

The Impact of Linguistic Imperialism on Indigenous Languages in Iraq: A Case Study of Language Policy and Preservation

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ABSTRACT

The present study looked into the effects of linguistic imperialism, specifically, the dominance of English, on the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages in Iraq. Tapping into a phenomenological study, using interviews, the study recruited 30 students enrolled at a university in Baghdad, majoring in different fields of study. Half of the participants were Assyrian and half were Armenian native speakers, with an age range of 20-22 years old and equal numbers of male and female. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data through open, axial, and selective coding. The linguistic imperialism has impacted Assyrian and Armenian languages in Iraq in a very complex manner. These villages are resistant, and through different cultural activities or family traditions, they try to keep their languages alive; however, the prevalence of English in schools makes the young generation feel displaced. This is the pressure that makes them give more importance to English, leading to lesser exposure and fluency in Assyrian and Armenian-especially now, when the education system is giving more emphasis to English, besides Arabic. The given study underlines urgent policy changes to be made for the promotion and support of indigenous languages in Iraq. The current policies need a re-evaluation in order to keep the life preserved, which gives priority to Arabic and English. Inclusion of indigenous languages into education, resource allocation for learning a language, and the use of social media for revitalization are the crucial steps toward preserving these treasures.

KEYWORDS

indigenous languages; language policy; language preservation, linguistic imperialism

INTRODUCTION

Languages are not only a means of communication but also a fundamental element molding culture, identity, and even opportunities. Of the many varieties of languages spoken in the world, one has emerged as the dominant, internationally utilized language—one that has transformed the lives of billions of humans: English. The rise of English as an international lingua franca is the result of transformative impacts of history, namely colonialism and technological innovation (Crystal, 2003). Understanding the current dominance of English requires tracing its historical origins. The evolution of English from a regional language to a global powerhouse is rooted in colonial expansion, economic dominance, and cultural exchange (Ullah & Akram, 2023).

Burns and Coffin (2001, pp. 78-87) observe that, “the extent to which English is involved in the political, educational, social and economic life of a country is clearly a result of both

the historical legacy of colonialism and of the varying success of countries since independence in warding off the threats of neo-colonialism.” This pervasive influence of English has triggered language shifts, undermined the indigenous languages and, in some cases, caused their extinction. As English permeates local contexts, it reshapes cultural identities, leaving its mark on art, literature, and everyday life (Ullah & Akram, 2023). English often acts as a gateway to international job markets and educational opportunities, highlighting the disparities created by unequal access to the language. As Phillipson, 2009 manifests, the two important concepts that have legitimized the expansion of English are ethnocentricity and educational policy. The former can be defined as “the practice of judging other cultures by standards of its own.” Such practices have strengthened differences among languages. Against this backdrop of linguistic imperialism, resistance naturally arises, as communities worldwide strive to preserve their linguistic and cultural identities.

The Iraqi linguistic landscape represents the complex historical and cultural heritage of this region, really a rich tapestry of languages. Arabic has been recognized to be the primary and most spoken language within Iraq, by about 75-80% of its entire population, particularly in the center and south of the country (Doğan et al., 2017). On the contrary, Kurdish is an official in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region; Kurdish is a basic expression of ethnic identity and regional government. Indo-European, Kurdish is basically divided into two widespread dialects, named Sorani and Kurmanji; each spoken in different geographical areas Badawi et al., 2023. This linguistic diversity speaks volumes to the importance of ethnic identity in Iraq. The Kurdish people are roughly 15-20% of the population and can be found in the northern parts of the country, primarily (Abdullah & Hama, 2020).

Among indigenous languages spoken in Iraq, besides Arabic and Kurdish, a number of languages are spoken by various minority communities. Traditionally, Assyrian and Chaldean Neo-Aramaic dialects have been associated with the Christian communities of northern Iraq (Pakstis et al., 2019). These make for a highly interesting combination in this multicultural, where the Turkoman community speaks mainly in Turkmen (Pakstis et al., 2019). Every language not only acts as a means of communication but also carries unique cultural heritages, traditions, and histories within them, which are intrinsic to Iraq’s diversified identity.

Dialectical differences within Arabic and Kurdish further complicate the linguistic geography. For example, the dialects of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul in Arabic vary significantly in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax (Doğan et al., 2017). In similar vein, Kurdish dialects, like Sorani and Kurmanji, have distinct linguistic features reflecting the regional identity of their speakers (Mustafa & Rashid, 2017; Badawi et al., 2023). This diversity in dialects proves the dynamism of language in Iraq, resulting from geography, social organization, and political history.

However, preservation of the indigenous languages faces a lot of challenges especially with the current social changes taking place in Iraq. These languages need to be revitalized and preserved since they are key conveyors of aspects of cultural identity (Pakstis et al., 2019). Community programs and educational initiatives are being called for so that the coming generations may proceed speaking and cherishing their own ancestral languages in a sense of belonging and cultural continuity amidst the fast changes (Pakstis et al., 2019; Al-Obaidi & Nofal, 2022). Thanks to this significant point, the study attempted to explore the impact of linguistic imperialism on mother languages in Iraq by considering all the factors associated with language policy and preservation initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

On the other hand, social changes that have begun in Iraq oppose various challenges to preserving these indigenous languages. It is important to revitalize and preserve them since these languages are one of the major cultural identity carriers (Pakstis et al., 2019). Community programs and educational initiatives have been advocated for to ensure that future generations can continue speaking and cherishing their ancestral languages, thus fostering a sense of belonging and continuation of culture in a rapidly changing environment (Pakstis et al., 2019; Al-Obaidi & Nofal, 2022). Along this line of the very important issue, the present study has sought to explore linguistic imperialism and its effect on indigenous languages in Iraq in respect to language policy and preservation efforts.

The expansion of English also fell on the critical period of colonialism and imperialism. As the British Empire grew between the 16th and the 20th century, English was imposed upon other cultures, establishing a language hierarchy with English at the top. Illich (1981) notices that this power of language was noted early in the plan by Antonio de Nebrija in 1492 to establish Castilian as an instrument of conquest and social control underlining the fact that the connection between language and empire is very old. By the late 18th century, the Industrial Revolution in Britain helped English to spread via trade and technology.

Steamships, the telegraph, and later the internet made communication among those English-speaking communities possible. British cultural influence, through writers like Shakespeare and Dickens, helped spread the language too. Then came the 20th century and the rise of the United States with its powerful export of pop culture-Hollywood movies, music, and whatnot-that really made English a strong contender for the top position in world pop culture. The British Council, too, came about in the 1930s and helped spread British culture with its brand of English across the seas. The other powerful force in spreading American English, with its distinctive flavor, was through educational institutions and exchange programs. In the thought of linguistic imperialism, as was witnessed in the fall of the Ba'ath regime in the popularity of the institutions teaching the English language in Iraq, it gives a clear insight into how the language of English has changed. This paper tries to make an effort toward understanding the impact of linguistic imperialism on indigenous languages in Iraq with regard to language policy and preservation, drawing from the findings of Ullah and Akram (2023) on the multi-dimensional impact of global English dominance on societies, languages, and cultures. Thus, in this way, linguistic diversity, language preservation, and inclusion contribute a great deal to bringing into existence a global linguistic landscape of respect and festivity of the multitudes of human languages and cultures. The research question guiding this current study is:

How has linguistic imperialism, particularly the dominance of English, impacted the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages in Iraq?

RESEARCH METHODS

Design

This present study adopted a phenomenological approach in order to delve deeper into the lived experiences and perceptions of the respondents. It helps in understanding the subjective experience of the participants, which probably may not come out with the use of other means. It contributes to the understanding of the essence of the phenomena and gives holistic views of how people perceive their world. As Creswell (2013) observed, this becomes an indispensable approach in understanding complex human experiences and places much emphasis on reflexivity; that is, encouraging researchers to set aside their biases for an authentic finding. This idea is supported by Moustakas (1994).

Participants

Using a convenience and purposive sampling method, 30 university students partook in this study, of whom 15 were native speakers of Assyrian while the rest were 15 native speakers of Armenian, aged between 20 to 22 years. A total of equal numbers of male and female students in medicine, law, and TEFL undergraduate majors participated in this study. The logistical constraints of the researcher markedly limited further participants and breadth of majors in this present study.

Instrument

The participants were 30 university students from Baghdad, Iraq. They had been selected through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling technique. Fifteen respondents were native Assyrian speakers, while another 15 respondents were native Armenian speakers. The participants' age range was between 20 and 22 years. Both females and males were equally represented, and the participants were enrolled in undergraduate studies in medicine, law, and TEFL. Due to logistics, it was beyond the feasibility of the researcher to include more participants or a greater variety of majors for this research study.

Data Collection Procedure

This first step was to seek approval from the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education. The interview questions were validated by experts. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after personally informing them of the purpose of the study and that participation was said to be voluntary. In-person interviews were conducted and tape-recorded for the purpose of accuracy. Furthermore, the participants' confidentiality was ensured by the use of pseudonyms, and data was kept securely where access was possible by the researcher alone. The recordings were done along with transcriptions in verbatim to analyze them.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed through thematic analysis. This process involved three stages of operation: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. At the open coding stage, the interview transcripts were broken down into segments, and codes attached to the segments denoted the emerging themes. Axial coding involved an investigation of the relationships among codes to identify larger themes. Finally, selective coding describes the process of refining the important findings through articulating the main themes by using illustrative quotes from the transcripts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the transcribed interview data revealed the following key themes:

The Shadow of English in Education

This theme indicates that English is becoming dominant in education and most likely to reduce the usage of Assyrian and Armenian, particularly among the young generation. The university students participating in this study indicated that they had been under pressure to give more concentration to English at the cost of achieving fluency in their native languages. The following example was contributed by one of the participants:

“My parents told me, ‘You must learn English. It’s the key to the world.’ But I feel like it’s also the key that locks us out of our own language. It’s like our languages are fading into the background noise.” – Arman, a 21-year-old Armenian student.

This extract reflects how the dominance of English in education can lead to a sense of displacement for speakers of indigenous languages. The student recognizes the importance of English but feels its influence is overshadowing their native tongue.

Community Resilience and Language Preservation

This theme reveals the critical role that community efforts play in rescuing indigenous languages. In fact, these communities are transferring the language practically through cultural events, religious gatherings, and family practices, hence creating a domain for their languages to survive.

“Every Sunday, we gather at the Assyrian church. We sing hymns in our language, share stories about our ancestors, and teach our children Assyrian. It’s how we keep our language alive. We know that English is powerful, but we’re determined to hold onto our heritage.”
– Nour, a 22-year-old Assyrian female student.

This excerpt shows how important community gatherings and cultural practices are in the preservation of endangered languages. It reflects an active commitment on the part of elder generations to make sure that the youngest generation truly inherits their language—one that is showing signs of resilience against linguistic pressures.

Language Policies and the Struggle for Recognition

This theme emphasizes the role of language policies in the determination of the status of indigenous languages. If the policies favor Arabic and English, that may push Assyrian and Armenian to the periphery, possibly harming their preservation and revitalization.

“The government says it supports all languages, but in reality, it’s different. Arabic and English dominate official settings, while Assyrian and Armenian are barely recognized. We need more support in order to promote our languages and keep our cultural identity alive.”
– Bashar, Assyrian student, 22 years old.

This excerpt brings out the disengagement between declared language policies and their actual implementation. What is implied here, of course, is a call for more recognition and promotion of indigenous languages to temper the heavy influence that comes from both English and Arabic.

The Intergenerational Gap in Language Fluency

This theme brings up the possible long-term threat to the survival of Assyrian and Armenian. If young generations are less fluent in their mother tongue, intergenerational transmission could be broken and might eventually lead to language loss.

“My grandmother speaks fluent Armenian; my parents understand it, but I only speak a little. My generation is more interested in English, and we don’t get the chance to learn Armenian the way our grandparents did. It’s a shame, because our language is part of who we are.”– Arpine, a 21-year-old Armenian female student.

The struggle of intergenerational language transmission is realized in this excerpt. Younger generations may not reach the same level of fluency as their elders due to various factors that might include educational policies, social pressure, and lack of exposure to their native language.

The Impact of Language Shift on Identity

Such a theme underlines the emotional and cultural significance of language. To speakers of Assyrian and Armenian, their mother tongue is closely interwoven with their identity and

their sense of belonging. Therefore, language shift may have very serious consequences for individuals and communities.

“Speaking English feels like I am melting into the society, but speaking Assyrian feels like holding on to a part of my roots. Losing the language would mean losing a part of me.” — 21-year-old Assyrian student Ninos.

The given excerpt shows the close relation between language and identity. The student feels that his native language is a part of belonging and heritage, which can also hint at the emotional effect a language shift can cause.

Social Media as a Double-Edged Sword

This theme addresses how social media, despite offering a potential resource for language revitalization and community building, can also contribute to linguistic imperialism. On one side, it allows for global communication and access to resources, including materials in the English language; on the other, this may create pressures for conformity, where English may become the “language of the internet,” pushing indigenous languages to the margins.

“I am always being bombarded with English on social media. There is hardly any group or even regular post in Assyrian language. My language feels lost at sea amidst English. If I do find any Assyrian groups, it’s mostly people talking about politics or sharing jokes. Where is the space to actually use and practice our language?” – Nishtar, Assyrian social media user, aged 20.

This extract captures the complex experience of linguistic imperialism on social media. The user talks about how English is everywhere and comments on the difficulty of finding a place for the Assyrian language. It highlights the issues of maintaining a language in an English-based digital world and how, such media, can be extrapolated to contribute to linguistic marginalization. It also outlines why most social media platforms cannot independently use and learn a language as most social media is built on information sharing rather than on in person conversations and language acquisition.

Collectively, these excerpts provide a glimpse of the nuanced dynamics of language in Iraq. On the one hand industry players are aggressively promoting the supremacy of English; on the other, community strength is mobilized to defend native languages. Thus, this study provides differentiated knowledge about the dynamics and their roles in Iraq's linguistic landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study was intended to investigate how linguistic imperialism has affected indigenous languages in Iraq, based on language policy and preservation. For this reason, it reflects the complexity of linguistic imperialism in the case of Iraqi Assyrian and Armenian languages. While both communities have shown continued resiliency through cultural events and familial practices in preserving their native tongues, the dominance of English within their educational systems creates a sense of displacement among children. This pressure towards favouring English puts in place lack of exposure and fluency in Assyrian and Armenian, yet especially due to the education system favours English and Arabic. Moreover, while social media is a potential venue for the revitalization of languages and community building, it is also a contributor to linguistic imperialism by creating pressures for conformity toward English, making the search for active use and practice of indigenous languages quite limited. Thus, the study emphasized that promotion of indigenous languages should be enhanced through language policy, education, and community involvement in order to counter linguistic imperialism for more prolonged guarantee of the lives of these valuable languages.

These results can be understood with the aid of a number of theories on linguistic imperialism, professional language shift and linguistic conservation. These theories have the potential to explain how power arrangements, processes of globalisation and linguistic policies may facilitate or challenge survival and dynamism of indigenous tongues in the face of powerful, normalising languages such as English.

Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism is at the core of understanding the replacement of Assyrian and Armenian languages in Iraq. Based on this view, the hegemony of English is not by chance, but a consequence of historical, political, and economic mechanisms which consistently give an advantage to English at the expense of other languages. This is clear from the focus on English in the education system and the role it plays as a gatekeeper to social and economic mobility, compelling younger generations to give English preference at the expense of their own languages.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital helps explain why English holds a dominant position in the linguistic marketplace. In Iraq, English is connected to social mobility, accessing the globalized world, and modernity, thereby contributing to the depreciation of local tongues such as Assyrian and Armenian. This leads to feelings of displacement in younger generations, in that, proficiency in English outweighs proficiency in their native languages.

Fishman's (1991) theory of language reversal shift (RLS) may be used to describe the capacity of Assyrian and Armenian communities to maintain their languages through cultural events and family practices. Although such efforts have value as a type of resistance to linguistic imperialism, Fishman's framework also reveals to what extent such communities experience difficulties in situations where institutional backing (e.g., schooling and media) is not a given, thereby complicating the possibility of continuing intergenerational transmission of their languages.

Such a role of social media could be put in line with the views of Canagarajah (1999) on linguistic imperialism in the digital era. On the one side, social media can be a way to create communities and practice language; on the other, it reinforces the hegemony of English by inducing linguistic homogenization in digital environments in all parts of the world. It has this mixed function which adds to the difficulties of indigenous language conservation.

Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural hegemony explains why English has come to dominate in education and social media, subtly molding attitudes and behaviours in the culture. The normalization of English as a global lingua franca perpetuates its dominance, making it difficult for minority languages to compete or find institutional support.

It has been empirically reported that the hegemony of the global languages, particularly English, may pose severe problems to the local languages, in Iraq as well. For example, the research by Arjuna Manage (2023) illustrates the negative impacts of English medium instruction on indigenous languages in the Kandyan Kingdom, pointing out how educational policies supporting English may easily marginalize local languages and cultures. This is in line with Iraq, where the strong demand for the integration of English into the school curriculum has tensed the intergenerational relation between younger members of Assyrian and Armenian communities.

This is also shown through the systematic review carried out by Alcántara et al., 2022, who identified the need to retain native languages in European educational settings; without this, it would result in cultural assimilation and loss of cultural identity. It is relevant to the scenario in Iraq, where the imperative of acquiring proficiency in English and Arabic as part of educational curriculum has been resulting in restricting fluency and exposure to native tongues. This resilience is frequently expressed in the form of cultural activities and home

practices to maintain their linguistic tradition of these communities, and diverse indigenous communities throughout the world (Wang, 2024).

A further important discussion which the literature has addressed is the function of social media in reviving and undermining indigenous languages. Social media may allow spaces of community and language practice, but it may also endorse linguistic imperialism by supporting English as the default modality of communication (Garg, 2024). This is true in the Iraqi context, as a younger generation may be required to confront their native languages and English, which are seen as the language of opportunities and modernity.

In addition, the calling for supportive language policies and educational programs has been reflected in a multitude of studies. For example, Haque and Patrick (2014) build on the ways policy decisions to support language reproduce racial inequalities by putting indigenous languages in a sublime position relative to English and French (Canada). This reflects a broader trend observed in Iraq, where there is a pressing need for greater recognition and support for indigenous languages through comprehensive language policies that prioritize their preservation and revitalization (Wang, 2024).

Thus, through an exploration of the experiences of students of Assyrian and Armenian heritage in Baghdad, Iraq, the present study provides an answer to the intricate relationship between linguistic imperialism, language policy, and community resilience, which will inform the destiny of indigenous languages. Dominance by English in education, subjected by global economic and political pressures, poses a certain threat to the transmission of Assyrian and Armenian across generations. While the communities themselves try with much passion to retain their languages by holding cultural events, religious occasions, and even family-related functions, the absence of formal institutional support in favor of the languages under discussion and the overwhelming penetration of English into daily life and social media further worsen the case.

All of these findings hold significant implications for language policy and preservation in Iraq. In the meantime, there is an imperative need to reassess the current language and policy arrangements that favor Arabic and English over indigenous languages. The results are an unambiguous indication of the requirement to translate into policy the promotion and support of the use, teaching restoration of indigenous languages. This may involve, for example, the incorporation of such languages into teaching, supporting of indigenous language learning and the staging of cultural activities (and also honoring the use of indigenous languages at official settings). The second messages points to the necessity to explore anti-strategies facing English control of education, potentially utilizing indigenous languages in educational materials, bilingualism, and encouragement of their own use by course staff in the classroom. Consequently, this also brings into relief the need for novel approaches to leveraging social media for language revitalization, such as the development of platforms dedicated to language learning and practice, the creation of online communities that encourage engagement with indigenous languages, and the development of culturally appropriate digital content in these languages.

If these results are taken on board by Iraqi policy makers and community leaders it will be valued and help pave the way of a more welcoming and supportive context for indigenous languages. Thus, it will result in the maintenance of the corresponding cultural heritage, a sense of membership and identity to speakers, and provide future generations with the possibility to engage with the vibrant linguistic heritage of their progenitors.

This research, despite the contribution it makes to Iraq's linguistic landscape, is not without limitations. First, the limitation includes sample size and participant selection. The convenience and purposive sampling technique relied on for the study targeted 30 university students from Baghdad. While this enabled an in-depth exploration of experiences within

this particular group, findings cannot be generalized into other parts of Iraq or to other demographics. It would have also enhanced the present study to have a more diverse sample in terms of geographic location, age, and socioeconomic status, including participants with different educational backgrounds and levels of exposure to different language policies.

Also, reliance on self-reported experiences, though yielding rich qualitative data, might further be complemented with the inclusion of quantitative data collection. This can be done by survey questionnaires that measure proficiency levels in languages, attitudes toward language use, and exposure to different languages across a larger sample. Moreover, the research of official language policy documents, educational materials, and media representations on indigenous languages might provide a fuller understanding of the broader context that shapes the use and preservation of the languages. Lastly, the research employed vigorous methods for data analysis; adding to that triangulation, such as comparing interview data with observations of everyday language use or with data from other sources, would enhance the robustness and reliability of the findings. These limitations could be overcome and further recommendations for future research incorporated in order to develop a more integrated and far-reaching understanding of linguistic imperialism and its implications in the preservation of indigenous languages in Iraq.

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