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Counterpoint to Henry G. Widdowson's Point

Robert Phillipson

The expansion of English

English evolved as a creole from several languages in islands off the European coast. It was consolidated as a unifying national language by creative writing that reached a peak in the sixteenth century, and in translation of the Christian Bible into English. There has always been considerable variation in speech, whereas the generalisation of education in the nineteenth century consolidated a standard form of the written language. This was a nation-building task, part of colonisation, both in the USA (Webster's dictionaries leading to linguistic independence) and England educating for a unified, stratified United Kingdom.

To suggest, as Henry Widdowson does, that there is no serious study of 'educated native speakers' is disingenuous. Dictionaries are a benchmark. The emergence of phonetics led Daniel Jones to consecrate Received Pronunciation as a class dialect. The status of the privileged variant is confirmed in plays from Shakespeare to Shaw, and in novels from Defoe onwards. In twentieth century analysis, normative, hierarchising forms and functions were clarified by Basil Bernstein, Raymond Williams, Nancy Mitford, and many others. The team of grammarians, led by Randolph Quirk, proclaimed their grammar as 'comprehensive', but were in reality focusing on and standardising middle-class British norms. Studies of regional varieties and Black English celebrate diversity but do not challenge this hierarchy. Educated native speakers are those who do reasonably well in formal education.

English was imposed as the language of power on speakers of Celtic languages in the UK. They were physically beyond the pale, but were subjected to mental colonisation, to linguistic imperialism through the imposition and substitution of English for Welsh and Gaelic (see Brian Friel's play *Translations*). Similar policies were exported throughout the British Empire, with linguistic imperialism well documented in North America (Estes 2020), India (Mohanty 2019), Australasia, Kenya (Ngũgĩ 1986), and elsewhere (Phillipson 1992, Bunce et al 2018).

Widdowson reckons that my books on linguistic imperialism consist of 'railing' (which according to Oxford Dictionaries is to 'utter abusive language'), which is unscholarly, and ignores my considerable output of publications on promoting linguistic and social justice. I was awarded the UNESCO Linguapax prize in 2010.

Globalisation and neoliberalism have strengthened English in new forms of linguistic neoimperialism (Phillipson 2009):

organisations like the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the IMF and the British Council constantly at work promoting policies that continue to demonstrate the interdependence between the corporate world and language development in favor of English. (Mazrui 2016, 25).

English is the dominant language of the current global economic and geopolitical power outside China. Anglo-American publishing in English is important for maintaining this role. As a result of Brexit the UK is no longer subject to EU regulations that aim to ensure fair social policies and respect for the common good. Neoliberalism is already giving way to libertarianism, a global movement of corporate power that seeks to privatise all public services (see www.iea.org.uk, and www.atlasnetwork.org¹).

I have frequently written that it makes sense in the modern world for anyone to develop active competence in English. On the other hand, any increased learning and use of English needs to be seen in combination with the need to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity, and to ensure greater respect for the rights that speakers of all languages should enjoy (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, eds., 1994). This is a task for national and international language policy, on both of which there is a vast literature.

In British settler states (USA, Canada, Australasia, South Africa), linguistic pressures to eliminate indigenous languages are still in force through structural denial of linguistic human rights, while efforts to revitalise minoritised languages are also in place. In former British and American extraction colonies, English unites elites and a middle class, whereas the majority population remain marginalised (Bunce et al 2016). In these countries language policy in education, and assigning a privileged role to English, are important parameters. The same is true in continental Europe and EU institutions.

Relying on Kachru's oft-cited Three Circles is problematical, even as a crude heuristic prop, because of the vast amount of sociocultural and sociolinguistic variation within countries in each of the three categories. Widdowson agrees so far as the UK is concerned. The Circles approach obscures the stratification of Englishes within each country and official state promotion of Inner Circle English. In India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, good-quality education mainly through the medium of English for generations has produced an elite whose competence in English is comparable to educated native speakers in 'English-speaking countries'. This explains why countless brilliant authors in English have emerged in these countries, as well as heads of Oxbridge colleges and international organisations and businesses. The Circles converge.

Living in Scandinavia for nearly half a century makes me confident in stating that there are many continental Europeans, including many English teachers and much of the business and political world, who are in no way influenced by the self-doubts that Medgyes wrote about 40 years ago, and that Widdowson reiterates. An increased use of English, alongside national languages, is widespread. Universities are increasingly graduating people with bilingual academic competence. This is official policy for Scandinavia and Finland.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

Many years ago I was attracted to the ELF idea of analysing whether the phonology or grammar of English could be simplified so as to make the study of these disciplines more effective, with less time wasted on subtleties of allophonic or syntactic complexity. But so far as I am aware, ELF studies are seldom very illuminating, though big claims are made for their relevance. However, the initial theoretical underpinning of ELF was thin and monolingual (one language is named, English), and has changed over time, in the direction of conceding that users of English as a foreign or second language are influenced by their personal bi- or multilingual make-up. But this is what good foreign language education has built on for centuries, contrastive analysis, an understanding of the different semantic universes encapsulated in individual languages, hence the complexity of translation, and in more recent decades the aim of communicative competence.

My experience as an immigrant, as well as an experienced learner of foreign languages, tells me that bilingual dictionaries are an absolutely vital resource, one that TESOL, ELT, and presumably ELF, largely ignore. I am adding a description at the end of this Counterpoint on my experience of learning and using several languages.

Widdowson cites no empirical evidence for the many sweeping claims and broad generalisations in his text. Nor are there references to scholarship that could be seen as of direct relevance to his argument, in World Englishes, native speakerism, English in multilingual education, or sociolinguistics. What he does rely on heavily is the advocacy of adherents of ELF, but without addressing any of the critiques of its theoretical and methodological weaknesses, from principles of philosophy and linguistics (O'Regan 2014), of social justice, or English in school and higher education, on which the literature is voluminous.

Widdowson exclusively refers to *speech*, written English is ignored, but bold conclusions about the English *language* are made.

A typical example of ELF research is a study by Motschenbacher (2013). It quotes with approval its leading advocates, Jenkins ('international academic communication is today hardly ever native communication', p. 204), Seidlhofer (people can operate with their own 'common sense' criteria, p. 194), and Widdowson ('the old conditions of relevance and appropriateness no longer apply', p. 193). Following the line of argument in such statements leads logically to users of ELF thriving in linguistic autonomy that does not rely on the vocabulary, syntax, and phonology of English in the UK, USA, and elsewhere.

Other criticisms of ELF are that levels of competence are ignored; ELF is not supposed to be a variety or several varieties; English is considered a 'neutral' tool despite the 'social, economic, scientific, and cultural implications' of English being a hegemonic language (Grin 2018: 263-267). Grin adds that 'in the real world, language learners studying English are aiming for a standard variety approaching native speaker norms - *nobody* is asking to be taught ELF, *instead*'.

English is clearly a language that exists in social life in multiple forms and identifiable contexts, independently of how it is reified in the realm of theory or the abstractions that Widdowson relies on. Adding multilingualism and translanguaging to ELF empiricism merely increases the conceptual obscurity.

Widdowson also appears to conflate ELF with all uses of English as a foreign or second language, English in value-free international or intercultural use. This strikes me as unhelpful, since English for business purposes and English for academic purposes are well-established pedagogical specialisations. One can extend this evidence of English as a *lingua economica*, and *lingua academica*, to *lingua cultura* (Hollywood, youth culture, literature, media) and *lingua bellica* (NATO, US military presence worldwide) or a *lingua frankensteinia*, (linguicide in the British, American, and Chinese empires). One can be concrete on the use of English in all such contexts (Phillipson 2009).

An important distinction in language pedagogy is between *receptive* competence (exposure to many varieties of English, when used a mother tongue and as a second language, in speech and writing) and *productive* competence (realistic targets a different levels, with a narrower normative compass, also in speech and writing, and which can include translation). In former British colonies in which English has remained an important language, the norm will be a local one in general education for all (e.g. variants of Nigerian English or Indian English), whereas at higher levels an internationally viable English, evolving towards British or American norms, is aimed at for some.

At the national/foreign language interface, for instance in higher education, an important three-way distinction is between languages in which ideas and knowledge are *generated* (creativity is generally greater in the mother tongue), languages for *circulating* knowledge (disseminating, publishing), and languages for *learning* (acquiring new knowledge). Language policy needs to take these into consideration.

I wonder how ELF relates to the fact that American English has greater impact worldwide than British English. This has been confirmed by studies in India: the young are more interested in an American English target².

Language testing

For young people aiming to attend a university in an 'English-speaking' country, how is this to be achieved? Different routes for people for whom English is not their first language exist.

Route One is to prove proficiency in English by passing a test such as IELTS or TOEFL. I am fully in agreement with Widdowson that the IELTS test is a powerful screening instrument for the 3 million who take it every year, and a lucrative business for Cambridge Assessment. The IELTS name itself, *International English Language Testing System* is misleading, since it is a British product, in partnership with an Australian co-owner. The content is neither culturally nor

linguistically neutral. It is only international, as Widdowson rightly indicates, because the clientele sit the exam in many countries. Inevitably it uses standard English norms that are relevant since the university training that follows from success in IELTS is probably study in a monolingual British or Australian university. This is English as a *lingua academica*, for teaching, learning, and publications. I cannot see that ELF has any relevance here.

Likewise the American equivalent, TOEFL, has an intrinsic anchoring in a USA national cultural universe, which is remote from the cultural and linguistic world of most test-takers. A study of TOEFL in Saudi Arabia sees it as an integral dimension of linguistic imperialism, with negative washback effects in formal education (Kahn 2009). Monolingual IELTS and TOEFL testing ignores whatever competence the individual might have in other languages as well as their cultural universe.

TOEFL also has a shocking record of maladministration. Its parent body, Educational Testing Service in the USA was ordered to analyse 58,459 tests taken between 2011 and 2014 in the UK. Its investigation classified '97% of all UK tests as 'suspicious'. It classified 58% as 'invalid' and 39% as 'questionable'³. As a result thousands of foreigners were falsely accused of cheating and were forcibly repatriated⁴.

Testing is a challenging affair, as noted even by insiders. 'Most testers have a feeling that their tests are not sufficiently accurate (...) there is a fundamental conflict between the needs of good assessment practice on the one hand, and sound financial management and good business practice on the other' (Buck 2009, 181, 177; on the anthology this article appeared in see Phillipson 2010).

Linguistic neoimperialism

It is arguable that IELTS, which Widdowson describes as coercive, can be one constituent of linguistic imperialism. I have in many articles identified the following variables as key dimensions of linguistic imperialism:

- 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, stigmatize others, and rationalize the linguistic hierarchy.
- The dominance is *hegemonic*: it is internalized and naturalized as being 'normal.'
- Proficiency in the imperial language and in learning it in education involves its consolidation at the expense of other languages: language use thereby serves *subtractive* purposes.

This is not a one-way process. A lot of push and pull factors influence the structures and processes of linguistic imperialism.

I leave it to readers to assess whether there is evidence of linguistic imperialism in contexts that they are familiar with. So far as IELTS is concerned, Widdowson's analysis of its perversities means that it qualifies as a significant dimension of English linguistic imperialism. It dovetails with the empire of British and American publishing, teacher training, and English figuring strongly in school curricula, as Widdowson also points out. British Council activities and reports argue falsely that there is a global 'need' for English for all children worldwide – no longer a school subject but a 'basic skill' - and that (British) English is essential for 'development'. David Graddol's reports forecasting the future of English for the Council are useful in some respects, but they assume that the British know how to solve the English learning problems of people worldwide. The arguments adduced for this discourse of linguistic neoimperialism are false, echoing earlier imperial impositions (for analysis in detail see Phillipson 2016a and Phillipson 2016b).

The British Council used to be entirely state funded, but has gradually been transformed into a commercial enterprise that funds around 90% of its vast budget for activities in over 100 countries by teaching and testing English, and by consultative work aiming to strengthen English in education systems (as described in its corporate plans and Annual Reports). Widdowson fails to mention that English is a billion pound business, of substantial importance for the UK economy and the libertarian goal of 'global Britain' espoused by Theresa May and Boris Johnson. Neoimperial hubris.

Route Two is by attendance at 'international' schools in cities in non-'English-speaking' countries. These are now also big business. By 2021 there were 12,000 such schools, with over 6 million students ⁵. The 'international' label is misleading when the educational content is exported from the USA or the UK, and when the language of instruction is English, the dominant *national* language of the USA and the UK, and when presumably many of the teachers are monolingual, unlike their learners who generally have a different mother tongue. International schools aim for their graduates to attend universities in the US or UK after passing the International Baccalaureate, which is now run from the USA, or the examinations of Cambridge Assessment, which is the parent body of IELTS. Cambridge exams (O and A levels) are taken in schools in 150 countries, many of them former colonies. The language and content determined in Cambridge are considered relevant for school-goers worldwide.

Cambridge University Press is a separate body. Its 2018 Annual Report states that its 'Education group publishes print and digital products for use in schools, with strong positions in Australia, Africa, India and in international schools around the world. Our reputation for developing international best practice in pedagogy and learning skills means we also have an advisory practice helping governments and schools systems with educational reform.' This is covert linguistic imperialism. The 2020 Annual Report states 'Our partnership with

Cambridge Assessment deepened in many ways, with both our English Language Teaching and Education publishing groups working closely with Cambridge Assessment on the alignment of course and exam materials.' There were sales of 336 million GBP, with China, Turkey, Mexico, and Europe strongly represented.

It is British government policy that all this activity, and the importation of fee-paying students to British universities, should strengthen British commerce and geopolitical influence worldwide. It serves to create in all countries an elite class that will service the global economy. The graduates are effectively detached from local concerns and needs, and languages.

This is the context within which I was invited to record a short talk for a symposium at the TESOL Annual Convention in 2019 in Atlanta. I prepared a talk on 'Professionalism and myths in TESOL'. The myths are:

- International schools and universities?
- English is a global need
- British English is necessary for development
- Anglo-American textbooks are universally appropriate
- English only in international affairs
- All relevant scholarship is written in English
- Global language tests are objective and valid worldwide
- The internationalisation of TESOL and ELT is apolitical.

I do not have space to elaborate on the myths here; the talk is accessible on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPwUVhEOXKE>.

In my assessment, these issues are a much greater policy challenge than what ELF is occupied with. Widdowson's intellectual reflections are part of the discourse of English as an international language with border pales, which are activated when proficiency is tested, and in the teaching that prepares for such tests. If one considers the vast amount of activity that goes on in the currently fashionable focus on exploring ELF, the cost of professorial positions, research students, MA course student fees, journals, and conferences, my question is whether the activity has precisely the material/financial and ideological/attitudinal characteristics of an imperial or hegemonic language⁶. ELF may unwittingly, by its focus on forms of English, and ignoring its socio-political embeddings, be creating a new, now international 'academic enclave' and installing new pales, and thereby strengthening the imperialism of English.

My personal multilingual evolution, and its importance for understanding English in many diverse contexts

The truism that any language can be used for noble or evil purposes should not lead one to ignore the forces behind English. As history has shown, English continues to serve the privileged worldwide. Education is inevitably complicit with this, unless one consciously counteracts it.

I have lived outside the UK throughout my professional life, in countries in which the use of English has been expanding. The fact that research into English learning and use, including ELF studies, is experiencing a multilingual turn is nothing new in countries in which the language is learned relatively successfully as a foreign or second language. This is the case in Scandinavia, where I have lived since 1973, and in Algeria and Yugoslavia, where I also worked. Despite growing up in a monolingual family and education system in the UK, I was taught Latin for eight years, through which one learns a great deal about morphology, syntax, comparative semantics, and some metalinguistic terminology. I also specialised in foreign languages at school and university.

I believe my professional understanding of language issues has benefited by not living monolingually in an 'English-speaking' country. Like many of the readers of the *ELTJ*, I assume. I hope that all Anglo-American experts on language learning have themselves been through the experience of learning and using languages other than their mother tongue up to high levels of competence, but this is not a requirement in the ELT profession (Phillipson 2016b).

In my teaching in higher education I have, alongside research, been continuously involved in building up students' competence in English, often in project work, as well as regularly teaching core language disciplines. That students accumulate competence in English by using the language dynamically is good preparation for use later in a wide range of contexts nationally and internationally. I cannot see ELF offering substantial assistance here, in part because young people are exposed to English being used in a wide range of ways.

I have constantly believed in teamwork in research and publications. *Learner language and language learning* (1984) was based on years of empirical studies of English in use across all ages from 9 to 19, written with two Danish colleagues, Claus Færch and Kirsten Haastrup, and published in Denmark by Gyldendal and in the UK by Multilingual Matters. It is still used in teacher training in Denmark. Formalised language tests have virtually no role in Danish education.

For forty years I have worked closely with my wife, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, for whose 60th birthday I edited a multidisciplinary volume with 50 contributors, *Rights to language. Equity, power, and education* (2000). We have worked closely with academics worldwide, and edited books with Indian colleagues, including *Social Justice through multilingual education*, with Ajit Mohanty and Minati Panda (Multilingual Matters 2009). These all represent efforts to limit linguistic imperialism by integrating English into education policies that consolidate all other relevant languages.

I moved to Sweden in 2014. Even if English is my main family and professional language, I need Swedish for many purposes, and I constantly refer to Swedish-English and English-Swedish dictionaries. These are necessary supports in language learning. We each use four languages virtually every day (English, Danish, Swedish, Tove Finnish, me French), we code-switch unashamedly in private, and while attrition may be under way (me 79, Tove 80), our language proficiency is also evolving productively. We are also editing a *Handbook of*

Linguistic Human Rights that Wiley-Blackwell asked us to undertake. So we are still learning about language diversity, its suppression and promotion - and about English!⁷

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POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

A Response to Phillipson

Henry Widdowson

In his interesting position paper, Robert Phillipson says many revealing things about his own deeply felt ideas and what inspires his personal belief in their validity, but I find it hard to identify what points he is making that are counter to my argument. What does seem clear, however, is his commitment to the very institutionally authorized conception of English that it was my purpose to challenge, and that he is unable or unwilling to think of English in any other way. For him, defining the educated native speaker poses no problem: 'Educated native speakers' he tells us, 'are those who do reasonably well in formal education', seemingly unaware of the vacuity of such a definition. What seems to me to be paradoxical is that in subscribing to this orthodox conception of English, Phillipson is in effect unintentionally complicit in sustaining the very imperialism that he seeks to expose. It also of course prevents him, as it prevents others of orthodox persuasion, from considering any alternative ways of conceiving of the language. Hence his dismissive attitude to ELF: 'so far as I am aware, ELF studies are seldom very illuminating'. This lack of awareness might conceivably be because of a disinclination to engage open-mindedly with the ELF literature. This is regrettable since, if not blinkered by preconception, he would find that, in its exploration of how English is actually put to communicative use in the contemporary world, the study of ELF is directly relevant to issues of linguistic imperialism, inclusivity and social justice, and so makes common cause with his own concerns that he has so often and so eloquently expressed. The difference between us is not in the cause we espouse but in how the case for it can be most cogently argued.

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The author

Henry Widdowson, Honorary Professor, University of Vienna (Austria), was a British Council English Language Officer in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and

Professor of Education with reference to EFL at the University of London. Among his publications are *Defining issues in English Language Teaching* and more recently *On the subject of English*. He has been closely associated with ELTJ for half a century: the first of the many articles he wrote for it ('Teaching English as communication') appeared in 1972, and he was on its board of management for 25 years.

Bio

I have MAs from Cambridge and Leeds Universities, and a doctorate from the University of Amsterdam. I worked for the British Council in Algeria, Yugoslavia, and London from 1964 to 1973. From 1973 I was at the University of Roskilde, which had an initial two years of multidisciplinary project work prior to specialisation. Tove and I lived on an organic farm with sheep. From 2000 a research professor at Copenhagen Business School. For details of CV and publications see www.cbs.dk/en/staff/rpm-sc.

¹ This network is huge worldwide. There are 121 accredited think tanks in Europe, and even more in the USA.

² 'Demand for English Language Services in India and China', April 2009, British Council and Ipsos Mori.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jun/27/commons-inquiry-foreign-students-accused-cheating-sajid-javid>.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/sep/24/english-test-students-accused-of-cheating-send-letter-to-no-10>.

⁵ <https://www.iscresearch.com/about-us/the-market>.

⁶ There is no space here for distinguishing between these two variants of language domination.

⁷ I thank Ahmed Kabel, Tove, and Alessia for comments on a draft of this text.