

English Imperialism and Identity Alienation: A Critical Reflection Under a Global Context

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the relationship between English imperialism and identity alienation among multilingual individuals in non-Western contexts. Grounded in frameworks of linguistic imperialism, symbolic power, and neoliberal language ideologies, the study identifies four key dimensions of identity alienation: cultural insecurity, communicative marginalization, othering, and second-class citizenship. Drawing on recent empirical studies, cross-national case analyses, and decolonial scholarship, the article argues that the global dominance of English is not a neutral phenomenon but a structurally embedded power dynamic. It further suggests that fostering cultural confidence, critical language awareness, and plurilingual policies can mitigate these alienating effects. By reframing global communication from an English-centric model to a plurilingual approach, this research contributes to ongoing debates in applied linguistics, education, and cultural studies.

Keywords: English Imperialism, Identity Alienation, Intercultural Competence, Multilingualism, Symbolic Power

1. Introduction

English has become the most widely used lingua franca in the 21st century, with more than 1.7 billion people using it regularly (EF Education First, 2024). Its global presence spans education, business, technology, and international governance, giving English an unrivaled status in shaping communication across cultures. However, this dominance is not the result of a neutral, organic process. Instead, it is deeply rooted in colonial legacies, neoliberal globalization, and institutionalized power structures that privilege English while marginalizing other languages (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Phillipson, 1992).

This paper examines the phenomenon of identity alienation — the psychological, cultural, and social estrangement that occurs when multilingual speakers experience their linguistic identities being undervalued, erased, or stigmatized in English-dominant contexts. By analyzing diverse case studies and scholarly debates, the study identifies the mechanisms through which English’s global spread produces alienating effects and explores possible responses to this linguistic hierarchy.

Key concepts used in this paper are defined for clarity in Appendix A.

2. Background of the Study

The expansion of English has been shaped by three primary historical and structural forces: British colonialism, the post-WWII cultural and economic influence of the United States, and the dominance of English on the internet (Crystal, 2003; Statista, 2024). These factors have created a “linguistic hierarchy” where English occupies the apex, while other languages are relegated to peripheral or supplementary roles (Phillipson, 1992).

The impact of this hierarchy is visible worldwide. In East Asia, China’s National English Curriculum Standards mandate early English instruction, with high-stakes examinations like the Gaokao giving English equal weight to mathematics and Chinese (Lin & He, 2022). This policy has fueled a multibillion-dollar private tutoring industry but also deepened inequality between urban and rural learners (Zhang, 2023). Similarly, across ASEAN, English-medium instruction (EMI) has become prevalent in universities, though many students report struggling academically due to linguistic barriers (Nguyen, 2023).

In postcolonial Africa, the legacy of English imperialism remains stark. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) recalls being punished for speaking Gikuyu under colonial rule, a practice designed to impose English as a civilizing force. Today, English is the official language in 23 African countries, yet only 15% of the population speaks it fluently (African Union, 2023). In South Africa, EMI policies contribute to high dropout rates among Black students who feel culturally disconnected from English-only curricula (Mkhize, 2023).

Similar dynamics unfold in Latin America and the Middle East. In Brazil, English proficiency is a prerequisite for careers in technology and tourism, though only 5% of the population speaks it fluently (López, 2022). In Saudi Arabia, English is promoted through the

Vision 2030 economic diversification plan, yet many students perceive that their Arabic identity is undervalued in English-medium classrooms (Al Mazroui & Richardson, 2022).

These global cases demonstrate that English's spread is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a sociopolitical process that produces unequal access, marginalization, and cultural alienation.

2.1 Objectives of the Study:

This study aims to:

- Analyze how English imperialism contributes to identity alienation among multilingual speakers in diverse sociocultural contexts.
- Identify and categorize the dimensions of identity alienation, including psychological, cultural, and social forms.
- Propose strategies for mitigating the alienating effects of English's dominance through education, policy, and technology.

2.2 Significance of the Study

This research is significant for multiple stakeholders:

- For multilingual learners, it highlights that struggles with English proficiency and cultural belonging are not individual shortcomings but systemic issues.
- For educators, it calls for a shift in English Language Teaching (ELT) from “native-speaker mimicry” toward critical language awareness and inclusivity.
- For policymakers, it underscores the importance of protecting linguistic diversity in an era of globalization and English dominance.
- For technologists, it raises questions about how AI tools, trained primarily on English data, may reinforce linguistic hierarchies.

By addressing these dimensions, the study contributes to ongoing debates in applied linguistics, education, and cultural studies about language, power, and identity.

2.3 Research Questions:

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This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the global dominance of English contribute to identity alienation among multilingual speakers?
2. What are the key dimensions of identity alienation produced by English imperialism?
3. In what ways can educators, policymakers, and technologists resist or mitigate these alienating effects?

2.4 Limitations of the Study:

This study has several limitations. First, it primarily relies on secondary sources, including surveys, policy reports, and previous scholarly work, rather than original fieldwork. Second, while global case studies are presented, the research does not claim to represent all multilingual contexts equally. Finally, the discussion includes limited autoethnographic observations, which, while illustrative, cannot be generalized across all multilingual experiences.

3. Review of Literature

Research on English dominance has consistently highlighted its impact on identity, inequality, and cultural transmission. Phillipson's (1992) notion of linguistic imperialism emphasizes how English spreads through educational systems, media, and political institutions, supported by local elites who reinforce its prestige. Later studies (e.g., Zheng & Yang, 2024) confirm that English proficiency remains a prerequisite for academic mobility in East Asia.

At the same time, scholars have noted the ambivalence of local appropriation. In Singapore, Singlish is celebrated as a marker of national identity (Alsagoff, 2012), yet it is still stigmatized in professional settings (Park & Wee, 2013). This duality reflects what Widdowson (2015) calls the "agency of non-native speakers," who adapt English creatively but within structural hierarchies.

Research on language ideologies shows how English is framed as both opportunity and threat. In South Korea, for example, Park (2009, 2016) identifies narratives of English as a necessity for global competitiveness, as a foreign intrusion, and as a source of self-blame. These beliefs reinforce inequality, since access to high-quality English education correlates with

socioeconomic status (Lee, 2020). Similar trends are visible in ASEAN contexts, where local English varieties are marginalized in job markets (Sukarno, 2022; Suryadi, 2023).

A growing body of scholarship also examines linguistic racism (Flores & Rosa, 2015), which positions non-standard Englishes as deficient. Studies in the U.S. (Bufkin, 2024) and Europe (Zschomler, 2019) show that speakers of stigmatized varieties face systemic barriers in employment, housing, and education. Refugees and migrants are particularly vulnerable, often being excluded from professional opportunities despite advanced qualifications (Campion, 2018).

Finally, cognitive perspectives expand the discussion. Research on linguistic relativity (Boroditsky, 2011) demonstrates how English promotes linear conceptualizations of time, shaping thought in ways that may conflict with non-Western epistemologies. Battiste's (2013) idea of *cognitive imperialism* underscores how English-medium education erodes Indigenous frameworks of knowledge. Recent work on AI (Li & Zhang, 2024; Wang et al., 2024) suggests that digital tools further entrench English-centric biases, producing subtle forms of cultural invisibility for multilingual users.

Together, this literature reveals both the structural dominance of English and its everyday consequences for identity, belonging, and access to resources.

4. Theoretical Overview

4.1 Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson, 1992):

Explains how English is embedded in global systems through structural support, ideological framing, and elite complicity. This framework situates English dominance as a neo-colonial project rather than a neutral linguistic spread.

4.2 Symbolic Power (Bourdieu, 1991):

Views language as cultural capital that grants legitimacy, authority, and access to resources. This perspective highlights how “standard” English varieties are socially constructed as superior, marginalizing other forms of English and non-English languages.

4.3 Worlding and Cognitive Imperialism (Spivak, 1985; Battiste, 2013):

Emphasize how English reshapes cognitive frameworks and epistemologies, often erasing or devaluing local knowledge systems. This provides a lens for understanding the internalized sense of inferiority experienced by multilingual speakers.

4.4 Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997; Guilherme, 2002):

Offers a framework for resistance, focusing on the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries while critically examining power dynamics. This study draws on ICC to propose strategies for countering alienation and fostering linguistic diversity.

By combining these traditions, the study situates English not merely as a global lingua franca but as a complex system of power, ideology, and identity negotiation.

5. Methods

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based methodology supported by autoethnographic reflection. Instead of primary data collection, the research synthesizes secondary sources—including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, NGO surveys, and global case studies—published between 2018 and 2025, alongside canonical works in sociolinguistics and critical pedagogy.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns of identity alienation in the literature. The analysis is framed through four theoretical lenses:

- Phillipson's (1992) linguistic imperialism;
- Bourdieu's (1991) symbolic power;
- Spivak's (1985) worlding and Battiste's (2013) cognitive imperialism;
- Park's (2009, 2016) neoliberal language ideologies.

Findings are structured around four major dimensions of identity alienation—cultural insecurity, communicative marginalization, othering, and second-class citizenship. To

illustrate the lived reality of these processes, autoethnographic reflections from the author's internship at the United Nations (Geneva, 2024) are interwoven with global case studies.

6. Findings

6.1 Cultural Insecurity:

Cultural insecurity occurs when multilingual speakers internalize the perception that their heritage languages or dialects are less valuable than English. This leads to reduced use of native languages and even accent-related stigma. Evidence from multiple contexts illustrates this trend. In China, 60% of Shanghai youth under 20 are reported to lack fluency in Shanghainese due to the prioritization of Mandarin and English in schools (Lin & He, 2022). A 2023 survey by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy indicates that 45% of urban Tibetan children attend Mandarin-only schools, and only 25% can read Tibetan script. In Spain, 35% of Basque parents avoid teaching Basque at home over concerns that it may hinder their children's English proficiency (Uranga, 2022).

Accent-related stigma further exacerbates cultural insecurity. *Indian English*, for instance, is often perceived as less "professional," influencing career advancement in global workplaces (Mishra, 2023; Pennycook, 1994). An autoethnographic observation from the author's UN internship (2024) highlights this dynamic: colleagues' offhand comments about a "Chinese accent" prompted heightened self-consciousness and extra pronunciation practice.

6.2 Communicative Marginalization:

Communicative marginalization refers to exclusion from education, employment, or public life due to limited English proficiency (or perceptions thereof). In higher education, English-medium instruction (EMI) can reinforce inequality. In South Africa, 90% of public universities use English as the primary medium of instruction, even though 80% of students are first-language speakers of African languages. This contributes to higher dropout rates among Black students (Mkhize, 2023). In Vietnam, 72% of university students report difficulties in EMI-based STEM courses, often resorting to private tutoring to cope (Nguyen, 2023).

In professional contexts, language requirements produce similar patterns. In the United Arab Emirates, 90% of professional positions require fluent English, yet only 30% of Emiratis meet this criterion, resulting in exclusion from many high-paying roles (Al Mazroui & Richardson, 2022). Refugee populations experience extreme marginalization; for example, 85% of Syrian refugees in Canada remained unemployed one year after resettlement despite holding professional qualifications (Campion, 2018). Autoethnographic reflections from the author’s UN internship further illustrate that mastery of specialized English terminology in international human rights work was crucial for credibility, underscoring the structural nature of communicative marginalization.

6.3 Othering:

Othering arises when speakers of non-dominant language varieties are socially marginalized. Linguistic racism—stigmatization of non-standard varieties such as Spanglish, AAVE, Indian English, or local English forms in ASEAN contexts—limits social inclusion and perpetuates inequality (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Bufkin, 2024; Kosonen, 2020). Migrants and refugees are particularly vulnerable; for example, speakers of non-standard German were found to be twice as likely to be profiled by police and three times more likely to be denied housing compared to speakers of standard German (Zschomler, 2019).

6.4 Second-Class Citizenship:

Second-class citizenship emerges when English proficiency is linked to economic and social status, reinforcing systemic stratification. In South Korea, families spend an average of \$1,200 per month on English education, and students from affluent backgrounds are five times more likely to achieve fluency than lower-income peers (Lee, 2020). Similar patterns are observed among migrants and refugees, where institutional expectations for “native-like” English restrict access to employment and professional recognition (Campion, 2018; Al Mazroui & Richardson, 2022).

6.5 India’s English Policy and EMI: Class, Region, and Gender Disparities:

India provides a salient case of how English dominance produces complex social outcomes. As a former British colony, India retained English as an associate official language, and today

English-medium instruction (EMI) has expanded rapidly, particularly in private schools. However, this expansion has largely benefitted socioeconomically privileged groups: studies show that upper-caste and urban students are far more likely to attend English-medium schools than those from disadvantaged or rural backgrounds. Regional disparities are also striking—states such as Tamil Nadu now report over 70% English-medium enrollment, while Bihar and Madhya Pradesh remain closer to 25–30%. These differences translate into unequal outcomes, with students in EMI systems often facing comprehension gaps and, paradoxically, weaker mother-tongue literacy. Gender further shapes access, as boys are consistently more likely than girls to study in EMI schools, reinforcing pre-existing inequalities in education and employment.

7. Analysis and Discussion

The above findings align with the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, demonstrating that English dominance operates across cognitive, cultural, communicative, and structural levels of society.

Cultural Insecurity can be interpreted through Phillipson’s (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism and Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of symbolic power, illustrating how heritage languages are devalued within educational and social institutions. The internalization of English dominance affects multilingual speakers’ identities, contributing to accent shame and reduced use of heritage languages.

Communicative Marginalization reflects structural inequalities embedded in language hierarchies. EMI policies and workplace language requirements reproduce social stratification, privileging those with English proficiency while marginalizing non-native speakers. Park’s (2009, 2016) work on neoliberal language ideologies helps explain how English gets linked to human capital, thereby affecting access to education, employment, and mobility.

Othering highlights the social dimension of identity alienation. The stigmatization of non-standard English varieties constitutes linguistic racism, reinforcing social hierarchies. Spivak’s (1985) notion of worlding and Battiste’s (2013) concept of cognitive imperialism elucidate how linguistic “othering” shapes both social perceptions and individuals’ internal self-conception.

Second-Class Citizenship demonstrates the intersection of language and socio-economic inequality. English proficiency is not only a communicative skill but also a gatekeeper for status, wealth, and professional recognition. The findings confirm that linguistic hierarchies are maintained through both ideology and institutional practice, perpetuating cycles of exclusion.

Importantly, these four dimensions are not discrete; they interlock across scales. Linguistic imperialism furnishes institutions and material incentives; symbolic power naturalizes hierarchies; worlding/cognitive imperialism reconfigures what counts as legitimate knowledge; and neoliberal ideology individualizes responsibility for linguistic success or failure, transforming structural barriers into perceived personal deficits. In response to these intertwined processes, this section deepens two lines of intervention: (1) pedagogical and policy resistance via translanguaging and language revitalization; and (2) technological equity in the realm of AI.

7.1 Pedagogical and Policy Resistance: Translanguaging, Additive Bilingualism, and Revitalization

Educational practices grounded in **translanguaging** (García & Wei, 2014) reconceptualize classrooms as spaces where learners can flexibly mobilize their full linguistic repertoires rather than suppress their non-English resources. Evidence shows that integrating students' home languages enhances comprehension, affirms identity, and can even improve English development (García, 2023; Lasagabaster, 2015; Lo Bianco, 2010). An *additive bilingualism* approach similarly commits to expanding, not replacing, linguistic repertoires—avoiding subtractive trajectories where English displaces heritage languages.

Practical measures include: (a) using bilingual glossaries and reading materials; (b) allowing strategic use of L1 (first language) for planning and brainstorming in assessments; (c) explicit instruction on language ideologies to diffuse linguistic shame; (d) valorization of local language varieties in curricula and public communication; and (e) teacher development programs on recognizing and overcoming biases. Policy instruments can mandate mother-tongue instructional foundations in early education, fund the creation of regional-language learning materials, and recognize multilingual competencies in hiring and college admissions (OECD, 2023; Ochieng, 2024; May, 2012). India-specific implications include

strengthening regional-language schooling while ensuring high-quality English is taught as an *additional* language resource rather than a gatekeeping filter for advancement. For example, universities and civil service commissions can accept high-quality scholarship in Indian languages (with translation support), thereby expanding epistemic inclusion in academia and governance.

7.2 Technological Equity: Confronting English-Centric AI

AI systems trained predominantly on English-heavy web corpora tend to encode English-centric norms in tasks like translation, summarization, and information retrieval (Xu et al., 2023; Li & Zhang, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). This bias surfaces in under-translation of culturally specific terms, a preference for “standard” English outputs, and misclassification of non-standard language varieties. Remedies require concerted efforts: (a) curating multilingual datasets that represent regional Englishes and non-English languages; (b) developing culturally aware evaluation metrics for AI; (c) involving community members in the annotation of training data; and (d) increasing transparency about AI training data and error profiles. In the Indian context, creating equitable NLP (Natural Language Processing) tools means respecting the diversity of Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages and attending to widespread code-mixing practices (e.g., **Hinglish**, a Hindi-English blend). Public funding and open benchmarks can counter the concentration of AI capabilities among English-dominant tech companies, ensuring that local research communities help shape technological standards.

7.3 Future Research:

Going forward, further research is needed to promote linguistic equity and inform more inclusive language policies. First, in educational contexts, scholars could undertake mixed-methods studies comparing student outcomes in English-medium versus mother-tongue classrooms. Ethnographic classroom observations combined with longitudinal surveys of learner identity development would help clarify how EMI affects learners’ confidence, achievement, and cultural affiliation over time. For instance, discourse analysis of EMI pedagogy, paired with interviews of teachers and students, could illuminate the subtle identity negotiations occurring in postcolonial classrooms. Such research would guide evidence-based approaches to multilingual education reform focused on equity and inclusion.

Second, comparative policy analyses are necessary to evaluate multilingual education strategies. Within India, studies across different states – especially those with distinct medium-of-instruction policies – can yield insights into best practices for balancing English acquisition with native-language maintenance. Contrasting cases like English-centric policies in urban centers versus strong mother-tongue instruction in other regions could reveal how policy contexts mediate the outcomes of English dominance. International comparisons (e.g., comparing India with other multilingual societies in Asia or Africa) would likewise enrich understanding of how language policy impacts social equity. These studies should also examine intersections with gender and class, investigating who benefits or is left behind under various language-in-education models.

Third, research must critically engage with technology and AI to address emerging linguistic biases. As artificial intelligence and digital platforms become increasingly used in education and communication, there is a pressing need for large-scale audits of these systems' performance across diverse languages. Future studies should examine how well AI tools (from translation software to speech recognition and text generation) serve Indian languages and mixed codes like *Hinglish*, and whether these technologies inadvertently privilege English over local languages. Building on recent scholarship highlighting English-centric biases in AI, researchers can collaborate with computer scientists to develop new metrics for linguistic fairness. By identifying where AI fails to understand or accurately represent minority languages, such work would inform the creation of more culturally inclusive NLP standards. It would also provide empirical data for policymakers to regulate AI in ways that protect linguistic diversity.

Overall, future research should be interdisciplinary, merging insights from sociolinguistics, education, and computer science. By focusing on **language equity** – ensuring that speakers of all languages have fair access to educational and technological resources – scholars and practitioners can design interventions to mitigate the alienating effects of English imperialism. Addressing gaps such as the gender dynamics of EMI access, the long-term impacts of translanguaging pedagogies, and the decolonization of AI training data will be vital. These directions will not only deepen theoretical understanding of language and identity under globalization, but also generate practical recommendations for fostering plurilingual, inclusive futures.

8. Implications

The findings suggest actionable implications for several key stakeholder groups:

1. **Multilingual Learners:** Developing cultural confidence and critical language awareness can mitigate identity alienation. Engaging with heritage languages through literature, media, and community activities strengthens cultural self-perception, while reflecting critically on linguistic hierarchies fosters awareness of inequity (Rodriguez, 2024; Phillipson, 1992).
2. **Educators:** Decolonial ELT (English language teaching) and translanguaging approaches can promote linguistic equity. Integrating non-Western English texts, validating non-standard varieties, and encouraging students to use their full linguistic repertoire all enhance both confidence and English proficiency (García & Wei, 2014; García, 2023). Educators also play a role in confronting linguistic bias in the classroom.
3. **Policymakers:** Systemic interventions include funding language revitalization programs, implementing additive bilingual education models, and enforcing anti-discrimination laws based on language and accent (Ochieng, 2024; OECD, 2023). Policies should ensure institutional accountability in universities and workplaces to reduce linguistic inequities (e.g., requirements for inclusive language policies in higher education).
4. **Researchers and Technologists:** Addressing AI bias and centering Global South perspectives in linguistic research can counter English-centric dominance. Building multilingual datasets, creating culturally inclusive AI tools, and supporting research led by non-English-speaking scholars can help reduce cognitive imperialism in technology and validate diverse linguistic identities (Wang et al., 2024).

9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that English imperialism is a dynamic, systemic phenomenon that produces multiple dimensions of identity alienation: cultural insecurity, communicative marginalization, othering, and second-class citizenship. These dimensions interact with each other, creating cycles of exclusion that affect multilingual speakers globally.

However, the analysis also indicates possibilities for resistance through strategic interventions at individual, educational, policy, and technological levels. Cultivating cultural confidence, implementing decolonial ELT practices, enforcing equitable language policies, and designing inclusive AI tools can gradually reshape global linguistic hierarchies. Case studies — including Finland’s additive bilingual education system and UNESCO’s Decade of Indigenous Languages initiative — suggest that more equitable linguistic futures are attainable.

Ultimately, linguistic diversity is not merely a cultural value; it is a fundamental human right. English dominance, if left unchecked, erodes not only minority languages but also the cognitive and cultural identities they embody. Advancing a *plurilingual* future — where multiple languages and identities coexist and thrive — is essential for inclusive global participation.

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Appendix A. Key Terms and Definitions

Table A1

Key Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Identity Alienation	A psychological, cultural, and social sense of estrangement experienced when one's heritage language or cultural identity is devalued or stigmatized under a dominant language regime (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Phillipson, 1992).
English-Medium Instruction (EMI)	The use of English as the language of instruction for academic subjects (excluding English-language classes) in settings where English is not the first language of most students. EMI is typically implemented to enhance English proficiency and global competitiveness, though critics note it can disadvantage learners who are not fluent in English.
Translanguaging	A dynamic practice in which bilingual or multilingual individuals utilize their entire linguistic repertoire fluidly within a single conversation or educational context. In pedagogy, translanguaging encourages students to draw on all their languages to maximize understanding and expression (García & Wei, 2014).
Linguistic Imperialism (English Imperialism)	The imposition and privileging of one language (e.g., English) over others, often due to historical colonization and maintained by political and economic power structures. It results in the marginalized status of other languages and cultures (Phillipson, 1992).

Term	Definition
Plurilingualism	The ability of an individual or community to use multiple languages for communication, and an educational approach that values maintaining and developing proficiency in several languages rather than focusing on a single “native” language.