

Language Imperialism and its Impact in India

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Among all the creatures of this world, only humans have the gift of communicating through language. As people dominate others, languages too dominate over other languages. European colonialism started in the 15th century, affecting the realm of language. The colonizers started spreading their languages which resulted in language imperialism. Language is considered the powerful weapon of imperialism, resulting in the linguistic hierarchy, unequal societies, language shift, and ultimately language death. In this process, some languages have become world languages or global languages. With the colonization of India by the British, English was given importance which has resulted in a language shift. English, along with Hindi, has become the state language of India.

[Keywords : Language Imperialism, Western colonialism, Assimilation, Language shift, Language death, Global language]

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1. Introduction

Humans are the unique beings in this world who have the gift of communicating through language. “A language is a way of connecting sound and meaning.”¹ Language allows us to share our ideas, thoughts, and feelings with others. The significance of language in our general public is clear as it has assisted with smoothing social contacts, safeguarding our way of life and passing our contemplations on to people and individuals in society successfully. “The World Atlas of Languages presents essential information on the current 8,324 languages spoken or endorsed on the planet, being used and not being used. It also presents point by point information regarding how 1,863 dialects are utilised in different areas at the national level.”² Though there are thousands of languages spoken in the entire world, only a few have gained wide prominence over the years. As people dominate others, languages too dominate over other languages.

Though there was colonialism in the era before Christ, the most impactful form of colonialism has been that of the modern era of European colonialism, starting with Christopher Columbus’ discovering the New World in the 15th century and mostly ending, at least in terms of direct colonial control, in the 1970s and 80s. Among other things, colonialism has had a long-lasting effect on the modern world, particularly on language. This paper attempts to study imperialism with its diverse forms known as language imperialism and its impact in India. In particular, this paper will examine how colonialism affected the education and culture of India through its language changes.

The UN’s Convention on the Child’s Rights (1989) declares: “The child is entitled to receive an education which shall be free and compulsory at least in the preliminary stages.... The best interest of a child shall be the guiding principle for those responsible for his/her education and guidance, and that responsibility lies in the first place with his/her parents.”³ Secondly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 Article 27 provides that “ethnic or religious minorities have the right to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her religion, or to use his or her language.”⁴

2. What is Imperialism?

Imperialism means rule by an emperor. Generally, it is a policy of extending a country’s power and influence through colonization,

military force, or other means. The word ‘imperialism’ is derived from imperium, which means supreme power or sovereignty. The term colonialism was predominantly applied to Western and Japanese political and financial domination, particularly in Asia and Africa, in the nineteenth and twentieth century. “Imperialism refers to the policy, practice or process through which a strong nation uses its military, political and economic power to expand its rule and extend its control over other distant political communities for economic advantage, military security, international prestige, and establishing its cultural domination.”⁵ Since it always involves the use of power, whether military or economic, imperialism has often been considered morally reprehensible.

Imperialism is often confused with colonialism. If imperialism operates from the centre, as state policy and is developed for ideological and financial reasons, colonialism is simply the development for settlement or commercial intentions. Edward Said distinguishes between imperialism and colonialism by stating; imperialism involved ‘the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory, while colonialism refers to the implanting of settlements on a distant territory’ (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperialism>).⁶ There are differences between imperialism and colonialism. First, imperialism has a longer history than colonialism. While the historical backdrop of colonialism traces back to the fifteenth century, imperialism traces back to the Romans. Also, colonialism is where one country exerts command over the other. Imperialism alludes to political or financial control, either officially or casually. Thirdly, colonialism implies taking advantage of the assets of the vanquished country to support the winner. At last, imperialism implies making a domain, venturing into the adjoining areas and extending its strength all over. Finally, expansionism can change the social, physical and monetary design.

There are many theories of imperialism. Conservative theories state that imperialism is necessary to preserve the existing social order in developed countries. It is necessary to secure trade markets, maintain employment and capital exports, and channel metropolitan populations’ energies and social conflicts into foreign countries. Liberal theorists hold that increasing the concentration of wealth within the richer countries leads to under-consumption for people. Therefore, overseas expansion is a way to reduce costs and secure new

consumption. According to Marxist theories, since the state represents the capitalist interest, it is impossible to reduce under consumption effectively through liberal strategies. The strategies involve taking away money from the bourgeoisie and redistributing the same to the proletariat. Ultimately, the world would be completely divided up, and the rich countries would then fight over the division of the world. Social-Psychological theories view that imperialism is objectless expansion, a pattern learned from the behaviour of other nations and institutionalized into the domestic political processes of a state. The state will manufacture reasons to perpetuate its existence in this process, usually through manipulating crises.

3. Forms of Imperialism

Since imperialism is a complex process, we find many types in it. Colonial, economic, political and socio-cultural is the major forms of imperialism. We will also be discussing language imperialism separately here.

3.1 Colonial Imperialism

Colonialism started with discovering new lands in the 15th century. The British, the Dutch, the French, the Spanish and other European nations discovered new lands and colonized them. With colonization, these countries became rich and tried to exploit the natives and exert political and economic influence. “Colonialism is the practice under which a nation-state, after consolidating its national power, extends its dominion over territories of other countries for exploiting their natural and human resources. The colonial power establishes its administration in the subject country and takes all resources under its control.”⁷ If colonialism is the practice, imperialism is the idea driving the practice. In colonial imperialism, a powerful nation installs its government and controls other territories and regions. This type of imperialism is a complete virtual takeover of an area with economic, political, and socio-cultural domination. Such form of imperialism permits no local people in government, and natives of the region had nothing to do with the regulations, rules, taxes, or policies set out by the foreign power. Indigenous populations were treated as “second-class citizens”. Since the British had too many colonies to administer, they started recruiting the locals for administration.

3.2 Economic Imperialism

It dominates the colonies' economies by their rulers or politically independent countries. The definition is now extended to foreign or multinational companies. If imperialism is the dominion of one group over another, economic imperialism is establishing or exploiting such dominion for continuing material advantage.⁸ The objective of imperialism was to bring profits to the nation by exploiting the undeveloped nation's natural resources through economic and political domination. Here an "imperialist country overthrows the status quo of a country by changing the power relations between the imperialist nation and others not through the conquest of territory but by way of economic control."⁹ In this form of imperialism, the imperialist nation almost controls the other nation's trade and business. For instance, it could force guidelines that preclude trade with different countries, or imperialist organizations might possess or select privileges over their regular resources. Presently, China is following economic imperialism.

3.3 Political Imperialism

Political imperialism is an externally oriented phenomenon based on developed countries' concentration of decision-making power on underdeveloped countries. Although a country may have had its government with natives in top political positions, it operates on the dictates of the imperialist country. Its power comes from the economy since economic imperialism is the main branch of imperialism that provides the material means for the other types of imperialism to work (political, cultural, communicational and military). Therefore, three points to note are: First, imperialism occurs only where distinct political communities exist. Second, the colony lacks an international political 'personality'; that is, while it possesses an identity as a distinct polity, it does not interact with other states as a sovereign equal. Finally, exploiting the weak by the strong is not essential to imperialism, but it is an often-natural outgrowth of effective domination.¹⁰

3.4 Socio-cultural Imperialism

Socio-cultural imperialism is the imposition of various aspects of its own culture onto another non-dominant community by one usually politically or economically dominant community. It is cultural in that the customs, traditions, religion, language, social and

moral norms, and other aspects of the imposing community are distinct from the economic and political systems that shape the other community. In other words, “cultural imperialism is the displacement of one culture by another utilizing same imperialistic end.”¹¹ A simple illustration of cultural imperialism is the burden of British culture in India, where English was introduced in schools, Indian soldiers dressed British-style, and western trading rules were set up. By and large, the imperialist nations expected their societies to be unrivalled, and frequently they considered themselves to be achieving enhancements in the general public.

4. Language Imperialism

Language Imperialism is important for Cultural dominion. Language imperialism is perceived as the exchange of a predominant language to others. This language move or one-sided burden happens as a method and process of imperialism. The introduction and exchange of language are viewed as an indication of power; customarily, military power and economic power in the advanced world. A comparative peculiarity has emerged, particularly in colonial settings or where a dominant society has looked to bring together a locale under its influence. For instance, in the Roman Empire, Latin - initially the language of a restricted area in focal Italy - was forced first on the remainder of Italy and later on pieces of Europe, to a great extent uprooting nearby dialects. English is considered an imperialistic language because of its dominance “asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.”¹² Though many in India believe that Hindi is the only language of India’s socio-political and linguistic unity, many others, especially in the Southern states, believe it is an imperialistic language imposed by the Central Government of India.

The thrusting of a dominant language on speakers of other dialects is linguistic imperialism. The investigation of linguistic imperialism involves dissecting the policies by which dominant languages are nationally and internationally have been consolidated and the ramifications of those consolidations for different dialects. The European dialects like English, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish reflect language strategy as a critical component of colonial empires. English was advanced by the British and the Americans, and English merged worldwide as a global language

which had devastating ramifications for different societies and dialects. However, globalization has generated or played a role in spreading English as a global Lingua Franca. With the rise of China as the second-biggest economy in the world, linguists believe that the vigorous promotion of Chinese internationally may convert into a novel form of linguistic imperialism. The very fact that Mandarin - the Chinese language - is spoken by 1.117 billion people over the globe after English shows the imperialistic tendency of the Chinese language. Similarly, active suppression of Kurdish languages in Turkey or Tibetan and Uyghur in China is seen as linguistic imperialism. Similar is the case of Hindi in India.

Language policy plays an important role in language imperialism. According to Afreen Fathima, when Hindi is forced on speakers of different languages, we rob India of the cultural diversity that it celebrates so much.¹³ The Tamils, the Kannadigas, the Bengalis in Bengal and people of other areas have resisted the imposition of Hindi. We can find Hindi imposition in non-Hindi speaking states and media. Prime Minister addresses Nation in Hindi only. All central government ministers address press conferences in Hindi only. Even government officials in MEA, IMA, is giving press meet in Hindi.

5. Causes of Language Imperialism

“Today, we may require efforts to realize that English, one of the major world languages, is recent. English which had under five million speakers in 1600, had more than thirty million speakers by 1900. English became a world language because of its wide diffusion outside the British Isles to all countries.”¹⁴ The causes of the spread of English as a global language and language imperialism can be enumerated as below :

Western European powers comprehended the significance of language for expanding their countries even in the beginning phases of imperialism. In fundamental terms, language and empire are indistinguishable entities. With the triumph of the colonizers over the locals, the presentation of the metropole's laws and language began. An early illustration of this language triumph is the British colonisation of Ireland. Even though British settlement in the island began in the twelfth century, it was during the reign of the Tudor dynasty in the sixteenth century when the British endeavoured to Anglicise the

nation completely. All things being equal, King Henry VIII stifled the Irish in Ireland to achieve a solitary national cultural identity.

Political expediency may also lead to linguistic imperialism. An unfamiliar colonialist language could be taken on to handle the issue between at least two communities. For instance, in India, wherein excess of 1652 distinct dialects and vernaculars exist, English was taken on as an official language alongside Hindi in 1950 to keep away from debates among Hindi and non-Hindi speaking states.¹⁵ It stays one of the Official languages of India right up till the present time and is the method for correspondence between non-Hindi speakers and the government.

A mediocrity mentality concerning one's language is also answerable for colonialism's growth. The underestimating of the local culture and the worship of the colonizers was pivotal to the accomplishment of any colonizer's strategy. Education, the principal device for sending values and methods of thought starting from one generation to the next, was critical in effectively forcing the colonizer's way of life. British educational policies in India comprised the sabotaging of native schooling. Conventional schooling in Sanskrit and Persian, dialects was replaced by Anglo-centric curriculum, used English as a medium of instruction and taught English language.

The greatest benefit of imperialism is that countries get to partake in the innovation and skill of strong countries, which can help in economic progression yet additionally helps in working on the general expectation for everyday comforts of individuals of less rich and less strong countries.

Linguistic imperialism also had some important advantages. According to Prof John Baugh, as noted by India Education Diary on September 27, 2021. "The imposition of the colonizers' language on the natives has been instrumental in the colonial process. Many empires put extra effort into teaching children the imperial language and made it the official language in which all education occurred. This helped to foster generational divides, encouraging children to grow up speaking an imperial language and silencing their non-fluent parents."¹⁶

Not knowing a dominant language leaves the speakers of the native language at a clear disadvantage. Today, English being the global language with no knowledge of English leaves native speakers at a clear disadvantage. It is because English is very well connected to modern economics and finance.

Disadvantages of Multilingualism also lead to language imperialism. Multilingualism has its disadvantages. First of all, one might struggle to get along in multilingual societies. Secondly, it requires a complete immersion in the language to be effective. Thirdly, multilingualism can lead to fewer relationships. Further, multilingualism is inconvenient for administration because the governments or the public agencies have to communicate in different languages. So, it becomes uneconomical for the governments and public agencies.

Today, information technology is also contributing to language imperialism. The language spoken in a country affects technological development and access to information. When the language spoken is 'inclusive' for experts in the nation and the world, sharing of thoughts is promoted, that results in hatching of technological solutions and progress. Also, assuming the language verbally expressed is commonly comprehensible with different nations, trading innovative accomplishments will be better. In these two ways, the language verbally expressed in a nation speeds up technological development.¹⁷

6. Effects of Language Imperialism

Language is considered to be a powerful weapon of imperialism. Language has often been used as a fundamental tool for acquiring and denying power in the era of imperialism. In imperialism, an empire conquers another society, turns it into a colony, and exploits it for economic benefit. However, people do not want to be colonized. Linguistic dominion likewise had practical advantages. Therefore, numerous countries invested additional work into showing youngsters the imperial language and made it the official language of all schooling. This aided in cultivating a generational divide empowering kids to grow up communicating in an imperial language and quieting their non-familiar parents and guardians. This strategy, normal in places like British India, additionally guaranteed that just the rich, influential and cooperative could accomplish political influence in the state. Those too poor to even think about getting to English mentors could not have an opportunity to finish their schooling and would never participate in India's colonial government. The outcome was a linguistic hierarchy that reflected real power. Those communicating in the imperial

language had power, while those who communicated in local dialects were underestimated.

The use of language can become a major factor in creating unequal societies in the multilingual context. Differential and controlled language use in education, administration, and mass communication regulates access to rank, status, and wealth in society and aids elite formation. Such elitism develops its vested interest.¹⁸ English language in India has been beneficial mostly for the upper classes. However, many poor people cannot afford enough education to be fully proficient in English. This has a detrimental effect on science. While a unifying language might seem beneficial for science, it mostly creates barriers to entry into scientific fields.

Language imperialism often leads to language shifts. It is also known as language transfer, replacement, or assimilation. "Language shift to social scientists means switching from traditional/Ancestral language to the non-traditional language."¹⁹ It is the process whereby the community's speech shifts to a different language, usually over an extended period. Often, languages perceived as lower status are shifted to a language considered of higher status. So, languages perceived as higher status stabilize or spread at the expense of other languages. For example, people of India speaking their mother tongue switch to English. Bilingualist people gradually shift their allegiance to a higher status language. This process is known as assimilation.

Language imperialism not only leads to language shift but also language death. Linguistic imperialism exploits and monopolizes other languages and cultures, creating language death, loss of identity and a superior-inferior division among people and languages. According to David Crystal, language death is a terrible loss to all who come into contact with it: Facing the loss of language or culture involves the same stages of grief that one experiences in death and dying. As David Crystal further adds : This is indeed an intellectual and social tragedy. When a language dies, so much is lost. Language is the repository of the history of a people. It is their identity. Oral testimony provides us with a unique view of our world and a unique canon of literature. It is their legacy to the rest of humanity. Once lost, it can never be recaptured.²⁰

More than anything else, Imperialist languages have become the global languages. A global language is given special status-priority in business, education and government- over native or mother-tongue languages. It is un-denying that English ranks as a

world language since it rules economic and social fields. At the same time, it is generally accepted as a 'foreign' language all over the planet. English as a worldwide language has prompted linguistic imperialism, bringing about the predominance of English over different languages and societies. This results in linguicide, linguistic identity loss, superior-inferior chasm among people and languages. Albeit valuable for worldwide financial and political relations, the spread of English as the worldwide language has sped up the vanishing of minority dialects by making them unnecessary for correspondence. According to Okoth Okombo, language is like a reservoir of culture. Most of the cultural wealth of a community is stored in its language: their philosophy of life, their stories, their medicinal practices. So, the death of a language is like burning a library.²¹

One interesting paradox of colonialism is that it inevitably creates mixed language, creole languages, pidgin, etc., yet these new and even useful languages are often suppressed to support official "correct" languages. As a result, we today can speak Indian English and American English. Unfortunately, this has created problems and often accentuated class divides.

There are various reasons why an imperial language lives even after the empire itself is dissolved :

1. **Creole reason** : "An imperial language lives even after an empire is dissolved because it remains the language of the people who dissolve it."²² For example, even after the independence, English has remained the official language of India and French in Canada.
2. **Nostalgia reason** : The country that has become independent recently wants to retain a link with the imperialist country for trade, culture and other purposes.
3. **Unity reason** : Usually, when the power changes, the language used by the power also changes. However, sometimes powers may change, but the language remains to maintain coherent unity of the geography.
4. **Globality reason** : "A country may continue with an imperial language not because it links to the old colonial power but because it provides a means to transcend it."²³

Whatever may be the reasons for the imperial languages to persist even after the empire is dissolved, imperialism results in, as

Debi Prasanna Pattanayak writes, “in cultural reductionism, language loss, anomie and lack of creativity and innovativeness in education due to misuse and disuse of language and blockage of communication”²⁴

7. Conclusion

The processes of language domination and loss have been known throughout linguistic history. One of the areas where the effects of colonialism are most permanent is language leading to linguistic imperialism. The effects of linguistic imperialism are exploitation and monopolization of other languages and cultures, thus creating language death, loss of identity and a superior-inferior division among people and languages. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to undo the extinction of a language, and it is hard work to keep dying languages alive. The dominance of English over other languages and cultures has led to English becoming a world language or global language. Language death is compared to the burning of a library.

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