Applied linguistics as a smorgasbord of ontologies: A rejoinder to Lanvers' 'Spare a thought for the language learner!'

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I wish to thank Ursula Lanvers for her response (this volume) to my article "Global English: From 'Tyrannosaurus Rex' to 'Red Herring'", published in the special issue Global English and Social Justice (2020) in the *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, and for the opportunity it gives me to clarify and refine some of my points. Lanvers compares herself to a restaurant diner who is left wanting more after having read my piece. To an author as well as to a cook, it's of course always disappointing when a consumer expresses their dissatisfaction with what they've consumed. However, in reflecting on why Lanvers feels the way she does, notwithstanding any fallacies on my part to make the text less bland, I have been reminded that applied linguistics is a broad field. To stay with Lanvers' culinary metaphor in a way that befits a Nordic journal: applied linguistics is a veritable smorgasbord of ontologies. In other words, scholars come at an issue from a wide range of epistemological angles, and I believe this is what lies at the root of Lanvers' and my differing takes on the issue at hand. Where Lanvers is a language learning researcher, I am a sociolinguist, and our interest, concerns and not least conceptualizations of the ontological status of language are accordingly different.

Whilst the scope of my original piece was in fact wider than English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), expanding into areas such as English as a Language for Research Publication Purposes and English as a Global Language more generally, I will concentrate on EMI in this response, to reflect Lanvers' declared interest. In my view, one of the great things about the relatively novel but highly dynamic field of EMI is that it has brought together a diverse and multifaceted group of scholars of different sub-fields who might not normally interact, read one another's journals, attend one another's conferences, engage in networking activities or indeed in exchanges like the present one between Lanvers and myself.

Among those who have contributed to building up the field of EMI, I count researchers from science education, English language teaching, content and language integrated learning, language testing and assessment, modern foreign languages (Lanvers' field), language acquisition, teacher education, English as a lingua franca, educational linguistics, language policy, educational development, English for academic purposes, higher education studies, international education, sociolinguistics (my own disciplinary home), and the list could go on. Whilst we all have interests in common, each of us brings our own issues, shaped by our disciplinary outlook and the questions that we care about. The field of EMI will no doubt continue to be enriched by such diversity; however, it puts the onus on us all, if we are to have fruitful discussions, to be clear about the stance from which we are writing, as Lanvers indeed does, and to recognise the epistemological baggage we bring to a discussion (Salö 2017).

Whilst language learning researchers or educational linguists like Lanvers are understandably concerned with the impact of the rise of Global English on the teaching and learning of other languages, my starting point as a sociolinguist inspired by linguistic anthropology makes me more concerned with how language, English in this case, works as a proxy for issues in the social world. Drawing on Cameron's idea of verbal hygiene (2012 [1995]), I view struggles over language as ideological rather than as empirical questions. I see it as beyond my remit to take a stance for or against a particular linguistic ecology. I also write from the point of view of a Scandinavian who has witnessed first-hand Nordic language policy debates about 'domain loss' and 'parallel language use' and how such concepts can be re-appropriated by different stakeholders to serve their various interests (Dimova et al. forthcoming; Hultgren 2016a; Hultgren 2016b; Hultgren 2014).

Having clarified my theoretical starting point to readers who may not have read my original piece, I now turn to consider Lanvers' response to my article. Lanvers writes, '[i]t 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' (2021: 278). I would start by agreeing with Lanvers that, yes, learners have not been the focus of my article, nor more broadly of the special issue, and this was never really within the remit of the issue. There are two reasons for this.

The first reason is that unless an EMI situation is explicitly set up as a Content and Language Integrated Learning environment where language and content is co-taught, language learning is rarely if ever an explicit outcome in EMI contexts (Pecorari and Malmström 2018). Any language learning that happens—and the evidence is inconclusive (Macaro 2018)—is likely to be either incidental or implicit. Whilst institutional policy makers may sometimes claim that they want to implement EMI to strengthen their students' English competences, more often than not, the main drivers of EMI are economic and political rather than educational. Language learning in EMI contexts, therefore, is rarely an issue.

The other reason for not focusing on the learner is, as already mentioned, that I write from the point of view, not of an educational linguist, but of a sociolinguist, seeking to understand past decades' global restructuring through linguistic and communicative changes. I see higher education, which has undergone intense restructuring in recent decades, as a particularly pertinent study site through which to understand the profound changes—not only linguistic but also political, economic, and educational—the world has gone through in recent decades. Additionally, I see such knowledge as adding important and currently neglected dimensions to applied linguistics, a field in which many calls have been made to incorporate greater attention to the political economy and material conditions (Block 2014, 2018; Canagarajah 2017, 2018; Pennycook 2016, 2018; Ricento 2015).

Therefore, when Lanvers refers to the rising number of people in the world who want to learn English, I most certainly agree. Indeed, the rising number of English speakers and learners across the world was the starting point for my article. However, as a sociolinguist, I want to uncover what has brought about this rise: what are the socio-political and economic factors that drive it? The questions Lanvers raises about an unequal distribution of access to language learning are clearly important: 'who has access to opportunities to learn the language, and who does not? How are learning resources distributed? […] Who can afford (purportedly better?) English-medium education, rather than local vernacular education?' (2021: 278–279). However, as I hope to have managed to communicate in my piece, I believe applied linguists stand a better chance at answering such questions if we gain a better understanding of the underlying causes of this inequitable system. Lanvers' response, in fact, perfectly illustrates the point my piece was intending to make, i.e., that some corners of applied

linguistics are, to my mind, too blind-foldedly concerned with language itself rather than with the underlying causes of injustice, linguistic and otherwise. I agree with Mufwene in this sense, when he puts it as follows: 'language is often only an epiphenomenon of a problem that is fundamentally non-linguistic' (2010: 921).

Lanvers then goes on to address each of my three challenges to key assumptions in applied linguistics. Below I offer my response to each.

Assumption 1: Non-Native Speakers Are Disadvantaged by the Spread of English
I agree with Lanvers' underlying point, which I take to mean that advantage (and its counterpart, disadvantage) does not reside simplistically in whether or not one is a 'native' or a 'non-native speaker' of English (and like Lanvers, I use these terms with the usual caveats that come with them). Lanvers (2021: 279) writes:

> 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.

As a sociolinguist recognising the co-constructed nature of talk, it is not clear to me why the native speaker in this example would be inherently more disadvantaged than the implied 'non-native listener' who is on the receiving end of the culturally specific idioms, local sayings, regional accents and references to UK- or US-specificities. A more convincing example to my mind is offered by Lanvers' reference to the lack of opportunity for 'native speakers' of English to practise any foreign language skills, as many potential interlocutors prefer to practise their English with a real 'native speaker'.

Notwithstanding such minor quibbles, the crux of the matter is that assigning disadvantage a priori to any category of speaker, whether this is purported to lie with the 'non-native speaker' (as most applied linguists would be inclined to argue) or with the 'native speaker' (as Lanvers, along with others, argue) is not a given. In fact, this exactly illustrates the point I was making in my article, namely that advantage or disadvantage does not arise solely or even primarily from linguistic factors, e.g., whether or

not someone is a native speaker. That said, work on accentism and accent discrimination has shown that some speakers are disadvantaged, discriminated against or met with prejudice solely on the basis of the way they speak. This would seem to constitute an example of disadvantage based on language. Work on accentism, however, is often careful to point out that accents often serve as shortcuts for other prejudgements, based on ethnicity, gender and class, pointing to the difficulties in teasing out linguistic from other matters. Standard language ideologies and the native speaker fallacy loom large in most societies; there is no doubt about it. Equally, it is true that linguistic inequality can often index other types of inequality and often goes together with them. However, it does not automatically follow that redressing imbalances in the linguistic ecology will redress imbalances in the social, political and economic sphere.

Assumption 2: English Threatens Other Languages
My intention with challenging the assumption that English threatens other languages was to point to the historical, ideological and political nature of languages in their 'named' sense. As sociolinguists have long pointed out, more vocally so in recent years, languages are ideological inventions, the status of which is upheld by political intervention and standard language ideologies. The reason why we call something 'English', 'Chinese' or 'Swedish' is a political and ideological choice.

Conceptualized as ideological constructions, it is difficult not to agree with Lanvers' interpretation that the rise of English as an international lingua franca may play a key role in disincentivising people to learn other languages. However, although this is unlikely to satisfy Lanvers and other educational linguists or minority language activists who are alarmed by the decline in modern foreign languages and minority languages, sociolinguists would point to the fact that linguistic diversity need not lie in a plurality of 'named languages'. Rampton (2019) cites Blommaert (2010: 102):

> Multilingualism should not be seen as a collection of "languages" that a speaker controls, but rather as a complex of specific semiotic resources, some of which belong to a conventionally defined "language" while others belong to another "language". The resources are concrete accents, language varieties, registers, genres, modalities such as writing – ways of using language in particular communicative settings and spheres of life, including the ideas people have about such ways of using their language ideologies.

Linguistic diversity in Blommaert's and Rampton's sense, of course, does not address the fact that the learning and teaching of modern foreign languages has been in steady decline over recent years, an issue that Lanvers and many others are understandably concerned about. The widely different ontological status accorded to 'language' in different subfields of socio- and applied linguistics comes with different concerns, different questions and different passions. This can make it difficult at times to engage in productive debate. A sociolinguist might argue, for instance, that had it not been for the rise of English as an international lingua franca, people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds would not have been brought into contact and been able to enrich one another's outlook to the extent that they have been able to do in recent decades. Whilst globalization may reduce the world's 'named languages', then, and remove them from the formal language teaching curriculum, it might promote and make visible a wider range of accents, language varieties, registers, genres, modalities, and in that sense promote linguistic diversity in more informal learning contexts.

Assumption 3: Language Policy Will Curb the Spread of English
In the final point of my article, I challenge the assumption that language policies on their own will have any major effect on a linguistic ecology. An example to illustrate my point was the Nordic parallel language policy, whose intended aim was to protect the Nordic languages against a perceived encroachment from English whilst also recognising the importance of a shared international language. However, the concept of parallel language use has been appropriated by Danish universities to justify further expansion of English-medium programmes, and while it may serve important symbolic functions, it has not succeeded in reversing the drive towards English (Hultgren 2014). There are multiple factors that contribute to the chances of language policy initiatives being effective in achieving their aims, including broad stakeholder buy-in, sustained political momentum, clear operationalization and monitoring, and, perhaps most importantly, financial support. In short, language policies need to be co-developed with a wide range of political, economic and social actors, which once again points to the need for linguists to look beyond their traditional disciplinary remit. Lanvers' own example illustrates this point as well. Despite citing some promising initiatives to

address the language learning crisis in the UK, she concedes that 'there is no sign of a reversal of the UK's continual decline in language learning' (2021: 281).

Lanvers concludes by reaffirming the inseparability of linguistic and other forms of injustice. With this, I can only agree, and indeed, this underscores the main point of my article, which was to question whether applied linguists' sometimes myopic attention to matters of language are enough to address the underlying factors that drive the language issues that they care about. However, we won't get far in our quest for social justice—linguistic or otherwise—unless we get to the bottom of the political, economic and socio-cultural factors that drive it.

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