English Panacea or Pandemic

Robert Phillipson

In principle any language can serve noble or evil purposes. However, it is only dominant languages that may function as a panacea or pandemic. Imperial languages are enforced by structural means (resources) and ideologies (beliefs, attitudes), with linguicism functioning in comparable ways to racism, sexism, and classism. English and Chinese are currently rival imperial languages, but differ considerably in the use of military, economic, geopolitical, and cultural (so-called soft) power, including language promotion. The European integration project is currently in deep trouble at both the supranational and national/sub-national levels, whereas the consolidation of English throughout continental Europe and in many EU institutional functions and ‘actions’ - e.g. the Bologna process and the creation of a single European education and research ‘area’/market - these all serve to strengthen English linguistic hegemony and to marginalise other languages, including minority languages. This makes it imperative that the rights of speakers of all 24 EU official and working languages are fully enforced, and that within each member state there are language policies, officially sanctioned and implemented, that can maintain a vibrant balance between national languages and foreign languages at all levels of education. This can contribute to multilingualism and integration in forms that counteract linguicism.

It is important to assess how macro, meso, and micro level elements in language policy consolidate English in late capitalism. Seeing English as a panacea leads to an excessive concentration on English in schools, and promotion in academia and publications policy privileging English. Just as *homo sovieticus* entailed territorial, cultural, and linguistic dispossession, the globalisation of *homo americanus* represents a comparable threat that, if not counteracted, can rapidly evolve into a pandemic. Global Europeanisation began in what became named ‘America’, ‘justified’ by the fraudulent myth of unoccupied territory, *terra nullius,* in ideologies embraced by the Papacy, John Locke, and presidents from George Washington to Trump. Global Americanisation now permeates social and professional life through *cultura nullius* norms, McDonaldisation. The structural violence of the neoimperialist linguistic consolidation of ‘global’ English as a *lingua nullius*, as though the language is a universal ‘need’, and detached from the forces underpinning its expansion, is orchestrated by the US and UK governments, the British Council, TESOL, uncritical applied linguistics, and complicit academics (de Swaan, van Parijs, Graddol, et al). Empirical studies – of for instance, language policy in higher education, to assess whether linguistic capital accumulation or dispossession is occurring – need to be multi-disciplinary. Policy-makers must ensure that English is piloted between the Scylla and Charybdis of panacea and pandemic.

For elaboration see references at www.cbs.dk/en/staff/rpmsc.