# ENGLISH AS A HEGEMONIC LEGACY OF LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM IN POSTCOLONIAL SOCIETIES: AN INSIGHT FROM HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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**Abstract**

*The role of English in the current globalized world has become impertinent for survival. However, the importance of English did not stem from the natural attributes of the language but, over the course of history, from the mighty use of power and strategic planning by its speakers. In countries like Pakistan, English is considered a superior language which enjoys social and economic privileges. Though, it was colonization that established English as a dominant language in Pakistan; it is the policies and the consistent association of privileges with English that entrenches English imperialism which then drives people to use it as a manipulative tool. This study delved into analyzing the participation of people in establishing the linguistic imperialism in academic settings in postcolonial societies. With a mixed-method approach, 100 participants were recruited for questionnaire and 6 for interviews. The findings of the study revealed that people do not consciously use English for the motive to gain advantage in conversation. However, they do get to enjoy social privileges by being able to speak English in an academic setting. Moreover, the impact on listeners also reaffirmed the colonized mindset which further explains why English speakers enjoy social prestige.*

**Key words:** Social prestige, English imperialism, postcolonized societies.

**Introduction**

Language is central to all kinds of human interactions. Languages present and promote culture, identity and perceptions of people. Language has played a crucial role in making the world a global village. Although there are thousands of languages spoken around the globe, over the course of history, few languages dominated the world and became the language of the global world. However, this influence of few languages over many, as scholars have suggested, is neither natural nor arbitrary but strategic. For instance, English became a lingua franca not because of linguistic characteristics but because of colonialism and a mighty influence of English speakers (Crystal, 2003).

English as a global language dominating the wide spectrum of fields is crucial for survival in today's world. English language learning not only expands the horizon of economic opportunities but also improves the social status of its speakers. However, consequently, it shrinks the horizon of local languages. Rober Philipson's linguistic imperialism (1989) delineates the rising dominance of English at the cost of marginalization of local languages. Drawing upon Kangas' linguicism (1988), Robert Phillipson elaborates on the pivotal role of colonialism which established the superiority of the English language over local languages. At present, the hegemony of English is maintained by implicit and explicit policies of aid provision for English language teaching that favors the dominance of English. Moreover, the impact is not limited to the increasing lack of economic opportunities but rather the expulsion from other aspects of life of the non-English speakers. The dominance was established under colonization, the legacy of which still persists in the post colonized societies because of the hegemonic language policies that favors English and ultimately the English language speakers. Moreover, as stated earlier, the privileges of being English speakers are not limited to economic perks. In fact, the economic advantage of English speakers in such countries both emanates and translates into social privileges and status. For instance, the association of social prestige and intelligence with English language skills increase social acceptability

primarily because of the association with high social status and intelligence which ultimately translates into economic opportunity (Azhar, Ali, & Noor, 2019).

Pakistan falls in the periphery and was once part of British colonies. English in Pakistan is highly valued in economic and social spheres. In fact, English is the official language of Pakistan along with Urdu. Similarly, in the education sector, the English language is considered monumental to success. In Pakistan, the rise of superiority of English in the wide array of spectrum is attributed to the long period of colonization and the resultant colonized mindset. Similarly, the policies highly favorable to the rise of the English language are defended on the basis of it being the world navigating language.

In the context of academics, in Pakistan, the significance of talent and knowledge is highly linked with skills of the English language. Moreover, the association of social prestige and modernity with English language skills in academic settings also put on leverage the English speakers. On the contrary, it not only delimits the use of local language speakers in academic settings but also sidelines many brilliant minds. In the Pakistani context, most of the studies in linguistic imperialism are based on identity crises, marginalization of local languages in different settings and impact of policy making on local attitudes of people. There is little research available on the active participation of people in maintaining the influence of the English language in academic speakers as of their motives in using English in academic formal and informal conversations or whether people use English in their academic conversation under the influence of English influence. Also, whether the motives of participation are fulfilled in their use of English or not. Similarly, under the influence of a colonized mindset, how listeners receive the impact. This study aims to explore the above stated aspects of linguistic imperialism in the academic setting of Pakistan. An exploratory research study was conducted using a mixed-method research approach in Islamia College Peshawar setting.

## Research Questions

1) Considering the linguistic imperialism effect of English, do students use English in formal and informal academic conversations to influence conversations?

2) Do students materialize the motives that drive them to use English in formal and informal academic conversations?

3) What kind of impact do English speakers leave on listeners in conversation in an academic setting?

## Literature Review

English is a global language. The prevalence of which is evident in almost all fields ranging from commerce and science to politics and social arenas. Besides, the economic advantage and social gains of learning English further exemplify the status of English as a global language (Doms, 2003). In fact, learning English is equated with progress and prosperity (Gramsci, 1971). Due to this widespread influence of English, learning English has become impertinent for survival. It is one of the reasons why around the globe, it is taught either as a second or foreign language. However, this systematic influence of English Language is an outcome of strategic planning. It was largely the mighty power of English rather than its vocabulary or flexible structures that led to the global dominance of English (Crystal, 2003).

Though the emergence of English as a lingua franca is attributed to different factors, in the case of periphery countries, English language dominance stems from colonial legacy which was adopted and strengthened by the colonized societies (Canagarjah, 1999). Also, as a global language, English has assisted in advancement and progress of individuals and societies; it largely has added to the marginalization of local languages and individuals who are not equipped in English. Robert Philipson's linguistic imperialism (1992) offers a critical perspective of historical development of English dominance at the expense of other

languages. Philipson's linguistic imperialism is based on Kangas' linguicism (1988). According to the given concept of linguicism, hierarchies in societies are not only based on race, ethnicity or gender but also on the basis of language where certain languages have supremacy over others like supremacy of English in third world countries over local languages. Drawing upon the concept, Phillipson's linguistic imperialism (1992) underscores the integration of economic, political and cultural force by colonizers to establish the dominance of English in their colonies. Similarly, this dominance was ensured through educational policies (Canagarajah, 1999) and capitalistic economic systems which are still in practice. Moreover, as elucidated by Phillipson (2012), the ensured dominance is evident in explicit and implicit agendas regarding aid provision for and promotion of English language teaching.

Consequently, the impact of linguistic imperialism has been observed in the marginalization of local languages and their speakers (Pervaiz et al., 2019) along the similar lines of racism and sexism (Philipson, 2012). Besides, as has been largely studied, the effect is also visible in the identity problems of individuals of postcolonial societies (Sukuntab-Kangas, 2000). Further, an explicit and more detrimental impact is visible in the form of hierarchies established on the basis of linguistic competence in English (Griff, 2002). These hierarchies then are translated into privileges or become a symbol of social status. Subsequently, the association of status and privileges with English legitimizes and has legitimized the above discussed marginalization which further compels and has compelled masses of lower and middle class to learn the English language at the cost of perishing diversity (Canagarajah, 2002). Moreover, the internalization and naturalness of the phenomenon by colonized societies has made it widely normal (Philipson, 2012) as also evident from the rising trend of English in all across the fields in peripheral countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

Pakistan had been once a British colony and therefore a victim of linguistic imperialism. Though the colonization era has ended, the hegemonic linguistic practices still persist. English being the official language of the country is evidence of the fact. Similarly, in Pakistan 49% people can efficiently speak English which further establishes the fact that it is highly valued in Pakistan (Kroleuk, 2017). On the basis of a given linguistic hierarchy, in Pakistan, a class system has been created where English speakers enjoy economic, political and social benefits. Economically, being a global language, English language skills increase the chances of employment. Similarly, socially, due to a colonized mindset, people with such skills are highly esteemed in societies. In academics, English language skills have become the ultimate mark of talent and learning. English language skills become the primary rubric of judgment and modernity irrespective of the field (Ashraf, 1990).

Although considering the perks of English language learning render it superior socially and economically, its manipulative use in post-colonial societies raise concerns. Where the world learns and uses English for communication purposes, in countries like Pakistan, it is used to gain advantage (Azhar, Ali, & Noor, 2019). While the concept of global English with local varieties is emerging, in Pakistan, adoption of native accent is appreciated. Moreover, in both formal and informal conversations, English is used to dominate conversations or suggest the sign of "progress or modernity" (Ashraf, 1990). Consequently, on the other hand, those unequipped in English become voiceless or dominated. Their chances of survival, similar to local languages, become low. Though not largely noticed or discussed, people linguistically deprived of English Language become invisible (Burchfield, 1985).

Most of the studies done to investigate linguistic imperialism pertains to marginalization of local languages under English imperialism (Asad, 2020), linguistic attitude of people towards English imperialism (Shah and Anwar, 2015), linguistic policies burgeoning the imperialism (Rehman, 2004, 2014), and identity issues. Despite extensive research on Linguistic

Imperialism, Research delineating the motive of English speakers behind their use of English to dominate formal and informal conversations in academic settings and the fulfillment of the motive through the given language use has been missing. Similarly, there is a research gap of the impact of English on listeners exemplifying the colonial mindset. This descriptive study aims to incorporate speakers' i.e. students' perspective of instrumental use of English in gaining advantage and the impact on listeners under the colonial mindset. Both of which will exemplify the burgeoning dominance of English imperialism.

## Methodology

A mixed method approach was used for the research study. A pragmatic research approach, mixed methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative research tools to enhance the validity of the study (Denscombe, 2007). For data collection, two instruments were used; questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The primary source of data was a detailed questionnaire. Similarly, as a secondary source of data, semi-structured interviews were also conducted. Islamia College Peshawar was selected as the research setting. Questionnaire was shared with targeted participants through online google forms. Informed consents of participants were taken prior to the recording of responses both before interview and questionnaire. Interviews were also conducted online. Interview responses were first recorded and then transcribed. Robert Philipson's Linguistic Imperialism (1992) was used as a theoretical framework.

## Population and Sample

Population of the research included graduated and undergraduate students of Islamia College Peshawar. Sample size for questionnaire was composed of 100 participants including both BS and MPhil students. For interviews, 6 participants; 3 undergraduate and 3 MPhil students were recruited. Overall, participants included students of both gender, departments, and semesters ranging between age groups of 19-40.

## Instrument

To collect data relevant to the study, a self-constructed questionnaire with close ended questions was used. The questionnaire included a total of twenty items. Some of the items were adopted from Khan (2023) with additional self-structured questions specific to the study. The questionnaire was divided into three sections each responding to the research questions. The first section responded to the motives of use of English in academic setting conversations. The second section addressed the outcomes of usage. The third and last section respond to the impact of use of English on listeners. The responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale as it is considered adequate in capturing people's opinions, perceptions and behaviors (Peterson, 2000), with options ranging between "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Th data was treated as interval-data and mean scores for each section was calculated to identify the overall trend regarding the tendency towards English use and its impact on listeners in an imperialistic form.

For qualitative data collection, 6 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Questions for the interviews were self-constructed based on research objectives. Participants of the interviews included 3 BS students and 3 MPhil students. Interviews were conducted online where the responses were first recorded and then transcribed manually. The transcribed responses were shared with the respondents and were used for research after taking consent from the respondents.

Since the data collected consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data for data analysis, two methods for data analysis were adopted. For quantitative data collected through questionnaires, a descriptive statistics method was used. Using descriptive statistics, data was interpreted in terms of mean, mode and range. Whereas for qualitative data collected through interviews. The Braun and Clarke (2006) model of thematic analysis was used. The Braun

and Claire (2006) thematic model is considered the most suitable model for social science research because of the fact it provides an authentic and practical method to analyze qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

## Results
## Quantitative Data

A total of 100 participants participated in the study. According to demographic statistics, participants of the study ranged from 18-40 years of age. Majority of the participants were female and were BS students. The mean score of the total participants was 60.96 (St. Dv: 13.78) with a very good reliability score i.e. 0.908 which makes it appropriate for the given population study. Details of the demographic statistics are given below in Table.1.

*Table.1*
*Socio Demographics Characteristics of Participants*

| Socio-Demographic Characteristics | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| 1) Male | 39 | (38.6) |
| 2)Female | 62 | (61.4) |
| **Education** | | |
| 1)Undergraduate/BS | 59 | (58.4) |
| 2)MPhil/MS | 42 | (41.6) |

The objective of the study was to analyze the motives behind use of English in formal and informal academic conversations. The first section of the questionnaire i.e. Questions from no. 1 to 6 was about the motives of usage of English in terms of creating dominance. The total mean score of the given section was 20.62, with a median of 21 and range of 7-32. Given the total score, the given mean value suggests a moderate tendency of students using English for dominance in academic conversations or as a tool to acquire social privileges. However, largely, consciously students in academic do not use English to gain advantage in formal and informal conversations.

The second section of the questionnaire which corresponded to the second objective of the study i.e. the materialization of the motives through usage of English in academic conversations. It consisted of 5 items. With the mean value of 15, median 16 and range of 7 to 24, the findings suggest a moderate agreement of acquiring social privileges by using English in academic settings.

The last section was about the impact of use of English in academic conversation listeners. It consists of 8 items. With the mean value of 15 and range 11 to 40 suggests a moderate agreement with the statements. The data highlighted that students feel dominated, impressed and inferior in conversations where others have English edge over them.

**Table. 2**
*Psychometric Properties*

| Scale | M | SD | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| Likert Scale | | | |
| (1) Imperialistic    Motives | 20.62 | 5.57 | 7-32 |
| (2) Linguistic Advantage | 15.96 | 3.72 | 7-24 |
| (3) Influence on listener | 24.37 | 6.18 | 11-40 |

M: median; SD: standard deviation.

**Qualitative Data**

For interview analysis, Braun and Clare (2006) thematic model of analysis was used. Prior to code development, themes were selected considering the objectives of the research study. Four major themes were organized with sub-themes. The section below described the findings of interviews in terms of ascribed themes: perception of social prestige of English, motives of using English in academic formal and informal setting in correspondence to the perception of English social prestige, the expected outcomes of use, and lastly, the impact of English in academic conversations on listeners.

All respondents of the interview agreed to the fact that English enjoys a social prestige. The respondents described the social prestige in terms of association of modernity and progress with skills of the English language. As one of the respondents expressed, "English plays a significant role in our society. It is associated with modernism". Another interviewer stated "English carries significant social prestige in our society. It's often seen as a symbol of education and modernity. People who speak English fluently, especially with a refined accent, are frequently perceived as more competent or higher in status. This perception isn't always fair, but it's deeply rooted in our society'. Similarly, social prestige was also categorized in terms of economic class and social acceptance.  As the respondents expressed "In our society, people give a lot of respect to those who speak English. They assume such individuals are talented and judge others' intelligence based on their English proficiency. Those who do not speak English often feel inferior and undervalued because of societal attitudes". Another interviewer said "English enjoys a rather disproportionate prestige in our societies because of British colonialism. The subcontinent's history is marred with colonial exploitation, especially the linguistic imperialism that was forcefully imposed upon the locals. This makes English the language of prestige. The English language is associated with social prestige and thus, those who speak it flawlessly are perceived to be intelligent, often mistaken for someone belonging to the elite class".

Considering the perception of English social prestige, respondents were asked about their motives of using English in academic formal and informal settings. In terms of motivation, respondents largely highlighted the circumstances. However, they all agreed upon the motive

of sounding more sophisticated and earning social recognition in an academic setting. As one respondent stated "I use English in formal academic conversations to sound formal, serious and sophisticated". Another interviewer expressed "Consciously, I know that using English fluently in academic settings helps me participate more confidently and gain respect from peers and students. Unconsciously, I've internalized the idea that expressing myself clearly in English adds value to what I say. It's like my thoughts are taken more seriously when I say them in English".

Within the theme of earning recognition, some of the respondents also pinpointed the motive of being recognized as educated and a sense of belonging to elite class. As one respondent shared "People speak English to impress others and to present themselves as well-educated individuals from high-status families. That is why I use English in academic conversations at times to give such an impression. Our society works that way".

Building upon the above stated themes, another theme was materialization of the motives. Whether under the perception of English imperialism, the use of English yields the expected results. Respondents' views were mixed regarding the earning recognition. Largely, all agreed to the idea that using English in conversation makes them sound more educated and so they feel confident which ultimately adds to their academic success. For instance, one of the respondents expressed "I think I do fairly well in achieving my goals, whether it's attention or conveying complex ideas clearly. In informal conversations, using English helps me build a connection with others who value the language, especially in academic or professional spaces. In formal conversations, it allows me to structure my thoughts logically and be taken seriously". Similarly, another highlighted "I believe being able to express my ideas in the English language makes it easy to achieve academic success". Moreover, few of the respondents also suggested that to a larger extent it does assist in implying the impression of being educated and belonging to high status as of the interviewer stated "To a larger extent, I believe by speaking English we do create a good impression in front of others and give the perception that one comes from a strong educational background".

The last theme selected was the impact of English as being listeners in academic conversations. The given theme not only explains the perception of English imperialism but also elaborates the motive of use of English in conversation. When asked about the impression of English use in academic conversation with respect to associated social privilege, there was mixed response. Though they all agreed to the fact that at unconscious level they regard English speakers more in conversations, some of the student respondents strongly agreed to the fact that they unconsciously regard English speakers more. As one of the students stated "unconsciously associate more respect and credibility with English speakers". However, some of the interviewers also highlighted the fact that in academic settings they consciously try to critically analyze the phenomena or overcome the colonized mindset. As one of the students expressed, "Unconsciously, yes because our society make us to view English as a mark of status and capability. But consciously, I try to evaluate people based on what they say, not how they say it. I've met brilliant minds who don't speak English fluently, and I've heard fluent speakers say things with little depth. Therefore, while the unconscious bias may still exist, I challenge it as much as I can".

## Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the hegemonic use of English in academic settings. Given the perceived social superiority of English and its speakers, the study investigated whether students in their formal and informal communication employ English to secure social privileges. The findings revealed a moderate agreement of the participants with the conscious effort to gain social advantage in academic settings by using English. Similarly, the interview's responses also suggested the use of English for clarity and seriousness in
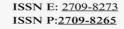
conversation rather than just as a source of influence to secure social advantage. As one of the respondents expressed, "I use English in formal academic conversations to sound formal, serious and sophisticated". The given findings can be compared with Khan (2023) study results that both learning and use of English motives might arise from educational causes. This indicates that though English is considered a power symbol in academic spaces, it is not necessarily strategically employed to exploit the privileges. Also, it reflects the internalization of linguistic hierarchies due to which the use of English is normalized in academic settings rather than critically assessed for the overwhelming use of it.

However, the participants strongly agreed with the statements that the use of English in communication does provide them with social privilege in terms of social acceptability or respect, regardless of their intent. This discrepancy between the students' use of English to secure social privileges and the actual benefits they receive in conversation could be attributed to the fact of normalization of association of social privileges with English speakers (Philipson, 2010). Over time, the superiority of English in academic spaces has become deeply embedded to an extent that it has become synonymous with social rank as evident from the data findings. Therefore, the student might not be aware of the strategic use of it but it has become the unconscious practice to gain the advantages. The given findings also resonate with Bourdieu's Linguistic capital which explains the value of language beyond mere communication advantage; shaping power dynamics and setting social hierarchies. Moreover, the data largely reflects the intrinsic role of English in implicit discriminations on the basis of linguistic capabilities by making language the mark of deciding privileges.

Similarly, as the findings suggested, the motivation to use English does not primarily stem from the desire to influence or dominate conversation. Instead, as a perceived necessity to survive in academic setting. This further affirms the idea as highlighted by Philipson (1998) that the hegemony of English makes the use of English not as a choice but an obligation to acquire social mobility and economic opportunities. In postcolonial societies like Pakistan, social mobility begins with social acceptability. Therefore, the acquisition of English in Pakistan signifies the social acceptability which then translates into economic advantages.

Moreover, the agreement of participants with the impact of English speakers in conversation in terms of being impressed, feeling dominated or having inferiority complex also highlighted the enduring legacy of colonization. Besides, as the data suggested, participants give more credibility to speakers with more native like accent in conversations. Underscoring the psychological effect of English as a superior language, the interviews' responses reported, to quote one, "I feel dominated when someone speaks English in conversations with a more native like accent". The impact on listeners reaffirms the fact that in postcolonial societies like Pakistan, colonized mindset shapes interaction even after decades of formal colonial rule. The linguistic imperialism still permeates the social and academic setting, reinforcing English language dominance over local languages.

The findings resonate with Canagarajah's (2002) assertion that linguistic hierarchies persist, placing English at the top of pyramid. The psychological impact of such hierarchies marginalizes non-English speakers, reinforcing the social dominance of English and positioning non-English speakers as inferiors. Moreover, if the participant feels dominated or marginalized by English as data of the study suggested, it will unconsciously drive people to use it. Although it might not be recognized or accepted as conscious effort as findings of the study suggested, it could be still a social practice. This suggests a need for further investigation into how social and psychological influence language practices and even when not explicitly acknowledged as an effort to gain social prestige. Moreover, one of the impacts of the esteemed social prestige of English is the growing tendency of English in academics irrespective of formal and informal decorum overshadowing the local languages and

contributing to linguistic deprivation. As Burchfield (1985) notes that such deprivation renders local language speakers' people invisible, denying them space in academic and intellectual discourses. This marginalization is visible in the form of significance of English next to knowledge and innovation and rendition of local language as being incapable of knowledge and understanding. Consequently, this dynamic not only elevates the status of English but also diminish the value of local language and speakers.

The above discussion presents a strong case for the long-established English imperialism in academia. While English facilitates global communication, it should be recognized as a tool of communication not as a vehicle of marginalizing local languages. Thus, the role of English in academia needs to be re-assessed, ensuring it serves as a toll of communication without sideling the local languages.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the given study was to analyze the factors behind the dominant use of English in academic formal and informal conversation. The aim was achieved by describing the motives of using English in formal and informal conversation, the success of speakers in achieving those motives in conversations, and the impact of the English language considering the imperialistic use on listeners. The findings of the study revealed that although English as lingua franca has become crucial for survival, in an academic setting, it is implied to gain respect and social acceptability. At individual level, the participants did not believe in English as superior languages. However, under the influence of the social and educational system, the motives of use of English aligned to the imperialistic impact. Moreover, the social acceptability and respect by using English primarily comes from its historical treatment of being superior with respect to other languages which has transcended into different other aspects. Besides, the motive gains are achieved by using English. Also, as listeners' impact explained, the impact of English also adds to the materialization of the motives which further strengthens the imperialistic standing of English. The long established and rising social prestige of English in academic settings has expanded the role of English from a language of communication to a tool of manipulating others or rather entrenching the imperialistic impact of English. Therefore, considering the privileges, in academic settings, English is treated as the primary standard not only to judge academic skills but also to earn social recognition. The given study contributes in explaining how linguistic imperialism exists in academia from student perception and as active participants as users and as passive subjects as listeners. English should be taken as a language of communication that connects people around the globe rather than being a source of wedge between English and non-English speakers to distribute the resources. Further, the current study is limited in it getting by presenting only students of limited setting and institutes. Besides, participants included the majority of female participants. The pattern of usage might differ from gender and gender and can provide a considerable future aspect to be studied to further study the impact of linguistic colonization.

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