Imperialism and the English Language in Hong Kong

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The article considers whether the charge of linguistic imperialism can be appropriately levelled against the British government over the period of its colonial rule in Hong Kong. First, a theoretical analysis is made of the concept of linguistic imperialism, using ideas elaborated by Kachru, Galtung and Phillipson. Key concepts in linguistic imperialism in its different phases are seen to be Compulsion, Manipulation and Covert Control. Secondly, selected landmarks in the history of the English language in Hong Kong are considered, particularly those which might have a bearing on the question of linguistic imperialism. Thirdly, the article applies the theory of the first part to the selected historical events of the second part and assesses how far the label of linguistic imperialism can justly be applied to the story of English in Hong Kong.

Introduction

There is an increased concern these days, in the field of multilingual and multicultural development, about the invasive and sometimes destructive spread of the English language into other languages and cultures. This global spread of English has been described as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), the thesis being that English, under the innocuous guise of a helpful language for business and travel, has become a potent weapon for cultural and economic domination. Others see the spread of English more positively, maintaining that the English language has become globalised for historical and practical reasons, and that it can help the development of poor countries without necessarily endangering their cultures (Quirk & Widdowson, 1985).

This article looks at the history of the English language in Hong Kong, from the early colonial days to the present. In 1997 Hong Kong loses its status as a Crown Colony of Britain and becomes a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. It seems timely, therefore, to review the role of the English language in Hong Kong’s history and to assess whether the charge of linguistic imperialism can be legitimately laid against the Colony’s administrators and educators, or whether English has in fact helped the colony, without detriment to its Chinese culture.

The article is in three parts: in Part 1, the concept of linguistic imperialism is examined theoretically and an attempt is made to define its typical characteristics; in Part 2, the story of the English language in Hong Kong is briefly sketched, with emphasis on some topics of relevance to the theme of linguistic imperialism; Part 3 draws on the analysis of linguistic imperialism in Part 1 and applies it to the history of the English language outlined in Part 2, assessing the appropriateness of the concept of linguistic imperialism to the Hong Kong situation.
Part 1 — The Concept of Linguistic Imperialism

The boast of the British Empire, at its height, was that it spread so widely that the sun never set upon it. In other words, somewhere, someone in the sun, was speaking English. In the heady days of the nineteenth century the language seemed ‘like the English nation, to be destined to reign in future with still more extensive sway over all parts of the globe’ (Bailey, 1992: 110, quoting Jakob Grimm). Not only would English have its place in the sun, but, it would, according to imperialists like Thomas DeQuincey, fulfil its destined role, ‘running forward towards its ultimate mission of eating up, like Aaron’s rod, all other languages’ (Penneycook, 1994: 73).

Ardent British imperialists have always shared a conviction of the superiority of the English language and culture, and its potential to transform the cultures of its colonies. ‘As the English language through its tropes and rhetorical force ushered in new representations of society, newer assessments of reality and newer modes of apprehension, the result was the dissemination of a newer configuration of values, the obliteration of older identities and the creation of novel ones’ (Dissanayake, 1993).

The original understanding of imperialism was a belief in the principle of empire, and in the right of a nation to expand its empire. In its more modern sense, the notion of imperialism has been extended, and involves the gaining by richer nations of political and trade advantages over poorer nations and the setting up of structures and mechanisms by which this inequality is perpetuated.

The term ‘linguistic imperialism’ adds to the general notion of imperialism an emphasis on the pivotal place of language in imperialistic attitudes and behaviour. In analysing linguistic imperialism Phillipson (1992) quotes the Ghanaian sociolinguist, Gilbert Anstre, who describes it as any situation in which the speakers of a language are dominated by another language ‘to the point where they believe they can and should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, government, the administration of justice etc.’ (Anstre, 1979: 12–13).

Phillipson’s theory of linguistic imperialism draws heavily on Galtung (1980) who describes imperialism under six broad, interrelated headings: economic, political, military, communicational, cultural and social. The world, in Galtung’s theory, is divided into the Centre (powerful Western countries) and the Periphery (countries dominated by the Centre). Within both the Centre and the Periphery there are other Centres and Peripheries.

Imperialism has characteristically three stages. In the first stage, the elites in the Periphery countries are the colonisers themselves. In the second stage, in neo-colonialist societies, the colonisers are replaced by a local elite, speaking the language of the colonisers and often educated in the colonial country. In such neo-colonial societies, transnational organisations are usually present, playing a key role in keeping the country effectively subjugated. In the next stage of imperialism, the neo-neo-colonialist, the physical presence of the dominating Centre’s personnel becomes unnecessary, since international control can be effected through technology, especially computer technology.

Phillipson considers linguistic imperialism as conceptually distinct from
Galtung’s six categories of imperialism, but as pervading all of them in practice. Most obviously, linguistic imperialism is akin to cultural imperialism, which is intimately linked with language, but it also diffuses Galtung’s other categories, since all of them are mediated through language.

Phillipson argues that the linguistic imperialism of the English language tends to follow the phases outlined in Galtung’s general theory of imperialism: first, the early-colonial stage which is blatantly compulsive — the ‘Stick’ stage; next, the neo-colonial stage, which is less obviously oppressive and which is marked by offers of advantage to a select elite — the ‘Carrot’ stage; thirdly, the neo-neo-colonial stage, in which control is achieved more subtly, by ideological persuasion through the media and technology — the ‘Idea’ stage.

Another significant contributor to the discussion on linguistic imperialism has been Braj Kachru (1985; 1992a; 1992b). Labelling ESL (English as a second language) as the ‘other tongue’, he says: ‘The vision of an other tongue evokes memories of language being used as a powerful — sometimes ruthless — instrument for religious and cultural subjugation and for colonisation’ (Kachru, 1992a: 1). Much of Kachru’s work deals with new Varieties of English. He describes the ‘new caste’ of English speakers which has developed, with its own Variety of English, and with values which are different from the traditional values enshrined in the parent English language.

Kachru warns of the danger of centralised linguistic power: ‘In the past, the control and manipulation of international power have never been in the hands of users of one language group’ (Kachru, 1995: 295). This one group, the imperial Centre, controls in different ways in different situations. The first, and most blatant method of control is by displacing native languages altogether and replacing them with the language of the Centre, English. In other situations, English may not displace the native language and may even concede dominance to it in certain areas, but English will establish itself as an important, possibly official language — a kind of ‘dual control’ situation. A third type of situation exists when English has become so much an accepted guest that it is made a member of the family, is taken over by the host country and is transformed into a local Variety of English. This may cause problems of control for the Centre, but the customary strategy of the Centre in such situations is to convince such host countries that their English Variety is ‘impure’ and that they must constantly purify it against the ‘Standard’ found only in the Centre.

Aspects of Kachru’s theory can be combined with that of Phillipson/Galtung to improve our understanding of linguistic imperialism. There are obvious similarities between the two theories: Phillipson/Galtung’s phases of Stick, Carrot and Ideas are reflected in Kachru’s stages of Language Displacement, Language Accommodation and Language Varieties Purification. The root idea of their first phase (Stick/Displacement) could be said to be Compulsion or Coercion. Their second phase (Carrot/Accommodation) is marked by Manipulation and Clever Compromise. Their third phase (Ideological/Purifying Varieties) could be described as Covert Control.

As with all categorisation, the categories and phases are not neatly separate: there is overlapping and blurring. Nor is there necessarily a chronological sequence, as the terms ‘phases’ or ‘stages’ might imply. However, with these
caveats, the general notions of Compulsion, Manipulation and Covert Control would seem to be useful in describing the different aspects and stages of the complex notion of linguistic imperialism.

With this preliminary analysis, then, of the nature of linguistic imperialism, we can now proceed to Part 2, which reviews some of the important landmarks in the history of the English language in Hong Kong.

**Part 2 — The History of English in Hong Kong**

**The early missionary schools**

A convenient starting point for an investigation of English in Hong Kong is the middle of the nineteenth century, when the first schools were established. These were church schools, run by groups like the London Missionary Society, their main purpose being to train local candidates for the Christian ministry. They were quite openly evangelistic, giving a good deal of emphasis to religious studies. When an Anglican Bishop was made Chairman of the Schools Body in 1853, it was decided that half the school curriculum should be given to Scripture.

However, these early missionary schools, as well having a religious purpose, had also more general educational aims. As Endacott (1979: 133) says: 'There is no reason to doubt that the churches were interested in education for its own sake'. Moreover, Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong from 1854 to 1859, believed in secular education and discouraged proselytisation. Accordingly, Christian instruction in the schools was made voluntary.

Most of the teaching in the early missionary schools was in Chinese. However, one of the schools, St Paul’s College, also taught English, since it trained interpreters for the Foreign Service, as well as training future ministers of religion. The teaching of English in schools was encouraged by a Committee on Education in 1853, ‘to prevent misunderstanding and to act as a bond of union between the many thousands of Chinese who have made this place their residence and the handful of Europeans by whom they are governed’ (Endacott, 1979: 137).

**Central School**

By 1860 Hong Kong had twenty ill-equipped and poorly-run village schools with Chinese instruction. Wealthier Chinese sent their children back to China for a traditional Chinese education. The Governor, Hercules Robinson (1859–65) supported the idea of centralising Hong Kong’s schools and in 1862 the Central School was founded. The curriculum had three parts: Chinese Classics, English and Scripture.

The first headmaster was Frederick Stewart, a man of energy and vigour. A genuine educationist, he refused to use the school as a base for evangelisation, and, in the face of opposition, made Scripture lessons voluntary. He had difficulty in achieving a reasonable standard of English in the school, since as soon as the pupils had learned a little, they left to put it to profitable use in the market place. Those who did not leave were a further cause of frustration to Stewart who described them as ‘giving themselves airs, by affecting a superiority they do not
possess, by forming clubs to the exclusion of those who do not know English’ (Endacott, 1979: 231).

**Growing need for English**

As we have seen, for the first few decades of the 1800s there was no great need for an English-speaking local population. The first governors had a small expatriate civil service which had few direct dealings with the Chinese. However, as the colony grew, the need grew for a body of local Chinese with a knowledge of English, to act as a bridge between the administration and the local people.

Successive governors in the latter part of the nineteenth century emphasised this need. Governor Hennessy (1877–82) criticised the Central School because it did not produce people with enough English to qualify for jury service, and stated his belief that the primary object of government effort in education should be the teaching of English. An Education Commission which he appointed duly supported the Governor’s views.

The emphasis on English in education became more pronounced with the appointment of Dr Eitel as Inspector of Schools. Eitel proposed to introduce English-medium instruction into primary schools. If the Chinese population did not like this, they could set up their own schools with Chinese-medium.

Governor Bowen (1883–85) was also keen on ensuring that the educational system produced a body of people competent in English, and proposed an exam in English for all appointments to government clerical posts. The effect of this on the school system was immediate, with a great increase in emphasis on the English language in schools.

Governor William Robinson (1891–98) criticised the earlier educational policy in Hong Kong, commenting that it was ‘extraordinary, not to say discreditable, that after fifty-five years of British rule, the vast majority of Chinese in Hong Kong should remain so little anglicised’ (quoted in Fu, 1975: 51). In tune with the Governor’s tone, Central School made English the medium in all of its teaching and in 1894 significantly changed its name to Queen’s College.

In the same year an event occurred which was to have an important impact on the position of English in Hong Kong: a bubonic plague broke out and killed many, especially the poorer Chinese. One of the reasons for the large death toll was that the Chinese could not understand the directives of the medical authorities on basic matters such as hygiene. This confirmed Governor Robinson in his decision ‘to elevate the Chinese people of the Colony by means of English rather than Chinese teaching’ (Endacott, 1979: 241).

The attempt to educate British and Chinese pupils together was proving increasingly unsatisfactory and British parents were demanding separate schools for their children. A wealthy Chinese, Ho Tung, had donated a building to the government for the express purpose of a school open to both Chinese and British. However, this was made exclusive to British pupils. Though Ho Tung did not retract his offer of the school, he registered a strong objection, saying the action was totally opposed to the spirit of his gift.

**Hong Kong University**

As the administration of the colony became more complex, the need for a more
highly educated, English-speaking elite became more patent. When Governor Lugard (1907–12) proposed the founding of an English-medium University in Hong Kong in the early 1900s, the idea was unpopular with the British business community, who feared that if the best of the local Chinese were given a good English-medium tertiary education, they would soon prove serious rivals to British business interests. Despite this, Lugard pushed ahead with the founding of the University, which was opened in 1912, with the medium of instruction English.

By making tertiary education English-medium, Lugard, though a liberal man with respect for Chinese culture, effectively ensured that secondary schools would adopt English-medium, since English-medium secondary pupils would clearly have a much better chance of gaining a place in the University and of doing better than those from Chinese-medium schools. Lugard’s decision thus critically affected the question of language of education in Hong Kong, a problem which would remain with the government for the duration of the twentieth century (Johnson, 1993/4; Boyle, 1995a).

The new University did indeed produce the educated Chinese elite which Lugard had wanted. However, it was a more critical elite, which despite, or perhaps because of, its own English-medium education, became more vociferous on the lack of vernacular education.

World events, however, during the first half of the twentieth century, notably the two world wars, left the question of a vernacular language policy for Hong Kong very low on the British government’s agenda. The Hong Kong government gave theoretical support to the idea of Chinese-medium education, but not much was done in practice to enforce it in schools which continued to use English as the medium of instruction.

As things settled down after the second world war, a government report (Jennings & Logan, 1953) reviewed the question of the medium of instruction in Hong Kong University. While accepting that learning in general was better done in the vernacular, the report concluded that, given the advantages of English-medium at tertiary level, it did not seem necessary that English should be replaced by Chinese. Another Report ten years later (Marsh & Sampson, 1963) again voiced the growing concern for more educational opportunities in the vernacular, but concluded that not much could be done about it.

The Chinese University

A milestone for the cause of vernacular education was the founding of the Chinese University in 1963. With a mandate to provide tertiary level education in Chinese, especially for graduates from Chinese-medium secondary schools, this seemed a real advance for the cause of mother-tongue education.

However, the hope was short-lived (Yau, 1989). The new University quickly ran into problems of lack of Chinese textbooks and reference materials and lack of qualified bilingual staff. Moreover, students from English-medium schools were more successful in gaining entry into the Chinese University than students from Chinese-medium schools, since the matriculation exam had an English language paper. Hence, the number of Chinese-medium schools, instead of
increasing, actually declined dramatically in the years following the founding of the Chinese University.

**Government reports on education**

In 1982 the Hong Kong government invited a panel of international experts to review the colony’s educational system. Their Report did not mince its words on ‘the present lamentable situation concerning the use of English as a medium of instruction’ (Llewellyn, 1982: III.4) and strongly recommended the wider use of Chinese medium of instruction in Hong Kong schools. It also warned against perpetuating a system which would ‘foster an elite caste of English users’ (Llewellyn III.1.12).

Following on the Llewellyn Report the government formed an Education Commission which brought out a series of six Reports between 1984 and 1996. An immense amount of work went into these Reports and they covered many aspects of the educational system in Hong Kong. On the question of language in education, the Reports strongly recommended Chinese-medium for schools. However, they did nothing to enforce it, leaving the decision on medium of instruction to headmasters of individual schools.

Among the many topics treated in the Education Commission Reports we will consider only three, which have a particular bearing on the theme of linguistic imperialism. The topics will be: the use of expatriate English teachers; the question of code-mixing; the policy of streaming pupils into Chinese-medium or English-medium schools at the end of primary school. We will look briefly at each of these in turn.

**The Expatriate English Teachers Scheme**

The first Education Commission Report, in 1984, recommended a wider use of expatriate native-speaker teachers of English. The idea was taken up by the Education Department who, in conjunction with the British Council, embarked on a project which became known as the Expatriate English Teachers Scheme (EETS).

This involved the hiring of a large number of expatriate teachers of English from U.K. to teach in Hong Kong secondary schools. It was hoped that the presence of native-speaker English teachers would encourage the Chinese pupils and teachers to use more English in and outside of the classroom.

The scheme was not a success, for a variety of reasons which could have been foreseen (Boyle, 1997a; Johnson & Tang, 1993). The local teachers resented the better conditions given to the expatriates, especially the provision of a housing allowance, something the locals had tried unsuccessfully to get for years. They were also not convinced by the new gospel of communicative language teaching, heralded by the native-speakers.

**Code-mixing**

The Reports consistently condemned the practice of code-mixing (mixing Cantonese and English) in the classrooms of Anglo-Chinese schools. The contention was that by mixing two languages, neither would be learned properly. Repeated pleas were made in successive reports for a clear-cut division between the two languages.
This flew in the face of a swelling body of academic opinion and research evidence which saw code-mixing in Hong Kong schools in a much more positive light (Boyle, 1997b; Gibbons, 1983; Johnson, 1991; Lin, 1996; Yau, 1993). The most outspoken criticism of the government’s position on code-mixing came from the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong, a body of largely local academics (Luke, 1992). Despite these appeals for a more open attitude to code-mixing, the Education Commission Reports remained adamantly against it.

**Streaming**

This was the sorest point of all for the members of the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong. The idea of streaming was that pupils would be separated into Chinese-medium or English-medium schools, depending on how they fared in an exam at the end of primary school. The prediction of the Education Department, based on fairly scanty research evidence, was that about 30% of pupils should proceed to English-medium secondary schools and 70% to Chinese-medium.

The Linguistic Society objected strongly to this streaming policy, claiming that, ‘what is bound to happen is that education through one’s mother tongue will be stigmatised. Those who learn through the Chinese medium will be those who cannot make it to the English medium classes. The damage this will inflict on the self-esteem of the majority of learners is unthinkable’ (Luke, 1992: 161).

The adverse educational effects of streaming at the end of primary school were also pointed out. Primary school children in Hong Kong work under immense pressure, with many hours of homework each night. Many of them have, in addition, private tutors at the weekends for extra exam-preparation work. The introduction of the streaming system will undoubtedly make primary schools even more frantically exam-oriented.

**Part 3 — Linguistic Imperialism in Hong Kong**

In attempting to apply our analysis in Part 1 to the historical theme outlined in Part 2, it will become apparent that it is not easy to assess the extent to which the label of linguistic imperialism can be applied to the story of English in Hong Kong. One thing that emerges clearly from a consideration of the history is that, whether they thought they were being culturally compromised or not, Hong Kong Chinese have always wanted English. Recent surveys (Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Pennington & Yue, 1994) have shown that there is no change in this respect. In the early days of the missionary schools, as soon as the opportunity for English was offered by St Paul’s school, Chinese parents grasped it avidly. There was no compulsion.

Christianity has, of course, in some situations been an instrument of imperialism, with religious conversion a prelude to economic conversion, thus providing the colonisers with a cheap, honest, God-fearing workforce, with sufficient knowledge of English to be able to communicate with their superiors. In Hong Kong, however, there is little evidence that the missionary schools, in the early days, were used for this purpose. The founders of the early missionary schools were liberal educators rather than religious zealots. In addition, there was no political or economic need to make English compulsory in those days: a small
body of government officials administered the colony in English, and the Chinese got on with their jobs in Chinese. There was very little contact between the two.

By the time the Central School was firmly established, however, the importance of English had become clearer to the Chinese: witness the early leavers from Central School, headed for the market place, armed with their scant English. Two early lessons, in fact, about English in Hong Kong can be learned from the story of Central School: first, Hong Kong Chinese have always seen the English language very pragmatically — as a means of doing better business; and secondly, that those with English quickly felt a sense of superiority over others. In other words, though there was no compulsion to learn English (education was voluntary), the commercial usefulness and the social prestige of the English language made it a highly desirable commodity.

A new phase began in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the need for more competent English speakers grew. If parents wanted their children to be educated in a good government school, they had to accept English-medium. If they thought their children might thereby lose their Chinese culture, then they could send them back to school in Mainland China. However, there is little evidence that Chinese parents felt oppressed by this policy. Most of them were in fact happy to have their children in English-medium schools. Hong Kong Chinese parents were ruled then, as would be seen again and again throughout the succeeding century, by pragmatism rather than nationalism.

In the early twentieth century, when Hong Kong University was founded by Governor Lugard, it was largely out of the need for an elite body of highly educated, English-speaking personnel to work in the lower ranks of the civil service. However, the danger was already foreseen of over-educating this elite and of broadening education too widely. A workforce was still needed, after all, to do the menial jobs, for which English was not necessary. A balance had therefore to be struck on the question of medium of instruction, with English for some, but not for all.

For Lugard the decision to make the new University English-medium was practical rather than ideological: the Administration needed its English-speaking elite and the University was an obvious way of getting this. It is unlikely that Lugard was being deliberately manipulative in his action, though he must have known that an English-medium University would lead to English-medium feeder secondary schools.

Nevertheless, in the context of linguistic imperialism, the founding of an English-medium University was extremely significant. Commenting on the equivalent situation in India, Dissanayake (1993: 339) observes: ‘In 1857 three universities were established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras and in these institutions English assumed the status of the primary medium of education. This paved the way for the Englishisation of India, which was to have profound consequences for the sub-continent’.

The same was true to some extent with the founders of the English-medium University of Hong Kong. As we saw in Part 2, the decision spilled back into the secondary schools and seriously weakened the prospects of a viable Chinese-medium education system. Concentration on English in secondary schools became a necessity.
Many of the government’s decisions over the first half of the twentieth century on the question of the language of education were, if not coercive, at least cleverly manipulative. Frustrated calls for action were growing among Chinese educators, but they were answered by government stalling. The prevailing system of education which produced an English-speaking elite, but did not over-educate the population at large, was working well enough for the Hong Kong government and it was hesitant about changing it for the sake of broader vernacular education.

The founding of the Chinese University seemed to spell some hope for the supporters of Chinese-medium education. A cynical view might be that the founding of the Chinese University was in reality a clear example of linguistic imperialism, of clever manipulation, by the British government. By calling the new University the ‘Chinese University’ they appeased the Chinese-medium wing, while knowing that the new University would actually strengthen the cause of English-medium education. A more benign interpretation would be that the founding of the Chinese University was indeed a genuine effort to further the cause of Chinese-medium education, but that the idea was ill-conceived and had not been thought through properly.

Government Reports over the past quarter of a century can be read as genuine efforts to find a balanced solution to many of Hong Kong’s educational problems. The tone of much of the Llewellyn Report was in fact frankly anticolonial and condemnatory of the position of English in Hong Kong schools. But the subsequent six Education Commission Reports were verbose and ineffectual. Chinese academics and educators, who had objected for many years to the government failure to implement Chinese-medium education, have grown frustrated and, like Hamlet, treat the Education Commission Reports as ‘words, words, words’.

The Expatriate English Teachers Scheme was one of the more obvious examples of linguistic imperialism in the story of English in Hong Kong. The local Chinese Teachers’ Union had given a rational, explicit critique of the scheme to the Education Department before it was implemented. Their comments were shelved and the scheme was pushed through. It then ran into precisely the difficulties predicted by the local teachers.

Again, on the question of code-mixing, the government’s stance has been authoritarian and intransigent. It is not entirely clear why this should be, given the weight of evidence in support of judicious code-mixing. At best, it could be said that the government sees code-mixing as the thin end of the wedge, and that the simpler course is to condemn totally any use of Chinese in the English classroom. More cynically, it could be said that the government realised that code-mixing, if accepted, would complicate the introduction of its controversial streaming policy.

This streaming policy, if it is fully implemented, does represent the nearest to compulsion and raw linguistic imperialism that has yet been seen in Hong Kong. The carefully argued and eloquently expressed objections from the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong have been ignored. So too have the wishes of Hong Kong parents. One of the strongest reasons why Chinese-medium schools have not worked in Hong Kong is because Chinese educators and parents have not been
brought into the discussion enough (Boyle, 1995b). Instead, they had been offered a paternalistic assurance from the Education Department that it knows what is best for their children.

Parental preference for English-medium in Hong Kong is a purely practical decision. Parents know very well that their children have a better chance in the competitive job-market of the future if they have good English. Hence, while they do not want their children to lose their Chinese culture, they are even more keen on their children being properly prepared for the world of work. The government’s streaming policy abrogates from parents their right to judge for their children on the balance between the preservation of cultural values and the benefits of multilingualism.

This problem of governmental versus parental choice for English-medium education is by no means exclusive to Hong Kong, and writers from many parts of the world, for example African writers like Afolayan (1984) and Bisong (1995), have commented on it. As Bisong (1995: 125) says: ‘The parent sends the child to the English-medium school precisely because she wants her child to grow up multilingual. She is also not unmindful of the advantages that might accrue from the acquisition of competence in English’. And he goes on to condemn simplistic approaches to the question:

Arguments that carry the implication that the users of this language (English) do not know what is in their interest should not be seen simply as patronising. They reveal a monolingual failure to grasp the complex nature of a multilingual and multicultural society. (Bisong, 1995: 131)

In Hong Kong, it is precisely this complex nature of a multilingual and multicultural society which makes the label of linguistic imperialism only partially appropriate. Hong Kong people down the years have chosen English for practical reasons. It has served them well in helping transform a barren rock into a prosperous city. And along with their option for English, they have managed to preserve their identity: their Chinese language and basic Chinese culture has remained intact.

At the same time, as we have seen in the course of this paper, the charge of linguistic imperialism in Hong Kong has to be sustained to some extent, at different times, and in different ways. The compulsion and coercion, characteristic of the first phase of linguistic imperialism, has never been very evident in Hong Kong. Unusually, it is only as the colonial power prepares to go that compulsion is threatened.

On the other hand, the second phase of linguistic imperialism, involving manipulation and clever compromises, has been part and parcel of British rule for over a century. A local English-speaking elite, which enjoys superior status and affluence, has indeed grown under the colonial regime (Lin, 1996). But the price that has been paid for this is that Chinese-medium education is in a sorry state and many local Chinese educators have been alienated and driven to linguistic nationalism.

The extent to which phase three of linguistic imperialism, covert control, has been established, is very hard to judge. On the one hand, in terms of Kachru’s Varieties, Hong Kong people are happy enough with their Variety of English,
which serves them for business and international purposes, and they are not over-worried about constantly purifying it at the sacred source of Standard English. On the other hand, the influence of transnational organisations is profound, the mass media are very influential, and computer technology is almost a religion in Hong Kong. Further, the full effect of the Internet, in achieving covert linguistic imperialism, has yet to be realised.

As the Royal yacht Britannia steamed out of Hong Kong harbour at midnight on 30 June, 1997, with the last Governor, Christopher Patten, aboard, it was certainly the end of an era for the British Empire in Hong Kong. It was not all bad, as Jan Morris (1996), a historian of Hong Kong, has said: ‘Empire is so politically incorrect now. I am not an apologist, I recognise the evils of empire, but also the good and excitement of it’. Part of Britain’s good legacy to Hong Kong was the addition of the English language to a vibrant Chinese community and culture. How the new Chinese government deals with this legacy remains to be seen.

References


