

Language and Social Justice: Using Language as a Lens for Investigating Inequalities

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Abstract

This article argues that if we as applied linguists are interested in social justice, we need to look at language with the aim of uncovering underlying social injustices. We can do this by investigating how language practices, language policies and language ideologies are tied up with social and material inequalities. The two cases discussed in the article focus on the role of English as a global language in the context of international business. By critically examining how language practices, language policies and language ideologies are tied up with underlying ideologies of globalism and neoliberalism, we can see how English in the business world is commodified as a communicative resource important for its potential economic value, but also how this commodification and the neoliberal ideology of employability mean that workers are the ones who bear the cost of internationalisation. Taking a critical perspective on global English means that investigating language does not have to be a misdirection away from the real issues of social injustice and inequality. Instead we as applied linguists can use language as a lens for investigating social injustice.

Keywords: Global English; critical applied linguistics; social justice; language ideologies; language policy; English as a corporate language

1. Introduction

The role of English in the world has been heavily debated for decades now. In the Danish context that I am writing in, much attention has been directed at the supposed battle between Danish and English, as English has been seen as encroaching on the territory formerly held by Danish. The so-called ‘domain loss’ debate which flourished in the early 2000s—and which still rears its head from time to time—was concerned with the loss of the use of Danish in certain societal arenas, such as business, higher education and advertising. As research has shown (Lønsmann 2011, Hultgren 2014), the fear of domain loss was largely unfounded, and the domain concept not the most suitable construct to understand the situation (Haberland 2005, Preisler 2009). Research also showed, however, that one of the real issues connected with the increasing use of English in Denmark was related to inclusion and belonging in

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internationalising settings, such as international university programmes (Hazel and Mortensen 2013) and international workplaces where English is used as a corporate language (Lønsmann 2014).

Discussions about how, when and where English should be used remain part of the public debate in Denmark. Leading up to the national election in 2015, a member of the right-wing nationalist Danish People's Party proposed that the use of English in Danish advertisements should be taxed. While on the face of it, this proposal seemed to be about language, it was also about something else. Arguing for the new tax, the politician said: "Vi ønsker, at de holder op med at tale til os på engelsk. Det irriterer mig grænseløst/We want them to stop talking to us in English. It annoys me to no end" (Møller 2015). While the use of English in advertising could be argued to be exclusionary to those Danes who are not proficient in English (who, contrary to popular belief, do exist), as this statement captures this was not the main argument against the use of English. Instead the politician framed the issue as one of "them" versus "us", making clear the underlying issue of identity and belonging. Around the same time, the party also proposed to ban the use of English in the Danish educational system. Again the relationship between language, identity and belonging became clear in the argument used by the party that the average Dane—such as the (fictional) carpenter's daughter alluded to in one article (Møller 2015)—should not be excluded in order to accommodate "foreigners" and "Eastern Europeans". These two examples not only reflect, but also contribute to constructing the anti-globalisation and anti-immigration rhetoric of the Danish People's Party. The two proposals about limiting the use of English in Denmark construct boundaries between regular Danes, such as the carpenter's daughter, and 'others', whether they are Eastern European foreigners or the internationally oriented elite in the form of businesses and advertising agencies.

As these examples show, and as Hultgren outlines in the introduction to this issue, language is intimately connected with social structures and change. Language practices, such as the use of English in Danish advertising, may lead to feelings of alienation for those who do not identify with these practices. Language policies, such as those regulating the use of English in the educational system, may disadvantage some while benefitting others. Furthermore, both examples can be seen as influenced by the 'one nation, one language' ideology, which by

equating national and linguistic borders contributes to constructing nation states and upholding boundaries. These examples, as well as the domain loss debate, showcase how social change in the form of processes of globalisation and their effects may be debated primarily in terms of language. They also show that analysing these debates about language can be a way of accessing the underlying social issues.

Hultgren (this issue) argues that critical applied linguists out to “salvage the world” by looking at linguistic inequalities are looking in the wrong place. She suggests that instead of looking at language, we should investigate the underlying material causes of injustice. Here, I have to disagree. As a scholar interested in both language and social justice, it is clear to me that a critical applied linguistic perspective affords us a way to use language as a lens to investigate underlying social inequalities. With that in mind, I will argue that as applied linguists, we need to do what we are best at and what we are trained for: look at language. But if we are interested in social justice, we need to look at language with the aim of uncovering underlying social injustices. Where Hultgren sees language as “a red herring”, I will argue first that language, in the form of language practices, language policies and language ideologies, is intimately tied up with social justice, and second that investigating language is not a misdirection away from the real issues, but can be a way of getting at these real issues. In short, we as applied linguists can use language as a lens for investigating social injustice.

2. Language as Practices, Policies and Ideologies

If we want to discuss whether language is a contributing or contingent factor in inequality as Hultgren sets out to do, we need to carefully consider what we mean by language. In continuation of previous work in applied linguistics (Spolsky and Shohamy 1999), I propose that we see the term language as including language practices, language policies and language ideologies. My argument is that language viewed in this way may contribute to creating or reducing inequalities—and not just reflect them. Considering language practices, Hultgren’s introduction gives us the example of how the use of new terminology to refer to non-native English research writers has been part of an attempt to move the field of English for Research Publication Purposes away from a deficit view of

these authors. Gendered language is another example of how language practices may contribute to inequalities. While gendered language clearly is not the root cause of gender inequality, gendered language may either uphold inequalities, or contribute to raising awareness and transforming gender relations (Gaucher et al. 2011, Liddicoat 2011). Language policies also have an impact on social inequality. In the field of language revitalisation, language policies can be effective in addressing social inequality by ensuring the rights of minority speakers in schools and public institutions. On the other hand, recent immigration policies in many European countries show that language and immigration policies that set out linguistic requirements for residency have less positive, but equally real material consequences for migrants. Finally, while language ideologies such as the standard language ideology and the ‘one nation, one language’ ideology may not be the source of inequalities, they still contribute to them. Through processes of linguistic differentiation such as iconisation, fractal recursivity and erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000), language ideologies contribute to structuring the social world, including how we perceive and value different groups. In relation to Global English, language ideologies about the role of English in a globalising world may contribute to marginalising workers in international workplaces (Lønsmann and Kraft 2018, Lønsmann and Mortensen 2018).

3. Looking at English as a Corporate Language—Seeing Unquestioned Ideologies of Internationalisation and Expansion

In the following, I will use examples from my own research to illustrate 1) how language practices, policies and ideologies are tied up with social and material inequalities, and 2) how looking at language can help us see these underlying social and material issues. The cases focus on the role of English as a global language in the context of international business. Here, English is increasingly used as a corporate language, and the introduction of English language policies is frequently linked with global expansion and growth. However, as the examples reveal, the introduction of English may lead to unintended consequences in the form of marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups.

English has come to be associated with internationalisation across a range of societal domains, including higher education (Hultgren 2014) and advertising (Martin 2007, Piller 2001). But the business world

may be where English is most prominently associated with internationalisation. Studies show that English in international companies is ideologically tied with status, quality and power (Millar, Cifuentes and Jensen 2013), is constructed as a language of equality and inclusion (Kraft and Lønsmann 2018) and as the both neutral and natural language of international business (Nekvapil and Sherman 2013). In many international companies English is introduced as a corporate or working language in response to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. However, international corporations may also see the introduction of English as a corporate language as a way of making the organisation more international, as shown for instance in the case of the Japanese e-commerce giant Rakuten that introduced English with the aim of being able to compete globally (Neeley 2017). This is also what happened in the two case companies that I present here. Both companies are large Danish-based corporations with explicit strategic aims of increased growth and internationalisation. These two cases illustrate how English becomes a proxy for internationalisation, specifically internationalisation in the form of ‘a global mindset’, and also how the introduction of English is tied up with underlying ideologies of growth and competition.

In the first case, a human resource manager in a large pharmaceutical company decides to hire the first non-Danish-speaking employee in the team when a vacancy opens up. The focus on the (lack of) language competence of the new employee was linked with the internationalisation strategy of the company. As the manager explains in an interview, he told this new employee that as an international, English-speaking employee she was meant to be “a tool for [him] to set an agenda” (Lønsmann 2017a: 337). Hiring someone who could not speak Danish was a strategic move designed to move forward with a “more international mindset”, not just in the team, but also in the wider organisation that this new employee would interact with in her job within human resource management (2017a: 336). While this international or global mindset is not defined further by the manager, it is clear from the data that this mindset is believed to be brought about by forcing the employees to communicate in English. In this way a change from Danish to English in the organisation was believed to work as a frontrunner for changing the mindset from local to global. This idea of the global mindset and its positive valorisations of the use of English can also be described as “a language ideology which sees internationalization as not

only a positive, but as a necessary process, inextricably linked with the use of English” (2017a: 337). While the manager succeeded in making more employees speak English as a consequence of the new hire, the strategic focus on internationalisation and the decision to use English to make the organisation more globally oriented resulted in the marginalisation of the employee who was brought in as the catalyst to change the mindset. While her status as international and English-speaking added value, she was still a minority in a largely Danish-speaking environment, and the position as catalyst was linked with feelings of exclusion and lack of respect from her Danish-speaking colleagues (2017a: 341).

In the other case, the Danish branch of a large Copenhagen-based engineering and consultancy company decides to introduce an English language policy. In slides communicating the new language policy, employees are told that “English is key to creating a global mindset”. This mindset is then linked with the aim of increasing international cooperation and revenue (Lønsmann and Mortensen 2018: 447). In this way the role of English in the company is closely linked with an ideology of growth and expansion. In documents, economic growth is constructed as the natural, unquestioned goal of the company, and English is explicitly linked with this goal through the construct of the ‘global mindset’ (2018: 447). English here becomes a proxy for internationalisation in a way that links English with the ideology of globalism, i.e. the neoliberal ideal of rule by the world market in which the aim is to be as competitive as possible (Haberland 2009, see also Yeung 2016). Again, the introduction of an English-language policy, and the underlying rationalisation of the need for international growth have consequences for employees. In this case, the Danish employees who have to adapt to the increasing use of English in the company experience this as exclusion. While younger employees who are used to speaking English to a large extent embrace the use of English as a corporate language, employees who feel less secure about their own English competences are less positive (Lønsmann 2017b). This can be explained by two factors. First, for the many employees who work on local projects with Danish customers and collaborators, institutionalising English as a corporate language simply does not make sense. English is not relevant in their daily work, and is most frequently encountered in top-down communication from the Copenhagen headquarters. Second, the English

mandate means that language barriers increase for employees who are not confident in English. This leads to avoidance strategies, such as lack of participation in meeting dialogue and deprioritising emails in English (Sanden and Lønsmann 2018). While these strategies clearly put the involved employees at a disadvantage, the bigger issue is that requiring employees to communicate in English without offering the needed support in terms of language training or extra time for tasks in English means that the cost of the English language mandate is borne by the individual employee and not by the organisation. The resistance from employees who question the relevance of English while suffering the consequences of its implementation in the organisation is in stark contrast to ideologies of English as a natural and neutral language that furthers equality and inclusion. As such, this case shows how widespread ideologies of global expansion may mask or even normalise underlying issues of workplace inequality.

I have discussed here two cases with the aim of showing how a focus on the role of English as a global language in these two companies allows us to discuss two underlying issues: 1) the unquestioned assumptions inherent in neoliberal ideologies about international competition and expansion, and 2) the consequences of introducing English in terms of exclusion and marginalisation of both international and local employees. By combining a holistic approach that includes investigation of language practices, policies and ideologies and how they relate to each other, with a critical approach that focuses on how language can be used as a lens for uncovering underlying social injustices, we can see how language is tied up with mindset and money. This holistic, critical approach to the use of English as a corporate language reveals the underlying ideologies of globalism and neoliberalism that undergird many English language policies and practices. We can see how English is commodified as a communicative resource important for its potential economic value (Muth and Del Percio 2018), as a commodity that will aid in securing increased revenue and continued growth and expansion for the companies. At the same time, the value of English also lies in its association with cosmopolitan and international values, epitomised in the construct of 'the global mindset'. The critical perspective allows us to focus on the consequences of these processes of commodification for local workers. Caught up in neoliberal ideologies about flexibilisation and employability that make labour

market access and success a matter of individual initiative and responsibility, workers are the ones who bear the cost of internationalisation either by having to continuously improve their skills or by being marginalised at work. Understanding that English is seen as a tool for increasing growth and earnings directs our attention to the material economic and social aspects of what seemed at first glance to be a language issue. And seeing these underlying ideological and material aspects is what allows us to begin to question existing structures and denaturalise hegemonic assumptions.

4. Conclusion: Applied Linguistics and Social Justice

In her opening article in this special issue, Hultgren argues that applied linguists are looking in the wrong place if they focus on language in their quest for social justice. Instead, she argues, we need to look at the underlying material factors. This argument echoes similar calls in sociolinguistics, particularly from within the field of language and migration. Here Van Hoof et al. (2020) call for a reorientation from focussing on language learning in discussions of migrant inclusion to focussing instead on the economic and political processes that determine the distribution of material resources and symbolic power. A slightly different approach is advocated by Del Percio et al. (2016: 55) who argue for an alliance between language and political economy that entails a focus on “the material and historical conditions of language and [on] locating linguistic processes in larger societal systems of inequality and difference”. I agree with both Hultgren and Van Hoof et al. that in order to understand and remedy social injustice, attention needs to be directed not just at language, but also at economic, social and political inequalities. But rather than looking at the underlying material factors *instead of* looking at language, I suggest that we as applied linguists focus on *how language contributes to social injustice*. While I can agree with Hultgren that language in itself rarely is the root cause of social and economic inequalities, I align with Del Percio et al. when they approach the study of language from the perspective of language as intrinsically interconnected with the political economy, and not just as a reflection of underlying material issues.

A focus on how language contributes to social (in)justice entails that we apply the tools and training we have as socially-oriented linguists and

utilise the study of language as a lens to reveal underlying inequalities. One way of doing this is to combine the study of language policies and practices with the study of discourses and ideologies about language. A combination of the practice perspective with both the policy and the ideology perspective will provide a holistic picture of how language is interconnected with larger societal issues, such as globalisation, migration and economic inequality. While English as a global language is clearly relevant in relation to all three topics, so are other languages as well as multilingualism and language use in general. Recently, political and public debates about language in a wide range of countries have focused on language and migration, in particular the role of the national languages of receiving societies for the integration of migrants. In these debates, the local language is heralded as the key to the labour market, especially for refugees. While this on the one hand has led to the establishment of integration programmes that include language training for refugees (e.g. in Denmark and Sweden), this one-sided focus on the local language as *the* barrier to labour market inclusion means that other barriers, including structural unemployment, some migrants' lack of education and work experience, health problems, after-effects of trauma as well as discrimination and lack of tolerance in the receiving societies are downplayed or completely erased from the public and political debates (Lønsmann 2020). Here, the interplay between linguistic practices in workplaces, language policies that regulate migrants' access to language learning and make language competence a requirement for residency, and language ideologies that value different types of migrants and their language practices very differently deserves a comprehensive study in order to shed light on how language is connected with societal inclusion.

By taking a holistic approach to language that includes language practices, language policies and language ideologies, we arrive at a better understanding of the underlying structures and inequalities that language is tied up with. While the study of the use of English as a corporate language does merit attention on its own, I argue that in order to be critical and responsible applied linguists we need to go a step further and use the study of linguistic practices, policies and ideologies to question the underlying material and economic structures and interests. In the case of English as a global language in international companies, this means calling out celebratory discourses of English as a language of equality

and inclusion, and highlighting the potentially marginalising consequences of introducing English. It also means questioning whether growth, expansion and the accumulation of capital necessarily should be the only aims of international enterprises in the 21st century, or whether acting sustainably and ensuring equitable working conditions should be on the agenda too.

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