

Linguistic Imperialism as a Tool in Cultural Hegemony: Language Decline and Revitalization of Indigenous Communities in Canada

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Abstract: This paper provides an in-depth analysis of linguistic imperialism and its relationship to cultural hegemony, with a specific focus on Indigenous communities in Canada. Linguistic imperialism is defined as the suppression and marginalization of other languages by a dominant language, often stemming from historical colonization, which results in the imposition of cultural hegemony on diverse cultural groups. To analyze this noteworthy phenomenon, Edward Said's theory of Orientalism is applied in the paper. Furthermore, the study not only emphasizes the negative impact of linguistic domination but also proposes various methods with the aim of reversing language shift and fostering cultural and linguistic vitality. By analyzing the case of the Inuit community in Canada and introducing methods such as language revitalization programs, this paper presents strategies to counter the influence of linguistic imperialism, aiming to contribute to the creation of a more inclusive environment so as to safeguard linguistic and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Linguistic Imperialism, Cultural Hegemony, Linguistic Philosophy, Hybridization, Edward Said

1. Introduction

Linguistic imperialism is a significant yet often overlooked factor of cultural hegemony that has a profound impact on power dynamics within society. This phenomenon involves the dominance of one language over others, subtly influencing communication, thought processes, identity formation, and power structures. The extensive use of English, resulting from British colonialism and contemporary globalization, exemplifies this by marginalizing local languages and dialects, thus leading to linguistic and cultural homogenization [1].

In Canada, the experiences of Indigenous peoples, particularly the Inuit, are a quintessential example of linguistic imperialism [2]. The Inuit community has been living in the northwest sides of Canada (Nunavut, Yukon Territory and Northwest Territory) since time immemorial, where it had its own languages, such as Inuktitut, which was central to its cultural identity, heritage, and way of life. However, colonization brought significant changes, including the imposition of English and French by European settlers and the Canadian government.

2. Inuit Community and the Language Decline

Since the arrival of British troops in Canada in the 1600s, Inuit communities have experienced active exclusion and suppression with the aim of assimilation. The implementation of residential schools, where Indigenous children were forcibly separated from their families, enforced the use of English or French while discouraging the use of native languages. Consequently, this policy resulted in a cultural disconnect and a decline in fluency in native languages. This linguistic imperialism, which served as part of a broader strategy to impose cultural hegemony, has had long-lasting effects by disrupting the transmission of Indigenous languages and cultures, as well as eroding the Indigenous cultural identity. The policies of the Canadian government reflect a devaluation of Indigenous parenting and heritage, effectively highlighting the profound impact of residential schools as tools of cultural dominance [3].

The legislative enactments regarding Bilingualism and Multiculturalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Canada served to perpetuate existing racial and linguistic stratification. This act favored English and French languages, marginalizing Indigenous languages and, by extension, their identities within the Canadian national fabric. Before 1988, immigrants arriving in Canada were generally anticipated to adapt to a lifestyle predominantly aligned with Western European and English-speaking norms. For example, the Inuit's diet is composed of food like walrus, polar bear, seal, whale, ptarmigan, geese, ducks, and other birds; however, it is seen as too "primitive" by the white Canadians. The concepts of assimilation and uniformity are not recent phenomena in the Canadian context; indeed, they form a foundational aspect of the nation's historical development. Indigenous languages, which hold the distinction of being the earliest spoken in Canada, faced suppression through deliberate policy and restrictions. This suppression was not solely because the colonizers spoke English and French, but also because these languages symbolized an 'ideal' Canadian identity, one closely tied to Western European norms and values. The lifestyle and appearance of English and French speakers represented a standard to which Canadian immigrants were expected to conform.

Throughout history, linguistic oppression has been a tool for the ruling elite to establish and maintain political dominance, controlling institutions, wealth and natural resources. However, aside from its political utility, the use of language oppression can also serve as a means to inflict harm upon minority groups, driven by perceived retribution and a desire for collective punishment. As described below, the degradation, reduction, or elimination of a language becomes an act of cruelty by degrading, diminishing, or eradicating not only a group's linguistic identity but also the individual identities within that group [4].

3. Language Loss and the Consequences

In the context of linguistic imperialism, the impact of accent and accent discrimination is frequently overlooked. The predominance of the English language significantly impacts the Inuit in Canada, highlighting broader issues of linguistic and cultural marginalization. This dominance privileges specific English accents, typically those from Anglophone countries, leading to the marginalization of individuals with indigenous or non-standard accents, such as the Inuit.

A case in point is the 2001 incident reported by Munro, where a Cree woman from North Battleford faced linguistic profiling [5]. The woman was denied an apartment over the phone due to her accent, but a friend with a 'standard' accent was told it was available. The case, which was resolved outside of court with the landlord compensating the woman and implementing an anti-discrimination policy, exemplifies the widespread nature of such discrimination against Aboriginal people or people in general with non-Standard English accents.

To refine and broaden the analysis, Said's theories explain more about the implications of this phenomenon. Edward Said, an eminent linguist and the first to suggest the concept of "Orientalism",

connects his analysis of Orientalism with linguistic imperialism. He posits that just as Orientalism generated a division between the “Orient” and the “Occident”, linguistic imperialism similarly segregates the dominant language from marginalized ones. This phenomenon entails more than a mere reduction in the usage of certain languages; it often involves a forced or voluntary shift by native speakers to adopt an alien language, leading to a loss or confusion of cultural identity and a distancing from heritage. This, in turn, represents a triumph of hegemonic forces. Said's examination reveals how imposing a dominant language on Indigenous communities mirrors broader patterns of cultural hegemony, wherein the “Other” is demarcated and dominated via cultural instruments, particularly language [6].

This preference for 'standard' English in Canada not only overlooks the linguistic diversity of Inuit communities but also contributes to their social and economic marginalization in areas like employment, education, and healthcare. Inuit individuals frequently encounter barriers linked to their distinctive accents or linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, the pressure to conform to dominant English language norms can damage the cultural identity and self-esteem of Inuit youth, further distancing them from their cultural heritage [7].

The case study shows how Language imperialism leads to cultural hegemony through the following three aspects.

3.1. Disappearance of Language

Linguistic imperialism involves the dominance of one language over others, typically a language associated with being spoken by people in power. This dominance can lead to the marginalization or even extinction of local languages. When a dominant language becomes the primary medium of communication in education, media, and government, it inevitably results in younger generations learning and using this language at the expense of their native tongue. According to the data from the Canadian Encyclopedia, in 2021, around 237,420 Indigenous individuals in Canada stated they were proficient enough in an Indigenous language to hold a conversation, marking a decrease of 10,750 or 4.3% since 2016. Without efforts to safeguard these languages, the count of Indigenous language speakers is expected to decline further [8]. As languages disappear, the unique perspectives, histories, and knowledge embedded in these languages are lost, reducing linguistic diversity and homogenizing communication.

3.2. Erosion of Culture

Language is a crucial vehicle for cultural expression and preservation. When a language is overshadowed by another one, the cultural practices, traditions, and expressions tied to that language can begin to erode. This erosion manifested in various ways, such as changes in art, music, storytelling, and even day-to-day customs. Over time, the cultural norms and values of the dominant language supersede local customs, leading to a homogenization of culture where unique cultural identities become less distinct or valued.

3.3. Loss of Identity

Language and culture are integral to individual and collective identity. As linguistic imperialism advances, individuals may feel pressured to conform to the dominant language and culture to succeed or simply be respected socially and economically. This pressure can lead to a loss of personal and communal identity, as people distance themselves from their original community, and deliberately alter habits such as not eating raw meals bleaching their skin, and changing last names for better job opportunities. In the long term, it acts like a negative feedback loop that makes the younger generation feel disconnected from its roots, experiencing a sense of loss or alienation from its ancestral culture

and history; however, not accepted by mainstream culture. The resulting identity crisis caused profound psychological and social implications, affecting community cohesion, bonds and individual well-being.

4. Reversing Language Shift and Methods for Cultural Restoration

In response to the years of suppression and assimilation that led to the disappearance of language, erosion of culture, and loss of identity among the Inuit as described above, Canada has been implementing a multifaceted approach to cultural preservation.

4.1. Language Revitalization Programs

The Canadian government established language revitalization programs for the recreation of language learning environments not only for the Inuits but also for everyone interested. The programs include setting up language schools, creating digital language resources, and incorporating Inuit languages into the mainstream education system.

Not only is Canada establishing projects to help revitalize and protect native languages, but so are other countries like Australia. The Australian government and the non-profit organization took the initiative to revive previously suppressed Indigenous languages, prominently First Language Australia. This task force has developed The Global Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, aimed at promoting international collaboration and strategic preservation of Indigenous languages. The goal is to ensure that younger Australians can learn and speak their ancestral language.

4.2. Cultural Preservation Initiatives

Some other method includes the documentation and archiving of traditional Inuit knowledge, stories, music, and art as well as colleges opening courses, research centers and activities on Indigenous history. Jennifer Sylvester, a 40-year-old student and mother, vividly demonstrates a driving scenario while seated in the University of Toronto's Centre for Indigenous Studies. This creative learning is part of a language game aimed at preserving the Anishinaabemowin language, reflecting a larger effort to combat the cultural and linguistic suppression that Indigenous communities have faced due to colonial policies such as residential schools. Jenny Blackbird, part of Nehiyaw and Finnish, organizes these Indigenous Language Games as part of the Indigenous language hub, highlighting the vibrant, action-oriented nature of Indigenous languages. The University's Centre, since its inception, has emphasized language courses, recognizing their significance in understanding Indigenous cultures and addressing the alarming decline in Indigenous language speakers—a trend that has profound implications for Indigenous identity and community well-being [9].

Additionally, Museums, cultural centers, and online platforms play significant roles in showcasing and educating both Inuit and non-Inuit populations about the richness of Inuit culture as well as encouraging the practice of traditional crafts and holding cultural festivals.

4.3. Community Empowerment and Autonomy

Strengthening community empowerment and self-governance is crucial for language and community revitalization. This entails supporting Inuit communities in protecting their culture and identity through self-determination. Policies that respect and enhance Indigenous sovereignty, including land rights and self-governance, should be implemented. Granting communities the power to make decisions regarding their education, culture, and language policies helps repair the damages caused by assimilation policies in the past.

In addition to the aforementioned methods, active involvement of individuals from diverse ethical backgrounds is encouraged in gaining Indigenous cultural knowledge. This includes supporting initiatives led by Indigenous communities, participating in cultural celebrations, advocating for strengthened Indigenous rights policies, and promoting respectful and sensitive collaboration with Indigenous communities. At the core of these efforts is nurturing awareness, advancing educational paradigms about Indigenous heritage, and supporting Indigenous businesses. Importantly, these actions must be guided by humility and a willingness to learn from Indigenous narratives. A notable example of this approach is the inclusion of Inuit history in Canadian history textbooks, inspiring students to understand the achievements and mistakes of their ancestors. This inclusive education plays a vital role in ensuring future generations have a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous history and culture, fostering a deeper appreciation and respect for their unique heritage.

Compared to the past, Canada is now regarded as one of the most welcoming English-speaking countries for immigrants, demonstrating its commitment to cultural preservation and inclusivity. Indigenous peoples, who were historically marginalized, are now seen as equal citizens, marking a significant shift in public attitudes and policies. With Inuit people gaining federal rights in the 1950s and taking on public office, their representation in politics continues to increase and therefore, able to protect the well-being of their community, signifying a gradual but meaningful rise in their social power and respect [10]. This journey towards a more inclusive and respectful society, though long and challenging, is indeed in clear progress.

5. Conclusion

Linguistic imperialism is inseparable from other forms of domination like economic and political power. The emergence of the English language is not merely a linguistic trend; it is deeply linked to the predominance of English-speaking nations, creating a cycle wherein linguistic hierarchies uphold and are upheld by other forms of power. To maintain dominance, a language must be interwoven with politics, government, economic systems, and social hegemony. Linguistic imperialism wields its persuasive power most effectively when it is supported by a position of dominance. Despite being less apparent than factors like warfare or the Internet, linguistic imperialism is a subtle yet potent force. It permeates daily life and thought, quietly molding consciousness, yet it often goes unnoticed in discussions.

In summary, by recognizing linguistic imperialism as a tool of cultural hegemony, we gain a deeper understanding of how social dominance is established and perpetuated. The case of the Inuits is a prime example of this, emphasizing the significance of addressing linguistic imperialism in opposition to cultural hegemony and in safeguarding cultural diversity and autonomy.

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