

# Reflections by Robert Phillipson on English in Post-Revolutionary Iran. From Indigenization to Internationalization, M. Borjian (2013)

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**Book Review**

**Reflections by Robert Phillipson on  
*English in Post-Revolutionary Iran. From Indigenization to  
Internationalization*, M. Borjian (2013), Multilingual Matters,  
ISBN 978-1847699091**

**Robert Phillipson<sup>1a</sup>**

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**1. Introduction**

**F**ew people in the Western world know much about Iran, so this book is useful for an international readership with an interest in English worldwide – and its role in Iran over the past 80 years. The book addresses the fundamental tension between conflicting pressures, an official pro-Islamic, anti-American ideology (indigenization) in tension with the import of English Language Teaching (ELT) practices and products from Western countries (internationalization). The volume is a fascinating portrait, drawn by an Iranian

American, of how English as an educational subject shifted character in successive periods after the Iranian revolution. Maryam Borjian (MB) has unearthed a wealth of empirical data, and summarizes some relevant theory. She has situated English as a subject in schools, universities, and the private sector firmly in relation to overall political and ideological trends in Iran, and external influences. The issues she raises are of global as well as local interest. Has English been localized in the sense of serving Iranian purposes, or is it still

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fundamentally connected to Anglo-American interests and influence? Can changes of approach to language learning be adopted without assimilating the cultural baggage embedded in the language and the covert agendas unmasked by critical scholarship?

I am not writing a traditional book review. I am responding from a Western perspective to many of the issues raised in MB's book, and expanding on them by connecting them to current language policy trends worldwide. Language policy, language rights, and multilingual diversity are dynamic fields in education, in research, and in practice in many contexts worldwide. More progressive approaches are increasingly multidisciplinary, and impelled by the need to promote greater social justice. MB is well aware of these factors, and reveals much of the complexity of their evolution in a country in revolutionary transformation.

MB brings many relevant variables together so as to connect 'educational transfers' to the processes, causes and agency involved in movement from one country or culture to another. She rightly concludes that the reality of educational transfers is that when products, paradigms, terminology, and language move from a dominant culture to others, whether these recipients are clients (friends) or alternative systems (enemies), you need to get to the root of the politics and economics behind such activities. There are multiple causes and agendas, external and internal, local and global ones. However, terminology in this field is slippery: for instance 'internationalization' is a seemingly innocuous term, but it obscures the power relations behind this process. The same is true of terms like 'globalization', as well as terms within sociolinguistics like 'language spread'. 'Indigenization' is likewise open to a variety of interpretations. A critical approach is therefore needed to both of the narratives or ideologies in MB's conceptual framework, as

well as when exploring the rich empirical evidence assembled.

MB surveys briefly the experience of an increased focus on English in a range of countries. It is summarized in relation to 'process, causes and agents' at the cross-national, national and sub-national levels, providing useful glimpses of what has been taking place, and not least the shocking role of the World Bank in imposing conditions that strengthen English at the expense of both local languages and national interests. Even if her survey does not go into the detail of the complexity in each situation, on which the literature is voluminous, readers in Iran are likely to find the presentation stimulating and sobering.

## 2. Part I

One detail that it is not quite correct (p. 34) is to state that Turkey was 'forced' by the European Union to stop oppressing Kurdish. Countries that apply to become member-states of the EU are supposed to meet a set of criteria that cover a large number of economic conditions and also principles like the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and respect for the language and culture of minorities. The negotiation process takes many years, and many international bodies are involved in assessing whether an applicant state actually meets the relevant criteria. The EU makes recommendations, in a diplomatic fashion that does not have any clout. Turkey in fact still oppresses users and uses of Kurdish in countless, often hideous ways that are in conflict with minority language protection principles. Only in Iraqi Kurdistan is there promotion of Kurdish and minority languages in conformity with human rights principles.

MB uses the term 'supranational' and 'international' interchangeably, which is reasonable enough for her purposes. However, in the European context the term supranational is used in a very specific sense, namely to refer

to the institutions of the European Union (Parliament, Commission, Council of Ministers) that function at the EU level. These share sovereignty with member-states. Eurolaw, i.e. laws that all 28 member-states have agreed to, overrides national law, and is promulgated in all 24 official and working languages of the Union. Other regional alliances that are not as deeply integrated as the EU do not have such elaborate language policies. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) operates exclusively in English. The African Union operates in European former colonial languages and Arabic, but primarily in English. The privileging of English distances these organizations from ordinary citizens and is fundamentally undemocratic. The EU also suffers from a democratic deficit, but in principle the main language or languages of all member-states have equal validity and rights.

There are currently massive problems in the European integration project: there are political differences on what kind of EU integration is aimed at; the euro is a deeply flawed financial and economic system that was introduced in radically different countries; the proportion of European citizens voting in European Parliament elections falls consistently; there is massive corruption in Italy, Greece, and former communist countries; there are undemocratic practices in several member-states; attitudes on military activities vary, etc. The plan to integrate higher education and research across the EU, known as the Bologna process, is impacting on universities very unevenly. Even if it is supposed to consolidate national traditions, including languages, in practice 'internationalization' is equated with 'English-medium education', at least from the MA level upwards. Scholarly languages other than English risk being downgraded, and serving international rather than national purposes. The potential threat from English is being seriously addressed in Finland, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. In all of them, English is increasingly in use. The challenge is to create conditions in which there

is a healthy ecological balance between international languages (which should mean not only English!) and national languages.

It is important for people outside Europe to know that EU policy-makers aim at 'globalizing' the Bologna process. I see it as a neo-imperial project. However desirable international collaboration is in the academic world, universities worldwide need to act very carefully so as to ensure that activities are reciprocal, and correspond to national interests. Analysis of 'educational transfers' serves to sensitize one to how such processes take place, and the structural (material, economic, and cultural) forces behind them. A recent anthology with a primarily Asian focus, *English as Hydra. Its impact on non-English language cultures* (Rapatahana & Bunce, 2012) has many insightful analyses of what is currently happening when English expands at the expense of (speakers of) other languages.

Language policy is integral to the European integration project – in itself a key instance of 'internationalization' – and since it is a politically sensitive topic, failure to seriously address language policy issues at the supranational, inter-governmental level means that market forces strengthen English, its learning and use in continental European countries and in the role that it plays in EU institutions (Phillipson 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008). The challenge in understanding what has been happening in relation to English in Iran is similar in several respects to what is happening in Europe.

### 3. Part II

In a run-through of the history of English promotion in Iran, MB refers at some length to the activities of the British Council. Ironically she does not mention the historical fact that the organization was founded in 1934 on the initiative of the British oil companies that were active in Persia, who had noted that the Germans were more active and effective in

cultural relations work, which was then also called propaganda (Phillipson 1992, 137). The first meeting at which plans for constituting the BC were firmed up was held in Shell Mex house in London, a building that at the time housed Shell and British Petroleum, then a joint oil company. Commerce and culture/language have always gone hand in hand. They still do, with Shell funding scholarships for Iranians to study in the UK in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after the British Council were invited to return (p. 123).

The British Council constantly flags that it is a 'charity', but this apparently idealistic designation obscures the fact that this technicality enables it to avoid paying tax! When I worked for the British Council (1964-73), it was almost entirely funded from government sources. It now funds two-thirds of its activities through the income generated by teaching and examining English.

I would have liked to see more analysis by MB of the purposes of British and American language activities in Iran in each decade from 1942 – information that she provides in detail – and consideration of them in terms of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992, 2009) and its interlocking with educational, academic, and cultural dimensions, as well as political and geostrategic ones. As she points out, this 'educational transfer' was not altruistic but clearly reflected a number of push and pull factors (as in all hegemonic practices and linguistic imperialism), positive features as well as potential risks. In establishing or maintaining a hegemonic relationship, there is invariably a tension between coercion and consent.

Chapter 3 has a major sub-heading 'Resisting linguistic imperialism', but whether there was any such linguistic – or educational or cultural – imperialism prior to 1978 is not analyzed in the earlier, descriptive historical chapter. Chapter 3 is a revealing analysis, concluding with an excellent summary, of the many

ambiguities of the Islamic policies as they impacted on English learning, so as to detach it from external cultural influence, alongside the need to send Iranians abroad to the Anglo-American world for university training. On page 76 'linguistic imperialism' is referred to in inverted commas, which can be interpreted as a reference, i.e., a quote of the Islamists in power. But it could be read as implying that none of the US or UK activities in the entire post-1945 period (summarized in detail by MB) were imperialist. The issue of the presence or absence of linguistic imperialism would need to have been explored empirically, using a valid definition plus a set of variables so as to make an assessment of what the situation was, including the role of insiders (a pro-Western government) and outsiders, and what consequences ensued for those involved in it or impacted by it. What agency role did external forces promoting the use and learning of English (British Council, UK and US universities, USAID etc.) have, as well as local professionals and policy-makers in determining the presence of the language to an increased extent? There is a reference on page 77 to 'an ideologically driven curriculum' by Islamists. Weren't US advisers in higher education in monarchic Iran ideologically driven? The reality is that since the time of George Washington over 200 years ago, the USA has seen itself as a model for the entire world, and ascribed to itself the right to convert all other countries and cultures to the American system. There is a large amount of research that documents this, which I have drawn on in my writings.

My *Linguistic imperialism continued* (Routledge, 2009) mainly consists of articles written over a decade or so, and which develop the theory and analysis of linguistic imperialism. In recent articles I have listed variables in linguistic imperialism, for instance in 'English: from British empire to corporate empire', *Sociolinguistic Studies*, 5(3), (2011) 441-464. In my *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992), the chapter on the five tenets/fallacies in ELT

may not appear to be directly relevant in Iran, because they are mainly concerned with medium of instruction policy, as opposed to foreign language learning. However, the central fallacy, monolingualism, is absolutely central to Anglo-American ELT and applied linguistics, coupled with the myth that all of this expertise is universally relevant, even when native speakers of English are not expected to know the mother tongue of learners. These fallacies and myths are patently suspect and should be challenged; critical skepticism is needed. The current fashion of starting the learning of English ever earlier, without the age issue being properly analyzed or related to general educational principles, or to teacher qualifications, and overall curriculum development, is also opportunist and often both invalid and ineffective. Many of the activities in promoting the learning of English in Iran between 2001 and 2005 to strengthen ELT professionalism, and funded by the UK (via the British Council) and the USA, are fundamentally monolingual and monocultural. It is obviously up to Iranians to decide how relevant any 'educational transfer' of this kind is, but such foreign 'aid' has a very poor track record worldwide.

The widespread use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education worldwide, including in Europe, makes it imperative for governments and the universities involved to articulate explicit language policies that aim at meeting local as well as international needs. A great deal of activity of this kind is taking place in the Scandinavian countries and Finland. Neither monolingualism nor monoculturalism is desirable or sustainable. It is imperative that Western norms and approaches, and the monolingualism of the UK, USA, and Australia, are not taken over uncritically elsewhere.

I do not wish to create the impression that my work on linguistic imperialism is the only relevant approach to these issues. Clearly a lot

of ongoing work is also of major importance, in critical discourse analysis, critical pedagogy, North-South relations, and the forms that neoliberalism has taken in recent years, hand in glove with the expansion of English. Sensitive analysis of experience in each country or context is needed, which MB's book is a good example of. It can provide a springboard for further analysis, granted the amount of detail that she has presented. The linguistic imperialism approach is controversial because it disturbs vested interests, and tends to make Anglo-Americans who are committed to exporting their expertise worldwide defensive. Some examples of this can be found in the exchanges between me and David Crystal and Margie Berns, reproduced in Seidlhofer 2002. A more recent example is my review article critiquing Alderson's book, *The politics of language education. Individuals and institutions* (Phillipson, 2010), and the very defensive reply by Alderson in the same number of the journal. His book exposes a large number of weaknesses in British 'aid' projects to both Asian and European countries, which aimed at strengthening the learning and testing of English competence, and which largely failed. I disagree with his analysis of the causal factors determining this. Such 'educational transfer' may fail in achieving its pedagogical goals, but it may be good business for the British economy and the careers of the individuals and institutions involved. A study of Australian ELT projects in Japan and Laos by Widin, *Illegitimate practices. Global English language education* (2010), demonstrates lucidly that these served the interests of the 'donors', the Australians, and definitely not those of the recipients: the bilingual local teachers' rights and skills were in practice denied and invalidated. This is how the commodification of ELT impacts worldwide when ELT 'experts' are not culturally, linguistically, and educationally qualified to act in the country where their 'educational transfer' is being undertaken. In countries where the learning of English is relatively successful (Northern Europe, some parts of

Eastern Europe), good teacher education is not strongly influenced by the US or the UK.

The British Council is committed to the intensive promotion of English learning and British interests worldwide. It also sometimes shows more awareness of the ambivalence of their position and of the complexity of these issues. It organized a debate on linguistic imperialism at the annual conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) in 2013, in which I was invited to take part. A film is accessible on

<http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2013/sessions/2013-04-10/british-council-signature-event-linguistic-imperialism-still-alive-and-kicking>

#### 4. Part III

I am not in a position to assess the validity or representative quality of the rich data that MB assembles throughout the book. Her data lends itself to assessing push and pull factors. A key issue is whether a local language is being replaced by English: linguistic capital accumulation by dispossession is the technical term I have used for this. This is a hot topic throughout Europe currently, because it is a question of whether English is shifting from being a foreign language into a local language for particular purposes that affect and disrupt the local language ecology. How far similar processes are under way in Iran is for Iranians to assess. Is the learning of English, or its use as a language of scholarly publication and as a medium of instruction at universities, adding to the repertoire of language proficiencies of individuals and institutions – or is it functioning in subtractive ways, marginalizing local languages?

MB rightly juxtaposes coercion and consent, the tension between indigenization and internationalization in the concluding sentences of chapter 5, but I sense that until that point the impression is at places created that

everything the World Bank and UN bodies do is disinterested and that the policies (structural adjustment) imposed worldwide have been all for the good. This is emphatically not the case, quite the opposite.

Chapter 6 is a detailed description of ELT during the Ahmedinejad period, the conflicting pressures between Islamist control, and attempts by the Iranian ELT world, in the private and public sectors, to maintain links with British professionalism. It is doubtful whether this ideologically driven confrontation, with extremism on both sides, one suspects, was productive for either Islamists or British cultural and political interests. It is also unlikely that the complexity of what was undertaken during this period by serious professionals has been fully captured here, views and experiences are bound to differ. With a new government in Iran now, MB's presentation of the issues and challenges in a short concluding chapter, and her entire book, can provide a useful foundation for exploring what Iranian ELT can build on. She sums up issues, developments, and pressures, as seen and lived through top-down and bottom-up, with English rightly seen as a site of struggle – which it is likely to remain.

#### 5. Concluding Remarks

I would like to conclude with a few more reflections on the issue of the relevance of British ELT and of reference works from Western countries (for instance grammars and dictionaries with examples of language in use). Teaching materials are deeply embedded in processes of structure and ideology. Teacher proficiency is obviously a key factor, and if some Iranian English teachers have tended to be under-qualified, the strengths that they do have may be undermined by linguistically, culturally or educationally inappropriate teaching materials. I would like to see answers to such questions as whether British textbooks are really directly relevant in Iran. Do they reflect a Western consumerist, hedonist

ideology, in purportedly class-less societies (see Block, Gray, & Holborrow, 2012, and earlier work by John Gray on the international textbook business)? What about contrastive aspects? Doesn't pedagogy in Iran need a translingual approach, rather than a monolingual, monocultural one? Translation and grammar-based approaches are excellent for some purposes, and still active in most European countries, where English is learned relatively successfully, often merged with more communicative approaches. The communicative language teaching bandwagon has manifestly failed to deliver success in many countries to which it has been exported, e.g. most Asian countries.

There are a few further details that I need to comment on. The reference to the 'English Department of Cambridge University' (128) is misleading. While the examinations business, Cambridge Assessment, is formally connected to the University, it has no connection to the teaching and research of the university proper. Likewise the idea that ELT Banbury is 'one of the 23 faculties of the University of Oxford' may be an impression that marketing seeks to create, but this private language school has nothing to do with any university.

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