

LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM AND ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

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Introduction: connecting linguistic imperialism with endangered languages

The study of linguistic imperialism focuses on how and why certain languages dominate internationally, and attempts to account for such dominance in a theoretically informed way. Many issues can be clarified: the role of language policy in empires (British, French, Japanese, etc.); how languages from Europe were established on other continents, generally at the expense of local languages; whether the languages that colonialism took to Africa and Asia now form a useful bond with the international community, and are necessary for national unity internally - or are they a bridgehead for Western interests, permitting the continuation of marginalization and exploitation? Do USA corporate and military dominance worldwide and the neoliberal economy constitute a new form of empire that consolidates a single imperial language? With the increasing importance of China globally, will the vigorous promotion of Chinese internationally convert into a novel form of linguistic imperialism? Can the active suppression of languages such as Kurdish in Turkey or of Tibetan and Uyghur in China be seen as linguistic imperialism? What factors account for hierarchisation of languages and hierarchisation of people/s on the basis of languages (linguicism), resulting in most of the world’s languages being minoritised? Why do many languages become endangered, and even extinct, and how can this be theorised so as to make agency explicit? How is linguistic imperialism connected to linguicide (linguistic genocide), with its concomitant features of crimes against humanity in education? Linguistic imperialism can be seen as an instance of linguicism. Linguicism has been defined as 'ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language' (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, 13). Most education systems worldwide reflect linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). The evidence for or against linguistic imperialism can be investigated empirically in a given context. Likewise, evidence of linguistic genocide and crimes against humanity in education can be (and has been) investigated not only from a sociolinguistic, educational, psychological or socioeconomic point of view, but also in international law terms. We start with the state and future prospects of the world’s endangered languages. Then we analyse linguistic imperialism, past and present, and current neoimperialism. Finally, various approaches to studying the issues are sketched out, with theoretical, methodological and practical problems and challenges for the future.

The state of the world’s endangered languages

The latest edition of the Ethnologue (http://www.ethnologue.com/home.asp), still the best listing of the world’s languages, listed 6,909 living languages in 2009, with some 5.96 billion
speakers (http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=area#1). 2,110 (30.5%) of these languages are spoken in Africa, 993 (14.4%) in the Americas, 2,322 (33.6%) in Asia and 234 (3.4%) in Europe (from Table 1 of the latter Web site). Three hundred and eighty-nine languages (just under 6% of all languages), each with over one million first-language speakers, account for 94% of the world’s population (but see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, chapter 1 on various estimates and their dubious reliability). The languages with the largest numbers of ‘native’ speakers are today (Mandarin) Chinese, Spanish, English, and Hindi in that order (see Ethnologue; see also http://www.terralingua.org).

The Alaskan linguist Michael Krauss was the first scholar to alert linguists to language endangerment, with figures and criteria. He divided the world’s oral languages into three groups: ‘moribund, endangered, and safe’ languages (1992, 5-7), using three criteria: intergenerational transfer from parents to children, numbers, and official status. Languages no longer being learned by children were called ‘moribund’, a term that many Indigenous peoples resisted. He called languages ‘which, though now still being learned by children, will – if the present conditions continue – cease to be learned by children during the coming century’, endangered (1992, 6). ‘Safe’ languages are neither moribund nor endangered. Krauss (1997) nuanced intergenerational transfer further, proposing distinctions based on the age groups speaking the languages, e.g. spoken by all generations, including all, or nearly all of the children, or also by adults in their thirties and older but not by younger parents, or all speakers being in their seventies and older, and fewer than 10 speakers. Languages with no speakers were then extinct.

Krauss also used the number of speakers as a criterion. It is the demographically small languages that are endangered. According to the Ethnologue, 2009 edition, 1,824 languages had between 10,000 and 99,999 speakers, 2,014 had between 1,000 and 9,999 speakers, 1,038 had between 100 and 999 speakers, and 133 had fewer than 10 speakers; for 277 languages, numbers were lacking (http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=size, Table 2). Thus almost half of the world’s languages had fewer than 10,000 speakers. We use the 10 Indigenous Saami languages, divided between four countries (Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden), as an example (sources: Olthuis & Kivelä, forthcoming, Sammallahti 1998, Schiller 2010). Akkala Saami is seen as extinct, with maximally two receptive knowers, both over 80; Pite, Ume and Ter Saami have a few elderly speakers; Kildin Saami has fewer than 100 active speakers; Skolt and Inari Saami (both fewer than 350 speakers) and South Saami (with some 500 speakers) have strong revitalisation movements – see below. Lule Saami may have some 2000-3000 active or potential speakers. All other Saami languages except North Saami (with an estimate of 17,000 speakers) are thus in this low category with fewer than 10,000 speakers, whereas the big languages that the Saami are surrounded by (Finnish, Norwegian, Russian, and Swedish), are, according to the Ethnologue’s Table 3, among the 132 largest languages of the world (with Norwegian, with 4.6 million speakers, as the smallest).

Krauss’ third criterion, status (on which he did not elaborate very much) will be discussed extensively below in connection with linguistic imperialism. On the basis of the criteria, Krauss estimated that at least half of the extant spoken languages in 1992 would be either extinct or at least no longer learned by children by the end of this century. This estimate has been used by UNESCO in, for instance, the position paper Education in a Multilingual World, (UNESCO 2003a). UNESCO’s Safeguarding Endangered Languages website www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages estimates that ‘over 50% of some 6700 languages spoken today are in danger of disappearing’, and ‘One language disappears on average every two weeks’. Some of their examples of indications of reasons for this disappearance are that 90% of the
world's languages are not represented on the Internet, and 80% of African languages have no orthography. Pessimistic but still completely realistic estimates suggest that as many as 90–95% of today's spoken languages may be extinct or very seriously endangered in less than 90 years’ time. This is Krauss’s estimate today (e.g. 1997, see also Krauss, Maffi & Yamamoto 2004). UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit’s Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages uses this more pessimistic figure in their report, *Language Vitality and Endangerment* (UNESCO 2003b). Thus there might be only 300 to 600 oral languages left as unthreatened languages, transmitted by the parent generation to children. These would probably include most of those languages that today have more than one million speakers (Gunnemark 1991, 169-171 gave their number as 208 languages; the *Ethnologue*’s Table 2 gives a figure of 389 languages, 5.6% of the world’s languages), and a few others. Almost all languages to disappear would be Indigenous (at least 4,500 of the world’s spoken languages are Indigenous, Oviedo & Maffi 2000). Most of today's Indigenous languages would disappear, with the exception of a very few that are strong numerically (e.g., Quechua, Aymara, Bodo, Mapuche, Bhili) and/or have official status (e.g., Māori, some Saami languages, maybe Santhali – see, e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_number_of_native_speakers_in_India#100,000_to_one_million_speakers for the numbers of speakers for languages in India according to the 2001 census).

Still more pessimistic estimates suspect that only those 40–50 languages will remain in which people can, within the next few years, talk to their stove, fridge and coffee pot, i.e., those languages into which Microsoft software, Nokia mobile phone menus, etc., are being translated (Rannut 2003). Readers are encouraged to check in their daily life in how many languages manuals, translations, etc are available – probably more than Rannut’s estimate.

UNESCO’s *Interactive Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* divides the total of 2,473 endangered languages into five categories: vulnerable (601 languages), definitely endangered (647), severely endangered (526) or critically endangered (578), and extinct (229) (http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/, last updated 1 March 2011). The most important criterion here too is intergenerational transmission: Are most of the speakers old, or are the languages still learned by children (see http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/languages-and-multilingualism/endangered-languages/atlas-of-languages-in-danger/ for details)?

UNESCO uses nine factors in assessing the vitality of languages (http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/languages-and-multilingualism/endangered-languages/language-vitality/). The first six are seen as ‘major’: (1) intergenerational language transmission; (2) absolute number of speakers; (3) proportion of speakers within the total population; (4) trends in existing language domains; (5) response to new domains and media; and (6) materials for language education and literacy. The last three are (7) governmental and institutional language attitudes; (8) community members’ attitude towards their own language; and (9) amount and quality of documentation. Each of these factors is then evaluated on a 5 or 6-point scale. ‘Taken together, the tables are a useful instrument for assessing the situation of a community’s language, the type of support needed for language maintenance, revitalization, perpetuation, and for documentation’, the report says. While cautioning that ‘No single factor alone can be used to assess a language’s vitality or its need for documentation’, it declares: ‘Languages cannot be assessed simply by adding the numbers’.
The *Ethnologue* measures ‘viability’ of languages using an adaptation of Joshua Fishman’s (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS); here, use of the language and intergenerational transfer are the major factors:

(1) the language is used in education, work, mass media, government nationwide; (2) the language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services; (3) the language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders; (4) literacy in the language is transmitted locally through compulsory public education; (5) the language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form throughout the community; (6) the language is used only orally and is being learned by children as their first language; (7) the child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it with their elders but are choosing not to transmit it to their children; and (8) the only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.’ (Lewis 2009).


Despite publicized cases of ‘the last speaker’ of certain languages dying (e.g. Marie Smith Jones, Udzakh’ Kuqax’a’a’eh’, the last speaker of Eyak, in Alaska, January 2008, or Boa Sr. the last speaker of Andamanese Boa, India, January 2010 – see Anvita Abbi’s [http://www.andamanese.net](http://www.andamanese.net)), we know too little of the extent to which the predictions are really coming true. Jonathan Loh and David Harmon’s ILD, *The Index of Linguistic Diversity: Results from the First Quantitative Measure of Trends in the Status of the World’s Languages* covers the period 1970–2005. Their conclusions are that linguistic diversity has declined globally by 20% over that period whereas it has declined by 21% for the world’s Indigenous languages. Of the world’s six regions (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, Europe and Oceania/Pacific), by far the sharpest declines in diversity occurred in the Americas and Australia. The top 16 languages spoken worldwide increased their share of the world population from 45% in 1970 to some 57% in 2005. When the ILD global trendline is superimposed upon that of the Living Planet Index (which uses species diversity as a proxy of *biological diversity*), the results are remarkably similar, leading Loh and Harmon ‘to conclude that the world has lost 20–25% of its *biocultural* diversity over the period 1970–2005’ (see [http://www.terralingua.org/projects/iLd/ild.htm](http://www.terralingua.org/projects/iLd/ild.htm)).

But what are the explanations for languages becoming endangered? Endangerment has to be understood in a holistic, multidisciplinary way. This is what the concept of linguistic imperialism attempts to do.

**Linguistic imperialism past and present**

Linguistic imperialism entails the following (Phillipson 1992, 2010):

- linguistic imperialism interlocks with a *structure of imperialism* in culture, education, the media, communication, the economy, politics, and military activities;
- in essence it is about *exploitation*, injustice, inequality, and hierarchy that privileges those able to use the dominant language;
- it is *structural*: more material resources and infrastructure are accorded to the dominant language than to others;
• it is ideological: beliefs, attitudes, and imagery glorify the dominant language, stigmatise others, and rationalise the linguistic hierarchy;
• the dominance is hegemonic, it is internalised and naturalised as being ‘normal’, with the result that supply and demand (push and pull factors) for the dominant language reinforce each other;
• this entails unequal rights for speakers/signers of different languages (for Sign languages, see below);
• language learning and use is often subtractive: proficiency in the imperial language and in learning it in education involves its consolidation at the expense of other languages;
• it is a form of linguicism, a favouring of one language over others in ways that parallel societal structuring through racism, sexism and class: linguicism serves to privilege users of the standard forms of a dominant language, which represent convertible linguistic capital;
• linguistic imperialism is invariably contested and resisted.

The term imperialism derives from the Latin imperium, covering military and political control by a dominant power over subordinated peoples and territories. A panoramic history of language empires reveals great variety in the role of languages (Ostler 2005). In the period of global European dominance, a combination of military, commercial, and Christian missionary activities facilitated the transplantation of Western cultural and educational norms, and languages (Fanon 1952, Mühlhäusler 1996, Rassool 2007). Using terms like imperialism is contentious, because ‘Defining something as imperial or colonial today almost always implies hostility to it, viewing it as inherently immoral or illegitimate’ (Howe 2002, 9), although dominant powers tend to have no illusions about the workings of empire. In the Roman empire that covered much of Europe and North Africa, the strategy for co-opting a conquered people was insightfully analysed by Tacitus 2000 years ago (1948, 72):

in place of distaste for the Latin language came a passion to command it. In the same way, our national dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen. And so the Britons were gradually led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable – arcades, baths and sumptuous banquets. They spoke of such novelties as “civilization” when really they were only a feature of enslavement.

The significance of language for the colonial adventure was appreciated from its inception. In 1492 Queen Isabella of Spain was presented with a plan for establishing Castilian ‘as a tool for conquest abroad and a weapon to suppress untutored speech at home’; for its author, Antonio de Nebrija, ‘Language has always been the consort of empire, and forever shall remain its mate’ (Illich 1981, 34-5). The language was to be fashioned as a standard in the domestic education system, as a means of social control, and harnessed to the colonial mission elsewhere.

Maintenance of a linguistic hierarchy typically involves a pattern of stigmatisation of dominated languages (mere ‘dialects, ‘vernaculars’, ‘patois’), glorification of the dominant language (its superior clarity, richer vocabulary), and rationalisation of the relationship between the languages, always to the benefit of the dominant one (access to the superior culture and ‘progress’). The ancient Greeks stigmatised non-Greek speakers as barbarian, meaning speakers of a non-language. The term Welsh was used by speakers of English to refer to people who call themselves Cymry. ‘Welsh’ in Old English means foreigners or strangers, a stigmatising categorisation from the perspective of the dominant group and in their language. A dominant language is projected as the language of God/s (Sanskrit, Arabic in the Islamic world, Dutch in South Africa), the language of reason, logic and human rights (French both before and after the French Revolution), the language
of the superior ethno-national group (German in Nazi ideology), the language of progress, modernity, democracy, and national unity (English in much postcolonial discourse). Other languages are explicitly or implicitly deprived of such functions and qualities; thus they are dispossessed of their linguistic and cultural capital.

Within Europe, the expansion of dominant ‘national’ languages was generally at the expense of other languages, in processes of country-internal colonisation. The expansion of English from its territorial base in England was preceded by its imposition throughout the British Isles, a process that lasted several centuries and only partially succeeded in eliminating the Celtic languages. The 1536 Act of Union with Wales entailed subordination to the ‘rights, laws, customs and speech of England’ (cited Jenkins 2007: 132).

When French became a lingua franca for secular purposes in Europe, there was widespread belief in the intrinsic superiority of the language. The Academy of Berlin held a competition in 1782 on the theme of why French was a ‘universal language’. A winning essay argued that languages which do not follow the syntax of French are illogical and inadequate. Similarly, dictionaries of ‘foreign’ words or ‘international’ words in some countries epitomize ‘civilized’ language. The venerable Finnish Sivistyssanakirja, still in use and updated, is literally a ‘civilisation dictionary’. In fact, English, French, German and Spanish have even more ‘foreign’ loanwords (mostly Latin, Greek or even Arabic-based) but you can be perfectly ‘civilised’ without knowing where they come from.

European settlement and colonisation of the Americas, Australasia and southern Africa resulted in the decimation of many local languages. In lands occupied by Europeans elsewhere -- that is, in extraction colonies -- linguist policies discriminated in favour of European languages. Linguistic hierarchisation figured prominently, alongside racism and the propagation of Christianity, in the legitimation of the colonial venture, a policy that the British evolved in India in the 1830s. The language policy was articulated in Macaulay’s much-quoted Minute, using arguments that are still drawn on when the British seek to strengthen the position of English in India (Phillipson in press). An analysis of the links between linguistics and the furtherance of the French colonial cause documents how French ‘consumed’ other languages, glottophagie (Calvet 1974). Genocide involves the destruction (physically or otherwise) of ‘the Other’, which can be those who are linguistically different. Appropriate pronunciation is recorded as a test of group identity in the Old Testament, where an alien way of saying shibboleth resulted in the death of 40,000 people (Judges XII: 6). Linguistic genocide, as defined in work on the United Nations genocide convention, is in fact still practised widely in the modern world when groups are forcibly assimilated to the dominant culture and its language (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000); such policies can also be seen as a crime against humanity (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010).

Imperial exploitation necessarily entails cultural and education policies. In the words of Rodney (1972):

The main purpose of the colonial school system was to train Africans to help man the local administration at the lowest ranks and to staff the private capitalist firms owned by Europeans. In effect, that meant selecting a few Africans to participate in the domination and exploitation of the continent as a whole. […] It was not an educational system designed to give young people confidence and pride as members of African societies, but one which sought to instil a sense of deference towards all that was European and capitalist. […] Colonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment. (Rodney 1972, 263-4)
Local languages were used for initial literacy purposes in British colonies, whereas in French and Portuguese colonies they were ignored. In ‘British’ Africa until the 1950s, 90% of educational work was in the hands of missionaries, from a range of European countries as well as the USA, working for dozens of different Christian denominations. Their primary goal was evangelisation, whether through English or the many African languages that missionaries codified, artificially because of linguistically and culturally uninformed selection practices and arbitrarily decreed colonial boundaries. Missionaries were generally looked down on by colonial administrators, and some were at odds with settlers and commercial interests, when they disapproved of how the colonized were being treated (Etherington 2005). There was in fact a tension throughout the history of the British Empire between the empire-builders and critics of imperialism.

The USA became a global colonial power in the 1890s. In the Philippines, education implemented an exclusive use of English in education from 1898 on: ‘… public education, specifically language and literature education during the American colonial period, was designed to directly support American colonialism. The combined power of the canon, curriculum, and pedagogy constituted the ideological strategies resulting in rationalizing, naturalizing, and legitimizing myths about colonial relationships and realities.’ (Martin 2002, 210).

The pattern was comparable in the British and French colonial empires. When colonies achieved independence, language education policies continued to give a privileged position to European languages, and to insist on a monolingual approach, with native speakers seen as the ideal teachers (Phillipson 1992, chapter 7).

It is important to recall that the UK and USA have a major economic interest in strengthening English worldwide, quite apart from language being a medium for ideological, cultural and political influence. TESOL (the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages, USA) and TEFL (the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language, UK) are significant exports for the Americans and British: teaching materials, examinations (millions take lucrative UK or USA proficiency tests every year), know-how, teachers, etc. They are a vital dimension of continued English linguistic and educational imperialism. ‘The English language teaching sector directly earns nearly £1.3 billion for the UK in invisible exports and our other education related exports earn up to £10 billion more’ (Neil Kinnock, Chair of the British Council, in the Foreword to Graddol 2006). The ambivalent role of the TESOL/TEFL enterprise is explored in a number of the contributions to Edge 2006. The intensive promotion of Spanish in Latin America is also seen as constituting linguistic imperialism (several articles in Mar-Molinero & Stewart 2006).

In an article analysing why the Nigerian military government decreed in 1998 that French should be the ‘second official language’ of the country, Omoniyi describes the neglect of local languages as a ‘rape on democracy’ (2003, 23). The decision exemplifies push and pull factors working together in neoimperialism. French economic interests in the region (push) are promoted through ‘aid’ (sixteen language attachés, support for 100 pilot schools, 6 colleges of education and 6 universities, 13 French language centres, ibid., 20-21) and combine with a Nigerian political wish (a pull) to subvert US interests and Commonwealth criticism of a military regime. Omoniyi refers to ‘two Europhone cohorts that have outlived colonisation: Anglophone and Francophone Africa … they resuscitate and/or perpetuate colonial presence and rivalries, and neo-imperialist discourses in supposedly post-colonial times’ (ibid., 23).
Indian research indicates that ‘Over the post-Independence years, English has become the single most important predictor of socio-economic mobility. … With the globalized economy, English education widens the discrepancy between the social classes’ (Mohanty 2006, 268-9).

In the global village there are
a few chiefs – very powerful economically and militarily – and a lot of powerless villagers. … The market has indeed replaced imperial armies, but one wonders whether the effect is any different. … It is therefore not the case that more English will lead to African global integration; the reverse is more likely…. Giving false hopes that everybody can have access to ‘World English’ is unethical (Rubagumya 2004, 136-139).

The World Bank’s real position … encourages the consolidation of the imperial languages in Africa. … the World Bank does not seem to regard the linguistic Africanisation of the whole of primary education as an effort that is worthwhile its consideration. Its publication on strategies for stabilising and revitalising universities, for example makes absolutely no mention of the place of language at this tertiary level of African education (Mazrui 1997, 39).

Diverse approaches to language dominance; methodological and theoretical challenges

Here we report on some other approaches to language dominance, and major challenges in research and action in relation to endangered languages, starting with approaches to linguistic imperialism. *Impérialismes linguistiques hier et aujourd’hui* (Calvet & Griolet 2005) contains studies of English, French and Japanese as imperial languages. There are articles by Japanese scholars, in translation into French, which describe the various forms that Japanese linguistic imperialism took internally within Japan and in the twentieth century occupation of Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria and other conquered territory. Until 1945 Japanese was being projected as a common language for eastern Asia. While scholars in this anthology describe what they see as variants of linguistic imperialism, others such as Ostler (2005) do not see the expansion of languages as constituting linguistic imperialism.

Fishman, Conrad and Rubal-Lopez’s *Post-imperial English. Status change in former British and American colonies, 1940-1990* (1996), has a wealth of empirical description of the functions of English in many contexts. The 29 contributors to the volume were specifically asked to assess whether linguistic imperialism, in the sense presented above, was in force in the country studies they were responsible for. They all address the issue, one editor challenges the validity of the concept, but no contributors assess whether there might be more powerful or precise ways of coming to grips with theorising the dominance of English. It is only Fishman, in his introductory and closing comments, who, as well as tabulating the degree of ‘anglification’ in each state, speculates on English being ‘reconceptualised, from being an imperialist tool to being a multinational tool … English may need to be re-examined precisely from the point of view of being post-imperial (… in the sense of not directly serving purely Anglo-American territorial, economic, or cultural expansion) without being post-capitalist in any way’ (Fishman 1996, 8). Corporate activities and regional economic blocs have made the locus of power more diffuse than in earlier, nation-state imperialism.

Scholars who are sceptical about linguistic imperialism as an explanatory model for the way English has been consolidated worldwide tend to analyse matters as though there is a strict choice between (a) active US-UK promotion of English, and (b) colonised people and others
actively wishing to learn English because of the doors, economic, social, political, and cultural, that it opens. Matters are summed up as though (a) involves imposition, whereas (b) is a ‘free’ choice (e.g. Kirkpatrick 2007, 35-7). This is a false dichotomy, the two elements in no way excluding each other. In addition, neither imposition nor freedom is context-free. Nor should (a) be seen as necessarily entailing the adoption of ‘Anglo-cultural norms’ and ‘British and American culture’, whereas (b) would not, since this ignores the lexico-grammatical substance embedded in the language (grammars are ‘fossilized experience’, Mühlhäusler 1996), and the uses to which the language is put. Push and pull factors both contribute to linguistic hegemony.

Kirkpatrick (ibid.) also accepts Fishman’s conclusion that the strength of English in former British and American colonies is more due to such countries’ engagement in the modern world economy rather than ‘to any efforts derived from their colonial masters’ (1996, 640). This analysis ignores the fact that ‘engagement in the modern world’ means a western-dominated globalization agenda set by the transnational corporations and the IMF, and the U.S. military intervening, with or without a mandate from the United Nations, whenever ‘vital interests’ are at risk. English serves to consolidate the interests of the powerful globally and locally and to maintain an exploitative world order that disenfranchises speakers of other languages.

Brutt-Griffler (2002, reviewed in Phillipson 2010) has argued that colonial education was more concerned to prevent colonial subjects from having access to English than with imposing the language. She sees World English as doing away with hierarchy among speech communities, non-Western nations taking equal part in the creation of the world econocultural system and its linguistic expression. At the same time she acknowledges that the US and UK dominate the world market and that World English is the dominant socio-political language form. Her attempt to explain the growth of English worldwide is therefore internally inconsistent, theoretically flawed, and based on argumentation that ignores the reality of the market forces, political, economic and military, that strengthen some languages at the expense of others locally and globally.

Several articles in The Handbook of Language and Globalization (Coupland 2010) analyse the spread worldwide of European languages, and current hierarchies of language. Mufwene reports that many speakers of African indigenous languages are replacing them by an African regional lingua franca. He then draws the conclusion that the spread of English has nothing to do with the condition of indigenous languages and that ‘It is ludicrous to suggest that teaching English as a foreign language in Third World schools is endangering the relevant indigenous languages’ (2010, 50, 49). This is an invalid argument: teaching English as a foreign language subject in African or Asian schools does not marginalise local languages; it is the widespread use of ex-colonial languages as a medium of instruction that marginalizes local languages in education, particularly if these languages are not actually taught and used as media of instruction. This facilitates elite formation in English (producing Afro-Saxons who use only English in the home), French or Portuguese, a characteristic feature of major urban centres.

Critiques of a linguistic imperialism approach that suggest it focuses excessively on structure and underplays agency are rebutted in Phillipson 2010, 15-18. Empirical study necessarily involves analysis of implementation, of the consequences of policy decisions, and of push and pull factors. Likewise the idea that linguistic imperialism is a conspiracy theory is false (Phillipson 2010, 72-81). A conspiracy smear (it has nothing to do with theory) is often, as a study of neoliberal agendas and ideologies shows, ‘the standard invalidating predicate to block tracking of strategic decisions’ (McMurtry 2002: 17). What scholarship should be concerned with is ‘the deeper question of the life-and-death principles of regulating value systems which connect across and explain social
orders’ (ibid.). This is the overall context within which uses of ‘global’ and ‘local’ English need exploration.

The combined effect of the role of English in the British Empire, the strength of the American economy in the twentieth century, and the global power structures put in place from 1945 (Bretton Woods, World Bank, IMF, WTO, NATO, United Nations etc), along with the imploding of a communist alternative, have all contributed significantly to the current pre-eminence of English. The accumulation of wealth in the neoliberal period that led up to the financial and economic crisis of 2008 is not territorially based (it depends on ‘price-space’ rather than ‘physical space’) and is intrinsically linked to the impoverishment and dispossession of the rest of the world’s population, while privileging a small elite worldwide. Commodity capitalism evolved with pre-eminence for a number of ‘large’ languages, whereas finance capital is symbiotically linked to the consolidation of English, and its acceptance by those who might earlier have insisted on parity for other languages. Linguistic capital accumulation in and through English may entail linguistic capital dispossession for other languages. This is why the French have attempted to resist the advance of English. The governments of the Nordic countries have elaborated a commitment to ensure that increasing competence in and use of English by their citizens does not impair the vitality of the Nordic languages. The European Union is in principle committed to maintaining linguistic diversity, though many of its working practices and policies reinforce the market forces that strengthen English at the expense of other languages.

Those in power impose or induce acceptance of this societal model. In Empire, Hardt and Negri draw together many threads from political, economic and cultural theory and philosophy, and astutely unravel the role of communication in global social trends, and how language constitutes our universe (2000, 32-3):

The great industrial and financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities… the immaterial nexuses of the production of language, communication, and the symbolic that are developed by the communications industries. The development of communications networks has an organic relationship to the emergence of the new world order – it is, in other words, effect and cause, product and producer. Communication not only expresses but also organizes the movement of globalization. It organizes the movement by multiplying and structuring interconnections through networks. It expresses the movement and controls the sense and direction of the imaginary that runs throughout these communicative connections… Language, as it communicates, produces commodities but moreover produces subjectivities, puts them in relation, and orders them.

This explains why it has been so important for the corporate world not only to dominate the media but also education, which is increasingly run to service the economy, and produce consumers rather than critical citizens. In the teaching and marketing of communication skills, linguistic imperialism transforms into communicative imperialism: ‘Language becomes a global product available in different local flavours…. The dissemination of ‘global’ communicative norms and genres, like the dissemination of international languages, involves a one-way flow of expert knowledge from dominant to subaltern cultures’ (Cameron 2002, 70). The modern focus on communication skills, defined by ‘experts’, entails the dissemination of American ways of speaking. Plans to introduce English as a ‘second official language’ in Chile, Japan and Korea, and the policy of making the learning of English compulsory throughout education in China from primary school are symptomatic of this trend. The British government’s effort to make the learning
of English a worldwide ‘basic skill’, through a pretense that it serves all equally well, is manifest linguistic neoimperialism.

Linguistic imperialism is a reality in many contexts worldwide. Whether changes in the global economy, and the mushrooming of Chinese-funded Confucius Institutes worldwide, will radically alter the status of English within a decade or two remains to be seen, but is quite possible. If a privileged status is accorded to Chinese, requiring its use at the expense of other languages, as part of a new exploitative world order, a new variant of linguistic imperialism may come into being. An extreme case is the oppression that linguistic minorities are exposed to in China. A new education plan for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is designed to assimilate Uyghurs to the dominant Han Chinese language totally and rapidly. This policy dovetails with measures to crush traditional economic, cultural and religious practices of the Uyghurs (see World Uyghur Congress’ website http://www.uyghurcongress.org/En/home.asp). There are comparable measures of educational and other linguistic imperialism in Tibet.

When analysing endangered languages, a general problem is that most figures cited refer to spoken languages. What about Sign languages? How many are there? The World Federation of the Deaf’s Fact Sheet on Sign language(s) gives no figures (http://www.wfdeaf.org/documents.html). Ethnologue lists 126 Sign languages. But there are many more. Every country in the world has deaf people, and they have developed Sign languages everywhere. Since the deaf have been much more isolated from each other than oral people, they may even have developed thousands of Sign languages. Each country that has so far recognised Sign languages has recognised one and one only. Since there are over 200 states in the world, the number of the world’s official Sign languages would be, when all states have recognised at least one, over 200 (see Branson & Miller 1998 for hierarchising processes among Sign languages).

In addition, most of the figures for not only signers but also speakers are seriously unreliable, for two main reasons, economic-political and conceptual. This is also true for numbers of ‘native speakers’ (for a problematization of the concept of ‘native speaker’ itself, see, for example, Annamalai 1998, and the various contributions to Singh 1998), second language users, etc. Census and other data about languages, mother tongues, first languages, competence in various languages, etc. have never been reliably collected except for small subsamples of various populations. Thus, even for an ‘official’ Indian language like Konkani, estimates vary from the government census estimate of 2.5 million to Ethnologue’s reckoning of 7.6 million (see Rao 2010). To get more reliable figures might be possible but would require money, conceptual clarification, and training. Chaudenson (2003) states that the official figures for French as a second language worldwide are fraudulent. Of the various figures for the numbers of native / first / home language English speakers (compared in Skutnab-Kangas 2000: 39) and second language English users, scholars who regard the expansion of English as unproblematic tend to produce the highest figures. For any language planning purposes, also in education, figures have to be used, and it is a challenge to find the most reliable ones while admitting their relative unreliability. To analyse the reasons for languages being maintained, marginalised, or murdered (Skutnab-Kangas & Phillipson 2010) requires a situated framework which sees languages in the historical, economic and political context of ‘globalisation’, which we see as entailing linguistic neoimperialism. Besides, with reliable figures, demands for language-based services on governments might grow considerably and many governments are not interested in offering them.

Secondly, the concept of ‘a language’ itself is unclear. What has been seen as one language can ‘become’ several languages, either fast, because of political developments and
machinations (‘Serbocroat’ reverted to ‘Serbian’ and ‘Croatian’, and ‘Bosnian’ was ‘invented’, all within a decade; until 2003 Maithili was a ‘mother-tongue’ under the rubric ‘Hindi’ -- that year it became an ‘official’ language in India), or over time (vulgar ‘Latin’ transformed into Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, French, etc, Janson 2007). In the lively academic debates on how best to approach the relationships between languages, ethnicities, nations, identities, all these concepts are questioned, and deconstructed. Of course the borders between ‘languages’ and ‘dialects’ and between one ‘language’ and another are sociopolitical constructions. This fact has made some linguists claim that ‘languages’ do not exist (e.g. Mühlhäusler 1996, Reagan 2004). All languages are changing all the time; therefore efforts to demarcate the boundaries of a particular language are inevitably at best able to provide a snapshot of the language at a particular time and place (Reagan 2004, 44). A language is ‘ultimately collections of idiolects [what individual speakers say] which have been determined to belong together for what are ultimately non- and extra-linguistic reasons’ (ibid., 46).

However, it is vital to recognize how the fact that languages are ideological constructs is used - and misused. The extensive post-modern literature suggests that we have (should have?) no lasting identities, only flexible temporary nomadic hybrid ones. Likewise, the ‘object’ of linguistic human rights, namely specific ‘languages’, do not exist either, as countable entities, and to name and count languages such as English, Swahili or Chinese belongs, according to Jan Blommaert, ‘to the realm of folk ideologies’, and ‘only every now and then are they salient as objects of sociolinguistic inquiry’ (Blommaert 2005, 390). We who talk about languages or mother tongues are thus claimed to be reifying and essentialising something that by its nature is always changing and multifaceted. However, even these linguists themselves habitually refer to languages - - we cannot in practice manage without the concept (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010, section 3.3 for a discussion).

However, it seems that many of those postmodern researchers who deny the existence of languages and mother tongues think that just because something is socially constructed it does not have any validity (see, e.g. Makoni & Pennycook 2007). A mother tongue as a concept (and claiming a particular language as one’s mother tongue), is seen as ‘outmoded’ (Canagarajah 2005, 443), ‘irrelevant’, ‘quaint’ or ‘antedeluvian’ (May 2005, 321) and worse. These debates are mostly confined to philosophical discussions amongst linguists and sociolinguists rather than the communities who use terms such as ‘mother tongue’. Whether one is in a village in India or Nepal; in a small town in Tanzania, Malawi, Senegal, Cameroon, Mozambique or Eritrea; in the Republic of Mari-El in the Russian Federation, or in Northern China or Sri Lanka, ordinary people use the term ‘mother tongue’, not in a literal and necessarily monolingual sense, but in a broad figurative and often multilingual sense (Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012). Sometimes it is meant in a singular form, sometimes in relation to several varieties or a continuum. As Pattanayak puts it: 'Places are not geographical concepts; they exist in people’s consciousness. So does the concept of "mother tongue". It is not a language in the general sense of the word, neither is it a dialect. It is an identity signifier waiting to be explained' (1992). By negating or ridiculing Indigenous/Tribal and Minority (ITM) mother tongues as a concept, and their deeply felt identities connected to mother tongues and their lands, these researchers may support the invisibilisation of ITM mother tongues in precisely those areas where the transfer of ITM languages to the next generations is decided, e.g. schools.

As Jaffe puts it (2011, 221-222):
Even though we can analytically deconstruct foundational myths and ideologies related to languages and identities as bounded, isomorphic entities, it does not mean that these ways of conceptualizing language are not meaningful to people as they go about constructing a minority identity in the contemporary world. It is also the case that these concepts of language are very widespread, and structure national and international language policy in ways that are consequential for minority and Indigenous language movements. In short, essentialism can be “strategic” to the extent that it establishes sociolinguistic legitimacy, often a prerequisite for the mobilization of local or extralocal resources (material or attitudinal).

There are major differences in how researchers conceptualise the task of critical theory in language policy and planning (LPP). Hornberger & Johnson (2011, 279-280) identify … a tension between structure and agency, between critical theoretical work that focuses on the power invested in language policy to disenfranchise linguistic minorities, and ethnographic and action-oriented research emphasizing the powerful role that practitioners play in language policy processes… The ethnography of language policy offers a way to resolve this tension by marrying a critical approach with a focus on LPP agency, and by recognizing the power of both societal and local policy texts, discourse and discoursers.

Working with linguistic human rights as a necessary (but not sufficient) part of supporting endangered languages, especially in education, presupposes resisting approaches which disenfranchise linguistic minorities.

Just as official spoken ‘languages’ are the ones connected to the most powerful dialects, imperilling others, most of the world’s Sign languages may also be ‘disappeared’. Using this verb form implies agency by something or someone. It stresses that languages do not ‘just’ disappear by themselves, of old age or because of not being seen as fit for a postmodern digitalised age or because people opt out of them ‘voluntarily’. Many states actively seek to eliminate minority languages – but intergovernmental organisations such as UNESCO cannot easily condemn such state action, or suggest measures to counter it, let alone refer to linguicide or crimes against humanity – which is what much of the state-organised education of ITMs is guilty of (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010) - when a state is the major agent. On the other hand, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was passed in September 2007, after much resistance and many changes watering it down. Even the four states that voted against it (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA) are now in favour of it. This also has major implications for research.

**Encouraging examples of change that strengthen endangered languages and multilingualism**

There is an urgent need for more socioculturally and linguistically appropriate language policies. There are pressures to change the state of affairs. African heads of state have established an African Academy of Languages with a mandate to promote mother-tongue based multilingual education, so as to ensure that a greater proportion of African children succeed in education. The Bamako International Forum on Multilingualism, 19-21 January 2009, approved a set of recommendations to African governments and to ‘aid’ organizations that should facilitate a reversal of current educational paradigms (see [www.acalan.org](http://www.acalan.org)). Research that documents good
practice and clarifies fundamental pedagogical and linguistic principles is summarised in Benson 2009 and Heugh 2009. There is recent evidence of success in mother-tongue-based multilingual education, MLE, throughout Africa, including some of the poorest countries (e.g. Burkina Faso, Ilboudo & Nikièma 2010, Nikièma & Ilbouda 2012, Nikièma and Ethiopia, e.g. Benson, Heugh, Bogale & Gebre Yohannes 2010, 2012; Heugh, Benson, Bogale & Gebre Yohannes 2007, 2010, 2012). There are positive results, also presenting the challenges of MLE, from India, Nepal, Peru, Bolivia, and other parts of the world (e.g. several articles in García, Skutnabb-Kangas & Torres Guzmán (eds.) 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson, Mohanty & Panda (eds.) 2009 and Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh (eds.) 2012). It is important to stress that children who benefit from literacy and concept development in their mother tongue are more likely to succeed in learning additional languages, including English and French, than is currently the case (see also Thomas & Collier 2002 and later). Such policies are not ‘against’ particular languages; they are intended to promote multilingualism and to combat linguist misuse of the languages.

Christian missionaries remain active worldwide, and are often concerned with documenting and alphabetizing indigenous languages (see Harrison 2008). Some also choose to combine their mission with functioning as teachers of English, which creates a major ethical dilemma for the English teaching profession (Wong & Canagarajah 2009).

While listing and documenting endangered languages is important, it is vital to try to influence the conditions that lead to the endangerment in the first place. The poor and powerless economic and political situation of ITMs who often live in the world’s most biodiverse ecoregions is one of the important factors in the destruction of biocultural/biolinecst diversity. Habitat destruction through logging, spread of commercial agriculture, use of pesticides and fertilisers, deforestation, desertification, overfishing, etc., often result in ITMs being forced into assimilation, migration or destitution. Formal education and media in dominant languages are the most important direct causal factors in linguistic genocide – behind them are the macroeconomic, techno-military, social and political causes. Arundhati Roy (1999) estimates that 33 million people (‘development refugees’) have been displaced in India alone during the construction of big dams since 1950. Misra and Majumdar’s The Elsewhere People (2003) describes several other groups for whom ‘the battle for the school was part of the battle for land’ (Zibechi 2010, 317).

On the other hand, while work on the economic and political causes of language endangerment continues, it is also possible to influence the learning and use of even very small languages in revitalisation projects of various kinds. The Master/Apprentice programmes started by Leanne Hinton, of the University of California at Berkeley, together with Indigenous peoples, are an example. Old speakers are paired with young people who want to learn the language; they get a nominal subsistence, conditional on spending minimally some 20 hours per week together, using only the endangered language. They are free to choose any activities, provided the language is used (Hinton 2002, Hinton & Hale 2001). Such programmes are spreading to other parts of the world.

One of the smallest Saami languages, Inari Saami, spoken only in Finland (see above) is experiencing a spectacular revitalisation. Some 20 years ago there were no child speakers and only a couple of young speakers. Today there are two language nests (day care centres & preschools) where only Inari Saami is spoken (since 1997), and children can attend their primary school with Inari Saami as the teaching language (since 2000) (see Aikio-Puoskari 2009). To create anew Saami speakers in the ‘lost generation’ between the children/youngsters and grandparents, Marja-Liisa Olthuis, herself Inari Saami, organised in 2009-2010 a full-time one-year intensive fully financed Inari Saami course for people from professions where competence in the Saami
language was lacking – teachers, social workers, journalists, etc; even one priest (see Olthuis & Kivelä, forthcoming). In Norway, many Saami children can have their first 9 years of school through the medium of mainly North Saami; there are two upper secondary schools, and the Saami University College in Guovdageaidnu uses Saami only as the teaching language (see http://www.samiskhs.no/).

Various commentators in a book on Indigenous education and resistance in Latin America (Meyer & Maldonado Alvarado 2010) criticize ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘interculturalism’ as appreciation-oriented celebrations of other cultures, and diversity as commodities supporting the status quo. These celebrations render invisible the disparities of power and status between languages and cultures; as such, interculturalism is part of the effort ‘to preserve the privileges of the colonizer language’ (Mamani Condori 2010, 287).

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