UNIVERSITY of York

This is a repository copy of *'Spare a thought for the language learner!' A commentary on Hultgren's red herring*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/177096/

Version: Published Version

Article:

Lanvers, Ursula orcid.org/0000-0003-1829-250X (2021) 'Spare a thought for the language learner!' A commentary on Hultgren's red herring. Nordic journal of English studies. pp. 278-283. ISSN 1502-7694

https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.670

Reuse
Other licence.

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

White Rose
university consortium
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield & York

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

'Spare a thought for the language learner!' A commentary on Hultgren's red herring

Ursula Lanvers, University of York

I am an applied linguist. I am passionate about justice, linguistic and otherwise. And I have a research interest in EMI. So you can imagine that as soon as I learned—via a tweet—of Anna Kristina Hultgren's special issue (2020), I excitedly downloaded the whole lot. I have now read (and I believe digested) it. But I am left feeling like a restaurant customer who has sat down to an appetising, nicely presented meal and then got up from the table wanting more: so what was I missing exactly?

It may be unsurprising that, as an educational linguist with a keen interest in language education policy and planning, I found the relative absence of the *learner* perspective a little disappointing. This is more than a personal academic hobby horse: the business of teaching and learning English is on an exponential 7.1% growth curve and is predicted to reach $54.8 billion by 2025 (Adroit Market Research 2019). Millions of jobs depend on it; moreover—and this point was made by several contributors to the Special Edition—millions of learners, right or wrongly (that is not for us linguists to say), are hoping to improve their own or their offspring's lives via the medium of English.

I want to take this opportunity to reflect a little more on what is perhaps the most important group in the discussion around global English and linguistic justice: the language learners themselves.

The first questions, if we want to apply the principle of justice (linguistic and otherwise) to the phenomenon of global English, should be: who has access to opportunities to learn the language, and who does not? How are learning resources distributed? What can language education policy do to promote fair access? Crystal goes some way in this direction by reminding us, in his response in the special issue, of the built-in injustices in the global English market, specifically the pay gap between 'native' and 'non-native' teachers (I shall use the term 'native' several times here, always with all the caveats that come with it). However, the issue that concerns a far greater proportion of the global population is that

Lanvers, Ursula. 2021. "'Spare a thought for the language learner!' A commentary on Hultgren's red herring." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 20(1): 278–283.

of learner inequality: Who can afford (purportedly better?) English-medium education, rather than local vernacular education?

This focus on learners also needs to be applied to the reverse situation: that of speakers who have fluent English embarking on learning other languages. Here, I use the term—now established in the discipline of language education research—'Languages other than English' (LOTE) pragmatically, but reluctantly: after all, we count some 7,000 languages around the globe, and the total number of first language speakers of LOTEs easily outnumbers those of English. Nonetheless, English—as the only 'hypercentral' language (de Swaan 2001)—has given us this imbalanced opposition, and it is likely to stay.

Here, we must examine Hultgren's assumption 1: "*Non-Native Speakers Are Disadvantaged by the Spread of English*" (Hultgren 2020: 15). By extension, this would mean that native speakers benefit from global English. Do they? As Haberland, in the special issue, reminds us:

> Adherence to native speaker norms does not seem to guarantee mutual understanding'. In a survey of transnationally mobile students' perception of English in EMI contexts, the UK only scored second after the Netherlands on 'ease of understanding. (2020: 146)

Native speakers, often not very highly sensitized to the difficulties of language learning and of conversing in a language with only a limited repertoire at their disposal, are notoriously disadvantaged in international communication: they use colloquialisms, idioms, local sayings, regional accents, and make references to UK- or US-specific cultural phenomena, all of which leaves the international interlocutor baffled (Hazel 2016). The focus on a purported native speaker advantage, then, might betray a somewhat unhealthy preoccupation with our own (academic) community, and the thorny issue of the advantage (or not) that native speakers might have publishing in English.

What, then, of the English native speaker learning LOTE? Here, they are disadvantaged on many levels (Lanvers 2016). As a result of global English, they often feel disincentivized to learn LOTEs, as their personal benefit from learning a LOTE remains unclear to them. Moreover, once they have taken the decision to learn a LOTE they will be hard pressed to find a willing interlocutor when practising their (often relatively poor) LOTE: why go through the pain when you can switch to English (a

language likely to be mastered adequately by your interlocutor)? Moreover, the landscape of LOTE learning—in both the UK and other Anglophone countries—is deeply coloured by social injustice (Lanvers, 2017b), in that opportunities for learning LOTEs align with the socio-economic background of students' parents. Since addressing this type of injustice falls within the remit of language education policy and planning, it is very much an agenda for the applied linguist concerned with social justice.

From both perspectives, then, that of a communicator in English, or a language learner, the native English speaker stands to lose from global English. Or, to use Skutnabb-Kangas' (1996) metaphor, they are likely to be the only ones left afflicted by the 'illness' of monolingualism.

We now turn to Hultgren's assumption 2: "*English Threatens other Languages*" (Hultgren 2020: 18). Here, different contributors to the special issue discuss, in a fairly balanced manner, the (lack of) threat of English to other national languages and lingua francas, but the dominant tenor, in the contributions by Hultgren and others, is that the threats have been exaggerated. The perspective of the language learner deserves more attention here too. We now have ample evidence (see, e.g., *The Modern Language Journal* 2017) that English is indeed pushing LOTEs out of school timetables in European countries, and beyond. Here, the social justice issue—which has been overlooked in the entire special issue—is no longer that of access to learning English: since becoming proficient in English is built into many education systems and is taken for granted across most European countries, increasingly it cannot serve to distinguish one learner's achievement from another's. Other foreign languages, such as German in France, and French in Germany, etc., stand to lose out. Added to this linguistic injustice is the phenomenon of social injustice, once again in the form of elite language learning: in an analogous manner to the language learning elitism observed in the UK, but at one remove from it, similar unequal access to LOTE learning can be observed outside the UK (Barakos and Selleck 2019). The privileged become educated in (fluent) English, and a further language, or two. Concomitantly, the demise of LOTE learning opportunities at school level, a direct consequence of global English, sharpens inequality in access to learning.

We now turn to Hultgren's final assumption: "*Language Policy Will Curb the Spread of Global English*" (Hultgren 2020: 21). When this is applied to the learning of LOTE, current trends would suggest the

opposite. Language learning opportunities in UK secondary schools have seen a steady erosion of language learning opportunities, and of language education policy more generally, over the last three decades (Lanvers 2017a). Despite some promising initiatives in the smaller UK nations (such as Scotland: see Scottish Government 2012), and ambitious goal-setting (such as for the qualification 'Ebacc': see gov.uk), there is no sign of a reversal of the UK's continual decline in language learning.

In conclusion, as Van Parijs ~~has~~ suggested (2020: 177), it is necessary to moderate Hultgren's statement that 'the real cause of disadvantage and injustice lies not in global English, but in political, economic, social and cultural structures' (Hultgren 2020: 26) by adding these caveats:

- Injustices ~~that~~ fall within the remit of our field, i.e., language learning as a sub-discipline of linguistics.
- Opportunities for language learning are part of material resources, but also part of linguistics.
- One of the most flagrant injustices relating to global English combines social and linguistic elements: it concerns the language learner.
- Global English shifts the landscape of language learning: opportunities for and access to LOTE learning are diminishing, and LOTE learning is sharpening social divisions.
- As Jenkins observes in the special issue, the juxtaposition of justice either within or outside linguistics is a false one. Instead, linguistic and social injustice go hand in hand. The process by which global English changes access to LOTE learning is a telling example.

This seminal special issue has managed to bring together academics who remind us of the positives a global lingua franca can bring (Jenkins, Parijs, Haberland). Hultgren proposes to detoxify the (sometimes heated) discourses around linguistic injustice in global English. However, postulating that social injustice lies outside linguistic injustice is overshooting this aim: if we ignore their intertwined nature, we also stand to lose sight of where we as linguists can take action against injustice. My own commentary has aimed to introduce an overlooked perspective: that of the language learner. As linguists, we are well placed not only to ask questions of (and listen to) language learners who have become disempowered (see Crystal's contribution to the special issue) and

marginalised through global English. By aiming to influence language policy, we can also do something about it.

References

Adroit Market Research. 2019. English Language Learning Market to grow at 7.1% to hit $54.8 billion by 2025 – Insights on Recent Trends, Size, Share, Growth Opportunities, Key Developments and Future Outlook. https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2019/07/26/1892347/0/en/English-Language-Learning-Market-to-grow-at-7-1-to-hit-54-8-billion-by-2025-Insights-on-Recent-Trends-Size-Share-Growth-Opportunities-Key-Developments-and-Future-Outlook-Adroit-Mar.html. Accessed 12 October 2020.

Barakos, Elisabeth, and Charlotte Selleck. 2019. Elite Multilingualism: Discourses, Practices, and Debates. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 40(5): 361–374.

Crystal, David. 2020. Global English and Social Justice: The Need to Listen. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(3): 165–174.

de Swaan, Abram. 2001. *Words of the World: The Global Language System*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gov.uk. [No date]. English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc. Accessed 20 October 2020.

Haberland, Hartmut. 2020. Who Profits from Global English? Reply to Hultgren. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(3): 143–150.

Hazel, Spencer. 2016. Why Native English Speakers Fail To Be Understood in English – and Lose Out in Global Business. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/why-native-english-speakers-fail-to-be-understood-in-english-and-lose-out-in-global-business-54436. Accessed 20 October 2020.

Hultgren, Anna Kristina (ed.). 2020. Global English and Social Justice. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(3).

Hultgren, Anna Kristina. 2020. Global English: From ‘Tyrannosaurus Rex’ to ‘Red Herring’. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(3): 10–34.

Jenkins, Jennifer. 2020. Red Herrings and the Case of Language in UK Higher Education. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(3): 59–67.

Lanvers, Ursula. 2016. On the Predicaments of the English L1 Language Learner: A Conceptual Article. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 26(2): 147–167.

Lanvers, Ursula. 2017a. Contradictory *Others* and the *Habitus* of Languages: Surveying the L2 Motivation Landscape in the United Kingdom. *The Modern Language Journal* 101(3): 517–532.

Lanvers, Ursula. 2017b. Elitism in Language Learning in the UK. In *Isms in Language Education: Oppression, Intersectionality and Emancipation*, edited by Damian J. Rivers and Karin Zotzmann, 50–73. Berlin: De Gruyter.

The Modern Language Journal. 2017. Beyond Global English: Motivation to Learn Languages in a Multicultural World. Special Issue 101(3).

Scottish Government. 2012. Language Learning in Scotland: A 1 + 2 approach. https://www.gov.scot/publications/language-learning-scotland-12-approach. Accessed 18 July 2019.

Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. 1996. Educational Language Choice: Multilingual Diversity or Monolingual Reductionism? In *Contrastive Sociolinguistics*, edited by Marlis Hellinger and Ulrich Ammon, 175–204. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Van Parijs, Philippe. 2020. Linguistic Injustice for the Sake of Greater Social Justice: A Response to Anna Kristina Hultgren. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(3): 175–178.