible purpose' (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993). The implication is that no sophisticated scholar would countenance such a simplistic diagnosis. Spolsky writes that my analysis of the global dominance of

English does not see it as ‘a complex result of a multitude of factors’ (2004, 79) but as due to a conspiracy. However, a conspiracy theory is often:

the standard invalidating predicate to block tracking of strategic decisions. [...] As a philosopher, I am not interested in ‘conspiracy theories’, the favoured term to invalidate all questions about 9-11. I am interested in the deeper question of the life-and-death principles of regulating value systems which connect across and explain social orders (McMurtry 2002, 17, xiv).

It is false to suggest that the theoretical underpinning and empirical documentation of my book ignores complex political and social developments. In addition, the British and US governments have been open about their aims for global English and adopted policies to promote it. I report on policy statements that were in the public sphere as well as some of the more ‘confidential’ ones. The imperialism theory that I elaborated tries to avoid reductionism by recognizing that what happens in the Periphery is not irrevocably determined by the Centre. The efforts of the Centre do not mesh in precisely with what the Periphery’s needs are understood to be. Nor are the Periphery representatives passive spectators. They have a variety of motives, at the state and the personal level, as do the Centre inter-state actors. I state: ‘A conspiracy theory is therefore inadequate as a means of grasping the role of the key actors in Centre or Periphery. The conspiracy explanation tends to be too vague and undifferentiated to merit being called a theory. It also ignores the structure within which the actors operate’ (Phillipson 1992, 63).

Similar points are made by Stiglitz in his insider denunciation of how the World Bank operates:

I have written this book because while I was at the World Bank, I saw firsthand the devastating effect that globalization can have on developing countries, and especially the poor within those countries ... decisions were often made because of ideology and politics. As a result many wrong-headed actions were taken, ones that did not solve the problem at hand but that fit with the interests and beliefs of the people in power... academics involved in making policy recommendations become politicized and start to bend the evidence to fit the ideas of those in charge [...] There are no smoking guns here. You won’t find evidence here of a terrible conspiracy by Wall Street and the IMF to take over the world. I don’t believe such a conspiracy exists. The truth is subtler. Often it’s a tone of voice, or a meeting behind closed doors, or a memo that determines the outcome of discussions. (Stiglitz 2002, ix-x, xv)

Spolsky’s 2004 book has a chapter on ‘How English spread’, with sub-sections entitled ‘Causes of spread’, ‘Conspiracy theory’, ‘Imperialism, linguistic imperialism and globalization’, ‘English diffusion in the UK’, ‘English in the colonies’, ‘Empirical study of linguistic imperialism’, ‘The global language system’, and a concluding sub-section entitled ‘Was or did English spread?’. The implicit structuring principle of the chapter, as the concluding section suggests, is a dichotomy between English as actively promoted so as to serve Anglo-American interests and the language merely spreading. He sees the vulnerability or demise of powerless languages as a ‘natural’ development, the alternative to which is implementation of ‘some conscious policy on the part of governments, civil servants, English-teaching professionals and their elite collaborators and successors in the peripheral countries’ (op.cit., 79), i.e. a conspiracy, in his terms.

In reality, it is inconceivable that any language can ‘spread’ without there being any causal factors or agents, meaning that both items in Spolsky’s postulated binary pair - ‘did it happen or was it caused?’ (ibid.,79) - are invalid contentions. Spolsky detaches language from all the other factors

involved in empire, military, economic, religious etc, whereas Phillipson 1992 integrates the role played by linguistic imperialism within a wider imperial, exploitative structure. In an earlier review of *Linguistic imperialism*, Spolsky noted (1995, 233) that I conclude that there was no secret master-minded plan, but rather a hegemony, a concept that my book elaborates in some detail. The post-structuralist approach necessarily connects language to the wider interests it serves, and entails analysis of material, ideological and symbolic power, and the discourses that facilitate these.

Spolsky falsely states that Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson define linguistic imperialism as ‘the intentional destruction of a powerless language by a dominant one’ (2004, 79), which we have never written. The definition is ‘ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language (on the basis of their mother tongues)’ (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, 13). Linguistic imperialism is a sub-type of linguistic imperialism – and manifestly not reducible to any conspiracy ‘theory’.

Spolsky searches in his book for evidence of language management outcomes that are the ‘direct and simple result of planned intervention by identifiable human agents, that they were the direct outcome of language management’ (this reads like Tolstoy’s ‘first approximation to a cause’). After presenting evidence from a selective range of contexts, Spolsky concludes that the causal factor was imperialism rather than linguistic imperialism (ibid., 85). Drawing on work by Fishman and de Swaan, he concludes that the global pre-eminence of English is due to ‘the changing nature of the world’, English being widespread, and because ‘the remaining superpower used it unselfconsciously’ (ibid., 88), so that English was merely there for the taking (although he puzzlingly restricts this to ‘international communication’, this apparently not affecting what happens within countries).

Spolsky’s analysis exonerates him from looking at the evidence of Anglo-American involvement in strengthening English either directly (see Phillipson 1992, Pennycook 1994), or through the World Bank and local partners (Mazrui 1997, Brock-Utne 2000), and at the interlocking of English with many forms of imperialism, educational (also ignored by de Swaan), scientific, cultural and economic (which involve, in Bourdieu’s terms, cultural and linguistic capital). This is a conspiracy of silence, an ignoring of historical evidence.

The reluctance to countenance the interlocking of the multiple agendas of applied linguistics and the English teaching business (buttressed by the myth of these activities being apolitical) with geopolitical goals is symptomatic of a positivistic disconnection between identifiable activities and the wider picture of strategic political and economic interests. This paradigm is well entrenched in the academic world, not least in Britain, which has been heavily influenced by US scholarship at least since the 1920s. An unquestioning acceptance of hegemonic ideologies is also the case in the media world, which is now essentially integrated into few global corporations:

In a resolutely empiricist culture like Britain’s – where ‘practical men’ prefer to shun the bigger picture ... - it is hardly surprising perhaps that many people feel unhappy with any suggestion of behind-the-scenes collusion and manipulation of events.... Among journalists in particular, it is an article of faith to insist on the ‘cock-up theory’ rather than the conspiracy theory of history. Real life is, of course, a mixture of the two. One side-effect of this dogmatic insistence that events are largely the product of an arbitrary and contingent muddle has been a chronic refusal by the mainstream media in Britain – and most opposition politicians – to probe or question the hidden agendas and unaccountable, secret power structures at the heart of government (Milne 2005, 311).

The secrecy and underlying agendas of British foreign policy - a parameter of paramount importance to the international promotion of English - are explored in a book that draws three conclusions (Curtis 2004): 1) the culture of lying and misleading the electorate is deeply embedded in British policy-making; 2) by contrast the secret record of official files is quite open about goals that differ markedly from what is made public. Curtis regards this as evidence not of a conscious conspiracy, but rather that foreign-policy making is so 'secretive, elitist and unaccountable that policy-makers know they can get away with almost anything'; 3) humanitarian concerns do not figure at all in the rationale behind British foreign policy. Tony Blair's lying about the Iraq war provides a vivid example of these three, in tandem with similar behaviour by George W. Bush.

American goals have been explicit and consistent since World War II. In 1948, the State Department's senior imperial planner, George Kennan, wrote: 'We have 50 per cent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 per cent of its population. In this situation, our real job in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which permit us to maintain this position of disparity. To do so, we have to dispense with all sentimentality... we should cease thinking about human rights, the raising of living standards and democratisation' (quoted in Pilger 1998, 59). President George W. Bush is visibly cast in this mould.

The integration of European economies, along lines that the US dictates, has been US policy since 1945: 'The process of European integration might never have come about had it not been imposed on Europe by the Americans' (Holm 2001, 34). This policy implies adoption of the economic models and value systems that have been evolved in the USA over the past 200 years, this young country having arrogated to itself the 'manifest destiny' to determine policies in the Americas through the Monroe doctrine since the early 19th century, and policies globally in the 20th century (see Harvey 2005a, 2005b, Smith 2003). The belief in the right of the US (i.e. its corporate and political leaders) to dominate the entire world was explicitly articulated during the election campaign that brought George W. Bush to the presidency in 2000:

Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world.

Condoleezza Rice, a Bush adviser who later became his Foreign Secretary, articulated this doctrine in 'Campaign 2000: Promoting the national interest' (cited in the Danish daily newspaper *Information*, 14 June 2001):

The rest of the world is best served by the USA pursuing its own interests because American values are universal.

These are the explicit goals of the 'Project for the New American Century', the Cheney-Wolfowitz-Rumsfeld doctrine (D. Armstrong in *Harper's Magazine* 305, 2002, cited in Harvey 2005a, 80):

The plan is for the United States to rule the world. The overt theme is unilateralism, but it is ultimately a story of domination. It calls for the United States to maintain its overwhelming military superiority and prevent new rivals from rising up to challenge it on the world stage. It calls for dominion over friends and enemies alike. It says not that the United States must be more powerful, or most powerful, but that it must be absolutely powerful.

Language policy is essential to this mission, as formulated in an article 'In praise of cultural imperialism' in *Foreign policy*, by David Rothkopf, Director of the Kissinger Institute, in 1997:

It is in the economic and political interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable. These are not idle aspirations. English is linking the world.

I am not suggesting that Phillipson 1992 is a definitive statement, and indeed the closing pages suggest many ways in which study of this area could be refined and extended. Nor is this the place for more extended analysis (see Phillipson 2003, 2006a, b, c, in press). But the 1992 book, rather than being deterministic, as some claim, goes beyond traditional structuralist analysis, and fits better into what Giddens refers to as structuration theory, in which 'Structure is the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organizes' and 'Actors are knowledgeable and competent agents who reflexively monitor their action' (Bryant and Jary 2003, 254). In other words, speakers of languages that are subject to linguistic imperialism are not helpless victims, but in a more complex relationship with the forces propelling a language forward. This tallies with Bourdieu's approach to symbolic power, linguistic capital, and the relationship between dominant and dominated groups:

To understand the nature of symbolic power, it is therefore crucial to see that it presupposes a kind of *active complicity* on the part of those subjected to it. Dominated individuals are not passive bodies to which symbolic power is applied, as it were, like a scalpel to a corpse. Rather, symbolic power requires, as a condition for its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it. (Thompson 1991, 23)

We need research that can unmask some of this complicity, and active 'forces', such as a government's strategic goals and means, in order to reach a deeper understanding of how language policy fits into and constitutes the wider picture. One is then more likely to achieve what Spolsky recommends, namely studying the practices of language policy as well as official statements or regulations (op cit., 222).

Spolsky's concluding remarks classify people analysing language policy as falling into two groups, the optimists who regard language management as possible, and the pessimists who believe language is beyond control. He considers the evidence as favouring the latter, as shown by his assessment of the failures of French, Irish and Soviet language policy. In journalistic terms, Spolsky thus adheres to a 'cock-up theory', even if his choice of the technocratic term 'language management' presupposes that policies can be and are implemented. His position therefore represents a defence of the established order, an entrenchment of existing power structures (he describes himself as a liberal pragmatist, and draws on the CIA as a credible source of information, *ibid.*, ix-x), and ultimately an acceptance of an American-dominated world order and the empire of English.

It is no mitigation to read in Spolsky's introduction that he is aware of the complexity of varying approaches in the social sciences, and the role of subjective choices - and that one can still be friends with those one sees the world differently from, like myself and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, which I can only endorse. The problem is twofold, first, that one would like not to be misread or misrepresented, and second, that Spolsky's study of language policy essentially remains a sociolinguistic enterprise that fails to build on the extensive work on language in many other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Each of these seeks to engage with aspects of what Tolstoy refers to as 'the causes of events in their completeness'. The more multi-disciplinary that language policy is, the more chance it has of being theoretically and empirically well grounded, and

of being significantly useful both for historical analysis and proactively. We need to avoid conspiracy theories and any conspiracy of silence.

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