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INTERVIEW

# Resisting Linguistic Imperialism: A Conversation with Robert Phillipson on Linguistic Human Rights, Multilingualism, and Indigenous and Minority Languages

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**Abstract**

Amid the rise of global monocultures, dominant colonial languages, and ongoing effects of colonial legacies on language practices, linguistic imperialism continues to pose a significant challenge in the struggle for linguistic human rights and revitalization of Indigenous and minority languages. This conversation with Professor Robert Phillipson—an eminent scholar in applied linguistics, known for his seminal work on linguistic imperialism and linguistic human rights—explores complexities and nuances in (in)equitable multilingualism, Indigenous languages and knowledges, and environmental sustainability. Reflecting on extensive academic and field experiences, particularly his work with distinguished scholar and mother-tongue education activist, the late Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson delves into the intersectionality of linguistic human rights, decolonization, and language policy. Through analysis of language in preservation or destruction of cultural and ecological knowledge, Phillipson illustrates how dominant language education systems, nation-state policies, and international power dynamics contribute to linguistic discrimination, linguicide, and marginalization of Indigenous and minority languages. The conversation calls on educators, policymakers, researchers, and citizens to challenge linguistic imperialism and work toward a more equitable future for Indigenous and minority language communities.

**Keywords**

Indigenous languages; linguicism; linguistic human rights; linguistic imperialism; multilingualism

## A TALE OF TWO CONCEPTS: THE ORIGINS OF LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM AND LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS

**Paul:** Thank you very much, Professor Phillipson, for your time to speak with us today for our JEM special issue on the intersectionality of multilingualism, Indigenous knowledges, and sustainability. What inspired you to coin the term linguistic imperialism, and how would you define it in today's context with the growing recognition of linguistic human rights?

**Robert:** There was a shift from the study of economic and political imperialism into understanding cultural imperialism because of the role of Hollywood media influence globally, with communication scholars thinking in such terms. It was then logical to add *language* or *linguistic imperialism* (Phillipson, 1992) because that term had not been used in

any way. There was a need for something to be defined, theory-based, exemplified, and in all sorts of ways worked on.

Among the triggering factors is that I worked for nine years straight after university for the British Council, which is concerned with the cultural promotion of England worldwide and the teaching of English. I was there, age 22, in Algeria, just two years after its independence (July 5, 1962), after a hideous War of Liberation (1954-1962), with atrocities on both sides. At the same time, it was then independent, more or less—not so much economically, of course—but basically, Algerians could try to do what they wanted to do at that point, and they were very keen to link up with other non-aligned countries, former colonies, and places like Yugoslavia. French colonialism, therefore, caught my interest. One of my close friends there wrote a book on French colonial language policy, a PhD supervised by Pierre Bourdieu, and other people were obviously very interested in the details of how French was imposed. The attempt was definitely made to eliminate Arabic from any kind of presence in colonial France. Within Algeria, there had been a strong Arabic culture with education through Arabic. But the French were there for 130 years, so that when I arrived, all my friends, all the young people I met—or people who came to my classes—were French educated, and many had been to study in France. At the same time, the colonial project was like British policy in India—divide and rule—and the French were very keen that the Berber people, Amazighs, could be made more pro-French than Arabs. The first novels about the experience of French colonization, written in French, were by Berber authors. And when I arrived in 1965, there was a professor of Berber at the University of Algiers, a famous novelist, Mouloud Mammeri, but when Boumédiène, the head of the Army, took power and became president about six months after my arrival, Mammeri and Berber were removed from the University. Boumédiène was a keen Arabist, and the plan was that the education system would progressively switch from French into Arabic. Berber languages had trouble surviving, which reveals something of the way linguistic imperialism functions: that some languages are preferred, and others are marginalized.

One triggering factor for my interest in bilingualism and linguistic imperialism was that I was an immigrant in 1973 in Denmark, where I chose to live. I had three children growing up bilingually, with Danish as a dominant local language, English in the family, and they became fully proficient in both languages. Later, I met Tove Skutnabb-Kangas from Finland, who in the 1970s had written two very influential reports on working-class Finnish kids in Swedish towns, for whom the Swedes provided inadequate education. She worked with a

social psychologist on how best to get those kids to succeed in education while maintaining their mother tongues, meaning Finnish in Sweden. Two reports on this, one on schooling, one on preschools, were written by those two people, and then actually published by UNESCO in the 1970s. This was great because then Tove went to UNESCO in Paris and met bilingualism scholars, not just from Canada, but also India and other places as well, which was something that she could build on. Another factor which ties in with your question about ecology, or the ecological environment in which languages function, was that she had earlier spent a whole year at Harvard. Her husband was a medical doctor, and he went for postgraduate training in Boston, Massachusetts. Einar Haugen, who was the professor of Scandinavian languages at Harvard, was one of the key founders of bilingualism studies, language ecology, and language policy. Tove was appointed as his research assistant, so she had this year when she basically got into a whole range of the sociology of language issues and how languages could best be maintained. She became involved in the politics of trying to fight for the rights of migrants in Sweden: her profile was scholarly with activism right throughout her life. She moved to Denmark in 1979, and we set up house together. She was deeply involved with the Saami, the only Indigenous people officially recognized in continental Europe, and this means that dialogue with very well-informed Saami was a deep influence on her awareness of the need for rights to be granted. The concept of *linguistic human rights* was one that she formulated, first in the world, and in 1980, she wrote what the characteristics were in Swedish. I'll give you the four characteristics, which are essential for looking at linguistic human rights:

1. Every social group has the right to positively identify with one or more languages and to have such identification accepted and respected by others. So, this is self-identity and other identity.
2. Every child has the right to learn the language or languages of his or her group fully.
3. Every person has the right to use the languages of his or her group in any official situation: education, the tax office, health, crime, or whatever. So, existential social contacts, for the members of any group.
4. Every person has the right to fully learn at least one of the official languages in the country where she or he is resident, according to his or her own choice.

So, basically, this is a model for bilingual education or multilingual education, mother-tongue-based bilingual education, at least in terms of key criteria. Those principles were used in one of her books, which was translated into English, *Bilingualism or Not: The Education*

*of Minorities* (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984, published in Swedish in 1981). At this time, I was working with Danish colleagues on what became *Learner Language and Language Learning*, which was published simultaneously in Denmark and the UK.

Then there was a conference in Brazil in 1987 with a European language teacher organization and UNESCO support. That conference produced the first International Declaration of Linguistic Human Rights, which was inspired by Tove's earlier draft. There were lawyers there, there were educationalists, there were minority people, and so on. Things got, in a sense, recognized at least by some involved people at that point. The lawyer, in fact, was from Canada, where there was already massive experience on how to implement language rights, with litigation as well, there were court cases already on aspects of that in Canada, which have continued ever since.

## LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS, DECOLONIZATION, AND MULTILINGUALISM

**Paul:** Thank you for sharing what inspired you to coin the term linguistic imperialism and its connection to linguistic human rights. How do you see linguistic imperialism and linguistic human rights intersecting with the themes of multilingualism, sustainability, and Indigenous knowledges for this special issue?

**Robert:** I think if I were to define sustainability so far as languages are concerned**,** it would be that all speakers of minority languages should have the same rights as what people take for granted for dominant languages. They should also be able to have a language that meets their needs in formal education and other contexts afterwards. That's easy to say, of course. But then, once you get into the power structure, in any context, clearly things become immediately more complicated.

I think one of the key people who had a huge influence on Tove and me was the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, famous for *Decolonizing the Mind* (wa Thiong'o, 1986), and a whole set of novels that he wrote in the language of the colonizer, which is what he had in education through schooling and university in East Africa. Later, he started working with people in his mother tongue, Kikũyũ, who were with him writing plays, which somehow encapsulated what life was like with a corrupt elite and with the neglect of African languages. This was so unwelcome to a very corrupt government in Kenya that he spent a year in prison, and he wrote a novel in Kikũyũ on toilet paper, which was fortunately smuggled out somehow or other. So, he started writing novels in an African language, and he was a real pioneer in that, and he's written several novels since that time in Kikũyũ. They have been

translated right from the start into Swahili and later by him into English. So, he's really been somebody who has understood how linguistic human rights could be established in certain domains. He's also written a lot of books on non-fiction, which are often lectures that he's then converted into books, books about cultural imperialism, linguistic imperialism, and how they challenged the syllabus of the University of Nairobi, so that it was not English dominant. He was obviously working for minoritized languages and wanted Kenyans to have something that was culturally appropriate, rather than imposed by a colonizing power.

While being inspired by Ngũgĩ, Tove and I were working closely with NGOs in Denmark and Norway who were committed to supporting the liberation movement of SWAPO, Namibia. We met in the 1980s regularly to plan how education should be organized once the South African illegal occupation of Namibia ended, which it did in 1990. We got to know Nahas Angula well, when he was preparing to become Minister of Education. The role of the diverse African languages in education was a key issue. We attended two workshops in Zambia at a United Nations Institute for Namibia, which was established to train people to take charge of the country. As preparation for advising Namibians, I looked carefully into how African languages had fared after colonization ended, in Ghana and Nigeria in West Africa, and in Tanzania, Kenya, and Zambia in East Africa. We were also liaising with the Inter-African Bureau of Languages of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). We wrote an article entitled "Namibian educational language planning: English for liberation or neo-colonialism?" with a close friend, a South African in exile, Hugh Africa. This was published by the OAU in French and English in 1985.

The exploration of language policy in former colonies influenced many aspects of what became my book *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992). In particular, I saw the pedagogical strategy underpinning British and American efforts to strengthen the learning of English worldwide as being based on five fallacies: monolingualism; the native speaker as the ideal teacher; an early start; maximum exposure; and the subtractive fallacy (chapter 7 in the book). I was also familiar with the research on bilingual education and the reality of multilingualism in much of Africa and Asia. As one of the British people whom I interviewed for my book put it—I think he was in Tanzania—what the British have done is to convert kids who arrive as multilinguals into monolinguals in English. That was the aim of colonial education, and little changed after independence. The contexts and the decision-making processes are followed up, including the challenges for Namibia, in the following two chapters of the book.

Another strong influence on my thinking was our contact with scholars in India. We went to a World Sociology Congress in Delhi in 1986, after which there was a follow-up on decolonizing scholarship in Mysore, where the Central Institute of Indian Languages is. It's a government-funded institute which works for the rights of all Indian languages, which, of course, is complex, because there are between 600 according to some people, and 1,600 according to others. It's a huge issue, but the Institute has a responsibility to support all Indian languages. There are lots of brilliant scholars who have evolved from there, led by Debi Prasanna Pattanayak, the first director, and E. Annamalai, his successor.

There are lots of brilliant Bengali scholars in the whole area of colonialism and reactions to it. Ajit Mohanty, from Orissa, has worked with tribal languages. The word "tribal" doesn't have the same stigma as in colonized Africa—it means local people who are not from the dominant group. With these tribal people, he has, in fact, ensured that mother-tongue education could take place in some groups in that part of India. The population of Orissa is 47 million! Ajit has a summary in a book which some of you, I hope, have heard of, *The Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights* (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023), which was published about two years ago and fortunately is now in paperback and available as an eBook at a much more moderate price than typical hardback handbooks. Ajit has a very good chapter (Mohanty, 2023), summarizing the work. His own book, *The Multilingual Reality: Living with Languages* (Mohanty, 2018), is a brilliant analysis of how diversity can be maintained.

## INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION: RESISTING LINGUICIDE AND GENOCIDE

**Paul:** Thank you. On a related note, this special issue emphasizes equitable multilingualism. How can societies resist linguistic imperialism while promoting multilingual practices and linguistic human rights?

**Robert:** I think it's very helpful to use the term *linguicism*, which Tove coined (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988), because she was saying, look, everyone's talking about racism and sexism, why are we not all talking about linguicism, which she then defined. The two key dimensions in that are:

1. Structure: meaning funding, status, position in education systems, and all those things that represent the way power is administered.

2. Ideology: how far is there an understanding that all languages have value and can be what's absolutely distinctive for each particular culture, and there should be positive attitudes to them.

There is a formal definition of linguicism that people can draw on. One of the books that Tove was deeply involved in is about revitalizing a very threatened language. This book, called *Revitalising Indigenous Languages: How to Recreate a Lost Generation* (Olthuis et al., 2013), was co-written by a woman from a very small community and a journalist who had learned the language. They succeeded in getting state funding in Finland so that they could attract people from all different walks of life in this community who were dominant in Finnish at the time, so that they could get time off to learn their ancestral language effectively. One of the three authors of the book was a local person who was actually of Finnish origin, married to a Saami, who was a student along with Saami people on the course, which lasted one year. The result of that process is presented in this book. Now, the vitality of the language is enormous in that area, from formal things like when you talk to people in offices, to education. Hip hop now flourishes in this particular variant of Saami. This is because the linguicist pressure of Finnish has been counteracted effectively by that community to reverse language shift. And, in that spirit, *The Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights* (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023) has several chapters documenting current trends, violations of rights, and successful rights achievements.

The *Handbook* is the result of 30 years of work with colleagues worldwide. *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination* (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994) was the first book on this topic. Interestingly enough, for anyone from Britain, we first submitted a plan for the book to Cambridge University Press and to Blackwell in Oxford, which is a famous academic publisher. Both of these publishers said, "Oh, the topic is of no interest." And then we discussed it with Joshua Fishman, whom we knew well, and he was delighted to have it in the Mouton de Gruyter series of *Contributions to the Sociology of Language*. He also has a chapter in the book, which is one of the more conceptual chapters. In addition, there's a whole variety of papers from different parts of the world. Many of the contributors were people from different continents interested in language rights who were in Thessaloniki in 1991 at a conference of AILA, the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, which has kept its French initials in English discourse. Māori is there, Latin America is there very strongly, and so on. This is how the position of language rights was being documented, and alternatives presented. 30 years later, the *Handbook* appeared, with

62 contributors and 52 chapters. Abstracts of them can be accessed on the Wiley website. I'll be quoting two of these later in this version of the interview.

I think the other thing I might mention is that in two of the Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden, at the moment, there are ongoing investigations of the crimes committed against the Saami over centuries. This is promising because it indicates that the dominant group has to accept that the crimes of the past took place and should be apologized for, which I think the Norwegians have already done. The Finnish investigation is going extremely well, I'm told by the chairperson, a woman who is also a contributor to this *Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights* and an old friend of myself and Tove. However, there's nothing of that sort in Sweden at all. Their Saami have far fewer rights. And typically, the chair of the Swedish investigation into the crimes is a Swede, a male. He's an experienced diplomat, but he has no Saami experience at all. And, to me, having lived in Sweden now for the last 11 years, it doesn't surprise me, and it's very sad. The studies are in early phases of this analysis of crimes in the past, but obviously, if you think in terms of linguicism, it does mean dominant groups are accepting that policies by the state and the church were criminal and indefensible. And in a way, Canada, of course, has done this by accepting that a lot of what happened, not least in boarding schools, constituted a cultural genocide. Cultural genocide includes linguicide, and according to one of the Canadians in this *Handbook*, historicide as well (Bear Nicholas, 2023); it meant the erasure of the Maliseet culture, in her case.

**Paul:** Thank you. This brings me to the next question. This special issue discusses the importance of including Indigenous knowledges in sustainability efforts. How can language policies support or undermine this inclusion?

**Robert:** This is obviously a crucial issue for oppressed minorities. One of the places where a minority emerged very strongly, 70-80 years ago, is in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where the Māori have a proud history that is extremely alive. There were hideous wars in the 19th century and, in the 20th century, the consolidation of English at the expense of Māori. At the same time, the Māori did achieve a very strong degree of rights to have their language used in the education system since it was constitutionally recognized as an equal language with English. One of the complications, of course, is that some marginalized local communities are thriving, but many of the Māori have been urbanized, have moved into cities, and don't have deep Māori cultural roots any longer. So, you're up against cultural change of this sort. Unfortunately, there is an extreme right-wing government at the moment which is actually

reducing the legal rights of Māori to use their language in ministries, in education, and the court system, and so on. I was asked to write a paper as an expert witness for a hearing on all of that, and I could access the hearing on YouTube for four days running. I could get glimpses of how this was being handled, with a team of people investigating, with a lawyer defending the government, of course, a white Anglo, and countless cases of Māori telling tragic stories about how their rights are not being maintained and respected. The government is currently trying to legislate against the Māori. The hearing itself has not yet published its findings. I think they're waiting because there's a huge dispute going on now as to whether the government will be able to push through a law to deprive Māoris of rights that had been achieved successfully. It's extremely worrying.

I also wanted to mention the fact that Norway, like the other Nordic countries that I mentioned, sent missionaries and monolingual teachers, to try to convert the Saami into becoming completely Norwegian. The King of Norway now recognizes that there have been two cultural founding nations, the Saami and the Norwegians. I wonder when the Canadians are going to abolish saying there are two founding nations—meaning two colonizing nations (the French and the British)—which completely erases all of the Indigenous languages. This shows both dimensions of linguicism in force, structure and ideology. The other thing that is really shocking, and that comes through in the *Handbook* by the Nunavut contributor (Kotierk, 2023) and in the Maliseet paper (Bear Nicholas, 2023), is that the funding for their languages is minute compared with the funding for French. These chapters articulate a plea for more solid funding, and simply to end the linguicist and ethnicist funding of education, which is against the interests of speakers of Indigenous languages. The two Inuit languages in Nunavut are potentially very strong, although, of course, a lot of the administrators have been trained in English and have gone back, and there's, in a sense, a lot happening. But what a key person in Nunavut did was to invite Tove, my wife, to do an assessment, for which she recruited Rob Dunbar, who is a human rights lawyer in Edinburgh. He's of Canadian origin, actually, and he and his wife are bringing up their son in Gaelic. The three of us were asked to determine whether what was happening in Nunavut in the past and present, in education and in other fields, could be considered as constituting a crime against humanity. We argued that this was definitely the case; there was clear evidence confirming that (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2019). The report can be downloaded, see under References. Whether policy in Nunavut constitutes linguistic genocide is something that's a bit trickier, even though what Tove has done in many of her writings is to make people realize that genocide is not only

exterminating people physically. There are five definitions, two of which are very appropriate for what is happening in education. For that reason, I think it's very important that people who are working in language policy and in language education have to be involved with lawyers in making sure that what is being claimed will hold water. That's where lawyers are very important. But just look at what's happening in Gaza, when all of the Western governments that are supporting the Israelis refuse to admit that genocide is taking place, when Amnesty International has done a very thorough report showing that this is exactly what is happening, and when the International Criminal Court is attempting to prosecute those responsible. Linguistic genocide and other forms of genocide are not all that well established, because there have been few international court convictions. The issues are contentious, though there is solid scholarship on genocide. In the book *Cultural violence and the destruction of human communities: New theoretical perspectives* (Greenland & Göçek, 2020), there are chapters by Damien Short on genocidal pressures on Indigenous peoples, and one by Tove on linguistic genocide.

## LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM AND COLONIALINGUALISM

**Paul:** How can educators and policymakers address colonialingualism (Meighan, 2023) and the challenges of linguistic and epistemic injustice in a world dominated by English?

**Robert:** You ask about a world dominated by English. I think Chinese is being promoted in a very similar fashion to the ways that the Americans, the British, and the Australians have promoted their language to become global. What China does within China represents an existential threat to its own minority communities. There are three very good chapters on China in the *Handbook*, an overview chapter (Zhou, 2023), one on the Uyghurs, written by three Uyghurs (Ayup et al., 2023), who are all in exile, of course, and one on Tibet (Roche, 2023). Gerald Roche has also recently published a powerful book *The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet* (Roche, 2024) on how other minority languages in Tibet and varieties of Tibetan are being eliminated at the moment so that, basically, Tibetan languages are on the way out, and Mandarin will soon replace Tibetan as well. I wrote a review of Roche's book (Phillipson, 2024), which was published in a journal I wasn't aware of until Gerald told me of its existence, called the *State Crime Journal*.

I think this is very interesting because states have been committing crimes everywhere, worldwide. Tove and I have been working with the Kurds for years because many of the immigrants from Turkey in Germany and Denmark are Kurds. Turkey has been committing

state crimes against Kurdish and its speakers for years, since the time of Atatürk, in fact, but this has been particularly brutal in the last three decades. This was one of the things that Tove and I were deeply involved in. We have attended peace conferences, one of them in the Kurdish region in Turkey, and we lectured in the Kurdish region of Iraq soon after the U.S. invasion ended. There's a very good paper in the *Handbook* on Kurds, contrasting the oppression of Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey (Sheyholislami, 2023). He's an Iranian scholar who's now actually in Canada, and he compares the different types of oppression of the Kurds. Whether that might change soon, anywhere, is anybody's guess. There's a small group of Kurds in Syria who are currently being bombed, but who worked for the liberation of parts of Syria in partnership with the Americans, so it just shows how vulnerable the Kurds have been, historically, forever, always. It's horrifying.

Coming back to the challenges of a world dominated by English, I'm worried by the way international schools are mushrooming worldwide, all through the Middle East, Arab countries, many in Malaysia, in China, and so on. International schools are undermining the state education system in countries like Nigeria and Kenya, and other former colonies. Some of the international schools are imitating what happens in elite private schools in the UK, so-called public schools. "International" schools are notoriously English-only, English-medium schools that are detaching elites from concern with local issues in their own country. They are servicing the global market, basically. There have also been good people trying to influence things, so that the languages, the mother tongues of people who go to international schools, are not totally neglected. But calling them "international" is ridiculous, if all the teaching is to pass British exams, administered by the University of Cambridge, with teaching entirely in English, or American exams. And the International Baccalaureate, despite the name, is administered in the United States now. These schools basically serve to qualify people to go to British, American, or Australian universities and join the international elite, which is what Trump is acting to strengthen.

The other thing I wanted to mention is that I've also been working for over a decade with an absolutely brilliant Moroccan guy called Ahmed Kabel. A chapter of ours features him in the *Handbook of English Medium Instruction in Higher Education* (Phillipson & Kabel, 2024). "English-medium higher education" is a term to describe universities that are not in Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom, but in countries where English is not the dominant language. It's a slightly misleading term. What Ahmed and I have done in this chapter is to look at linguicism, which I've talked about earlier, and we list 10 central

constituents of the linguistic imperialism of English in higher education. It's a structure of imperialism connected to culture, education, the mass media, and politics. It's about exploitation, structural, ideological, hegemonic, unequal rights for speakers of different languages, and so on. These 10 constituents are listed in a table in the chapter (Phillipson & Kabel, 2024, pp. 65-66) in one column, and in a parallel column, we list reactions and consequences for other languages due to the impact of English in higher education. I think this is a kind of checklist that people could use in other contexts. If one wants the Indigenous languages of the original inhabitants of North America or Latin America to succeed in revitalizing all their languages, it's not only a question of primary school as a bridge to the dominant language, it's a question of Indigenous languages being used through education. That means that in the higher education infrastructure, there should also be research and the teaching of some of those languages, or ideally, many of them. That's why I thought that this was something that could be a practical utility, and this is intended so that people who wish to challenge linguistic imperialism and ensure linguistic human rights can work through to see whether all of those things do apply in a particular context. One could do this at a micro (classroom) or meso level (a school) and in language policy in a particular country (macro). The other thing I want to say about educators and policymakers is that, ideally, powerful policymakers should have multilingual experience and understanding. It shouldn't be monolinguals deciding on all these things. One point about that is that linguistic justice for minority communities is also in the interest of the majorities, because then you get loyal citizens. They're not trying to become independent political units, or anything like that, but need a significant degree of local autonomy. The chapter in the *Handbook* by Christine Simms on "Pueblo Revitalisation in Education in Southwest USA" describes in detail how this has been achieved. Her abstract presents this major achievement convincingly:

> Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs) are essential elements of protecting Indigenous languages, many of which are facing daunting challenges for survivance today. This chapter explores current issues impacting Pueblo language revitalization initiatives taking place in the American Southwest. Key principles of tribal sovereignty exercised by Pueblo Indian tribes and other tribal nations located in New Mexico reflect the tensions arising from the intersectionality between local indigenous language efforts expanding into public school settings and education systems unprepared to address the language rights of American Indian students. The chapter provides an overview of both historical and contemporary challenges specific to Pueblo language survival and how their longstanding perspectives about language have guided their efforts to protect the LHRs of their language communities.

## GLOBAL MONOCULTURES, CORPORATE IMPERIALISM, AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

**Paul:** What are your thoughts on the relationship between linguistic diversity, on the one hand, and environmental sustainability?

**Robert:** Tove has very categorically written that those things are in a causal relationship (Skutnabb-Kangas & Harmon, 2018), and she bases this in part on Saami ecological knowledge and its verbalisation. Others think it's not causal, that one can't prove that very strongly. I think one of the things one learns from working with Indigenous communities is that their cultures are of great interest to pharmaceutical corporations. A lot of the knowledge about certain plants or types of treatment is embedded in those communities. And that means that if you eliminate those languages, if their (Indigenous) languages are killed off, then you're killing off the knowledge that is embedded in those languages. And that was Tove's very strong belief. It's quite true that pharmaceutical corporations are interested in local practices, and pharmacy is big business.

**Paul:** What strategies do you think could be employed to protect linguistic and biocultural diversity from the pressures of globalization or global monocultures?

**Robert:** This is where it's extremely tricky. This is for minority communities themselves to build up, rather than, in my case, a complete outsider, to have much knowledge to contribute. In passing, I can add that I use four languages, English, French, Danish, and Swedish, every day, and read others. If you think of Wales, I've heard a very distinguished professor of Welsh saying that one reason why Welsh survived well was that the Bible was translated into Welsh very early on, whereas that didn't happen in Scotland, where the Bible was promoted in English. That's one of the reasons why Welsh language maintenance has been much stronger than Gaelic language maintenance. The other thing in Wales is probably that they had a very rich musical tradition, which many communities have. This was iconic in Wales, so far as I know. I'm not an expert on this, I'm quoting somebody who was, in fact, talking for a broad audience of applied linguists on what was distinctive about Welsh and its vitality. After conquering Wales, the English imposed English for all official purposes. An influential Inspector of Schools, Matthew Arnold, wrote a report in 1852 (see Sutherland, 1973), which is rich in social issues but proclaims that English should be insisted on in schools, with punitive measures to impose it:

> Whatever encouragement individuals may think it desirable to give to the preservation of the Welsh language on grounds of philological or antiquarian interest, it must be the desire of a Government to render its dominions, as far as possible, homogeneous … the difference of language between Wales and England will probably be effaced ….an event which is socially and politically so desirable for them.

This linguicidal policy was effective in the southern, industrialised part of Wales. What is perhaps ironic is that while senior administrators of education in present-day England and the U.S.A. are probably monolingual, Arnold and his elite class in the UK spent much of their time in school learning Latin and Greek. I had Latin at school for 8 years, but this much was not common in my generation, but even a little experience leads to an awareness of differences in sentence structure, syntax, morphology, the complexity of translation and semantic variation between languages, and the historical origins of language. Such metalinguistic contrastive analysis experience can also be achieved by the study of languages from different families, which Canada has plenty of, with 70 distinct languages across a dozen families, plus a rich mix of the languages of more recent immigration.

You mentioned globalization pressures and all of that. I think one thing that Trump has made extremely clear is that American corporate imperialism is even more ruthless and vicious than people have understood. Globalization, in fact, involved expanding corporate influence worldwide and facilitating neoliberalism, without the terms neoliberalism or globalization explicitly signalling that this process essentially consolidated the American Empire (Smith, 2003). The European Union started life in 1958 as the European Economic Community, and has expanded since, both in terms of the number of member states (from 6 to 27) and as a supranational political union, with an influence on all aspects of life. It also manages the multilingualism of 24 official and working languages in its institutions effectively. Minority languages of all kinds are not an EU concern, though they have received modest funding, and the European Parliament has written excellent recommendations on respecting and maintaining linguistic diversity. At a conference on language policy in Italy last year, I was asked after my lecture, “You’ve been saying pretty depressing things. What do you recommend we should do?” I think I replied rather flippantly by saying you should ban the banks or something like that, because obviously, banks are hand in glove with corporations. Why do tax havens exist? Corporate dominance and banks are behind a lot of social trends. It’s easy to say ban McDonald’s, or that the oil companies could be more energetically controlled. BP, literally in today’s newspaper, is backing out of any environmental concerns. They have pretended to be concerned with promoting alternative

energy production, but now they're expanding, as are the Norwegians, a prosperous country which has had a welfare state, largely funded by oil revenues. The welfare state also existed in the United Kingdom when I lived there until the age of 22 (1964), and it doesn't really exist any longer now, although certain things function reasonably, but there are massive problems. The fact that a quarter of children are growing up in poverty says something about the way finance has been organized in England. In Sweden, 30 years ago, a right-wing government went for privatization in a very big way: privatization of the health system and care of the elderly is largely run by corporate interests that are undermining the state system. Networks of schools are owned by companies on the global stock exchange: anyone could establish a school to follow the syllabus, have it funded by the state on a per capita basis, and import under-qualified teachers from England or elsewhere, and say we're now delivering English-medium schooling for 50% of the curriculum. I write about this in my chapter in the *Handbook* (Phillipson, 2023), and it's quite shocking. PISA results show that the quality of Swedish schools has deteriorated.

It's really shocking that even in the Nordic countries (Scandinavia and Finland), which have been democratic welfare states, ensuring a decent standard of life for all with free schooling and free health care, much is changing because of neoliberalism and the logic of capitalism. Extremist parties have emerged in all of them—there are hugely worrying political developments in all these countries. This makes these countries more like the UK, the U.S.A., India, and many other countries, with the rich getting richer and the rest surviving as best they can. This is not the place for going into all of this in any detail, but it's possible to relate language policy to overall geopolitical trends. My attempt to integrate some of the variables can be seen in an article written in 2008, "The linguistic imperialism of neoliberal empire," that was published in *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* and reprinted in my book *Linguistic Imperialism Continued* (2009).

## MULTILINGUAL FUTURES? PROTECTING LINGUISTIC AND BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

**Paul:** The final question, looking forward, and feel free to add any additional thoughts you would like to emphasize: How can researchers, educators, and everyday citizens contribute to a future where linguistic and biocultural diversity are respected and sustained? Similarly, do you believe there are any successful models of resistance to linguistic imperialism?

**Robert:** In the Index of the *Handbook of LHRs*, the 51 references to "linguistic human rights" relate to many countries and regions, several UN bodies, and the global Deaf community. These efforts to implement LHRs are generally a response to linguicism (as in the Welsh case just mentioned) and, in most contexts in order to counteract linguistic imperialism. The Handbook has one of its five sections on Case Studies of LHRs being "Violated", and a separate Section on Case Studies of "Implementing LHRs". These document at least partial success for LHRs in Finland, Sweden, Canada, Latin America, the U.S.A., Russia, Nepal, India, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. It's important not to generalize from these case studies, because the reality is that, invariably, many languages are not thriving, even in this set of positive cases. What is striking is how little coverage there is of success in Africa or the Arab world and much of Asia (though the Handbook does not aim at being comprehensive). There is a chapter in a different Section on the Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion, which documents UNESCO-led coordination of 16 countries, and aims at the inclusion of all languages, and mother-tongue-based multilingual education. South Africa might have achieved that, because, as soon as apartheid was officially ended, there were many extremely talented people working out how all the 11 national languages could be strengthened, making a break with the ideologically motivated linguicism of apartheid language policy. People were committed to resisting linguicism, and official bodies were trying to implement education so that the African languages could be strengthened. Zulu and Xhosa are probably in a strong position. Essentially, what happened is that most people have understood that English is the only language that matters for employment and success, and wealth, but it's highly unlikely that, if education is entirely through the medium of English, this will guarantee success for many, quite the opposite. There is evidence of this sad reality in India and some former African colonies. Poor education through the medium of English is delivered by under-qualified speakers of English. The multilingual education policy that might have opened up a lot more success through Indigenous languages never really happened. This is tragic. The dominance of English perpetuates inequalities.

In a European context, there were a lot of people in Sweden 30 years ago who saw that publication in scholarly journals was switching into English and out of Swedish, like in the media and popular culture. Some feared that English was eating up Swedish as a national language. The government commissioned studies and consultations with not just academia, but with trade unions, local government, minorities, and interest groups. They enacted

legislation to ensure that Swedish is actually maintained as a language for all key purposes, and also in the activities of the institutions of the European Union. The risk from an increase in the use of English was seriously assessed, which led to legislation to try to make sure that nothing goes wrong. In reality, a change of language can trigger a change of content. When an economics journal switched from publishing in Swedish to English, scholars from many countries started submitting excellent articles, and Swedish scholars progressively tended to switch from topics of national interest to international issues.

There has been a Nordic agreement between five Nordic countries, Iceland included, which says that all higher education institutions have a duty to maintain the national language as well as being proficient in an international language, which currently means English. It could have been other European languages, historically, could have been German, could have been French, perhaps, but that hasn't happened. Sweden also legislated to give five minority languages official status. The government's description of them is as follows:

> The five national minorities in Sweden are the Jews, the Roma, the Sami (also indigenous people), the Swedish Finns, and the Tornedalers. The minority languages are Jiddisch, Romani chib, Sami, Meänkieli, and Finnish.
>
> The Act on National Minorities and Minority Languages applies to the whole of Sweden. It describes which rights minorities have in the whole country and within the specific administrative areas for Sami, Meänkieli, and Finnish.
>
> You have the right to be informed about your rights, no matter what national minority language you speak or where in Sweden you live. If you live in a municipality in our administrative district, you also have the right to communicate with us in your language, in both speech and writing.
>
> On the National Board of Health and Welfare's website, you can find information about the linguistic rights of minorities and also find out what you can demand from municipalities and authorities.

This is impressive on paper, but implementation has been weak (Lainio, 2024). The Chinese government has been working hard to promote the learning of Chinese internationally. One of their party committees has recommended that education worldwide in the future should be through the medium of Chinese. The source of this information is a woman of Uyghur origin who heard a Minister stating this on the radio from China. We ought to be following what the Chinese are doing worldwide more closely.

My impression now, from working in higher education in Denmark for many years, is that people who go into higher education in many fields, in technology, natural sciences, medicine, and even in the humanities and social sciences now are becoming bilingually

academic competent. They have had good schooling in English, it's in widespread use in universities, and there is massive input from the outside world, through social media and international links. Often, textbooks in natural sciences, medicine, and engineering will be in English, but it will be Danish, Swedish, or Finnish as the language of instruction. It's a fantastic bilingual learning process.

I'm worried stiff that elites going into international (English-medium) schools in West Africa and East Africa, and the Middle East, is essentially at the expense of local languages. The situation in India is different; there are huge national languages in specific regions of the country with over 2000 years of use, not only Sanskrit, but also Tamil and others. So, huge linguistic diversity is a real factor. There are lots of wonderful sociolinguists in India who are determined to maintain that. My Bengal friend, Probal Dasgupta, writes on complicated topics in the social sciences in Bengali, as well as in English, so here, too, there are communities where academic bilingual proficiency, or journalistic proficiency, is a vibrant reality.

One important contribution from Canada in the *Handbook* is a chapter written by four Indigenous authors (Bear Nicholas et al., 2023). With a lawyer they appealed to the United Nations. Here is their abstract:

> Four Indigenous Languages advocates filed a Complaint against Canada under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. They observed that while the *Indigenous Languages Act* of 2019 purports to recognize Indigenous language rights, it fails to give those rights legal effect by defining their content and providing enforcement remedies. Comparing these "rights" to the clearly-defined and enforceable language rights of Canada's official language minorities, the Complainants alleged discrimination under Article 26, Article 2(3)(a) and Article 27 of the ICCPR. Relying on recent jurisprudence of the Human Rights Committee, they maintained that these Articles must now be interpreted in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Their Complaint never reached the Human Rights Committee. It was rejected at the entry level by an unnamed UN official who made no reference to the Complainants' submissions that the Complaint was both procedurally and substantively sound.

Their chapter begins with four lively personal statements on how they have experienced discrimination and deprivation of their rights. This shows that Canada, in the way it treats Indigenous Peoples, is not living up to its international law obligations. Amos Key Jr. is one of the authors: Tove and I attended a First Nations conference in New Brunswick long ago, and heard him report that he meets lots of skepticism, such as, "Why should you bother to maintain your languages?" And he says, "Well, when I die and go to heaven, I need to be

able to talk to my ancestors, my grandmothers, my grandfathers." The skeptic then replies, "Well, what happens if you die and go to the other place?" To which he responds, "Oh, no problem. I know English." It's funny, but of course, if you look at the history, it's tragic. And when there is even a strong legal case in the UN system, which is supposed to be promoting human rights, there may well be political barriers. We all know that the Security Council of the UN fails to function well because five "great" powers have a veto. Lower down in the UN system, censorship also seems to operate.

**Paul:** Thank you so much, Professor Phillipson, for generously sharing your expertise with us. We deeply appreciate the time you've taken to offer your invaluable insights on the intersectionality of multilingualism, Indigenous knowledges, and sustainability for our special issue. We look forward to building on the work you and others have initiated to resist linguistic imperialism and linguicide, safeguard linguistic human rights and Indigenous knowledges, and foster more sustainable, multilingual, and decolonial futures.

## THE AUTHORS

**Robert Phillipson** studied at Cambridge and Leeds Universities, UK, and has a doctorate from the University of Amsterdam. He worked for the British Council in Algeria, Yugoslavia, and London, before emigrating to Denmark in 1973. He is an emeritus Professor at Copenhagen Business School. His books have been published in 14 countries, among them: *Learner language and language learning* (with Claus Færch, and Kirsten Haastrup, Gyldendal & Multilingual Matters), *Linguistic imperialism* (Oxford UP), *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy* (Routledge), *Linguistic imperialism continued* (Orient Blackswan and Routledge), *Why English? Confronting the Hydra* (edited with Pauline Bunce, Vaughan Rapatahana, and Ruanni Tupas, Multilingual Matters), and *Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights* (edited with Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Wiley-Blackwell). He has lectured in over 40 countries and given postgraduate courses in language policy and language rights in Denmark, Hyderabad/India, and Shanghai. He was awarded the UNESCO Linguapax prize in 2010, and the TESOL International President's Award in 2024.

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