Linguistic Injustice and Global English: Some Notes From Its Role in Academic Publishing

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Abstract

In recent years, the position of English as the main language of international research publishing has become a growing source of language ideological debates within academia and most notably, of course, amongst Applied Linguists. In very short terms, there seems to exist a division between those who regard English as an agent of linguistic injustice for multilingual scholars, versus those who would place more emphasis on other, non-linguistic factors in accounting for the injustices perceived to exist in the publishing enterprise. In this article, summarising some of my own recent work on this topic, I suggest that looking at the issue as an 'either-or' is not only not useful, but it can also be counterproductive for our analyses. Instead, I propose we need to look at the question of English for research publication purposes as a 'both-and', meaning that both linguistic and non-linguistic factors have to be taken into consideration, and I sketch some ideas as to how that can be done.

Keywords: English for research and publication purposes; linguistic injustice; linguistic and non-linguistic factors

1. Introduction: Situating the Debate

The idea that scholars with an L1 other than English find themselves in an unfair situation when writing in it for research publication purposes is not new. Certainly not in the area of Applied Linguistics, whose strands in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) have been debating the issue at least since the 1980s (see e.g. St. John 1987). Ever since then, the argument seems to have been split between two sides. On the one hand, some researchers seem to see English as not only an obstacle for multilingual researchers publishing internationally, but perhaps even as an agent responsible for the linguistic injustices that such scholars endure in the publishing cycle. On the other hand, other researchers seem to emphasise the idea that, while language is an important factor accounting for the success or failure in the publishing process, other non-linguistic variables may be equally, if not more, significant. Following Hultgren's conceptualisation (this

issue), the former would see English as "Tyrannosaurus Rex" (see Swales 1997) while the latter would be more persuaded by seeing it as a "Red Herring" (see Kuteeva and McGrath 2014).

One particular moment when this debate became most clearly evidenced was in the exchange between Hyland (2016) and Politzer-Ahles et al. (2016). In a provocative piece, Hyland (2016) discarded most of the research that argues in favour of a linguistic prejudice against English L2 scholars because, in his view, such research suffers from two major flaws. On the one hand, it perpetuates the Native vs. Non-native speaker divide which, as of late, has become increasingly questioned in applied linguistic research (e.g. Doerr 2009; Houghton et al. 2018); on the other hand, Hyland notes that such an argument overemphasises the primacy of language in determining the success (or lack thereof) of English L2 researchers getting published. This emphasis on language, according to him, is excessive and, as a result, counterproductive for analytical purposes. In short, if we wish to understand better the struggles authors face when trying to have their work published, we should better look at issues beyond language itself and pay attention at other variables such as authors' access to material and symbolic resources, including their academic networks and connections to other scholars (see also Curry and Lillis 2010).

Against Hyland's arguments, Politzer-Ahles et al. (2016) maintain that English L2 scholars do suffer from linguistic injustice in publishing for academic purposes. They build their argument on one main concept: linguistic privilege. From their perspective, English L1 scholars are linguistically privileged on two grounds: firstly, publishing may require less effort for them (they need to spend less time and energy in crafting their texts), and secondly, publishing may be biased in their favour (journal editors and reviewers are more likely to evaluate their texts more positively than those of English L2 writers). Politzer-Ahles et al. clarify that this does not mean that English L1 scholars do not earn their achievements, but rather it means that because of their L1, they are likely to avoid some challenges or enjoy some benefits that would not have been available otherwise.

Such is the gist of the argument and the debate more generally. Both sides, in addition, i.e. both Hyland (2016) and Politzer-Ahles et al. (2016) do not completely deny some validity of their counterpart's arguments. So, Hyland acknowledges the importance of language matters

in the publication process, and Politzer-Ahles et al. award some relevance to extralinguistic factors too. With this in mind, it is not surprising that both come to the conclusion that more research is needed in order to illuminate the greyness in this area, indeed an area that is far from black-or-white. Joining Hultgren's call (this issue) for Applied Linguistics to look beyond language alone, in this article I will introduce the idea that an 'either-or' interpretation of the situation at hand is not useful and, in fact, it can be analytically harmful, preventing us from going in more depth into assessing the idea of linguistic injustice in English for Research and Publication Purposes (ERPP). Instead, I will propose that a 'both-and' approach can be more fruitful, justifying that both linguistic and non-linguistic factors are equally important in the debate, and that by adopting this approach, we might be in a better position to develop frameworks that allow us to cut deeper into the issue at hand, with sharper and more suitable tools. Before that, I will first summarise two recent articles in which I have delved into the question of ERPP from different angles (Soler and Cooper 2019; Soler 2019). This should hopefully be useful in contextualising the topic further and in clarifying the direction of my main argument in the article.

2. Unexpected Emails and Early-Career Scholars' Trajectories

By now, it must be a universal experience of researchers in virtually all fields of science to receive emails from unknown publishers soliciting scholars to submit their work to journals they have never heard of before. Such emails are an inherent part of what has become more generally known as predatory publishing, and given their frequency, they have been the object of study in a number of recent analyses (see e.g. Clemons et al. 2017; Memon 2018; Petrisor 2018; Wahyudi 2017). In Soler and Cooper (2019), we analysed the structure of the rhetorical moves in a corpus of emails of this kind, paying particular attention at both the communicative function of the emails as a whole and at their micro-level, fine-grained linguistic details. We concluded that, indeed, English L2 scholars might be more intensely affected by academic spam emails of this kind, given that these scholars might be more prone to overlook the (sometimes very obvious) flawed nature of these emails, particularly at the micro-linguistic level. However, being affected by these emails is not purely a matter of linguistic competence alone. Judging them as

inappropriate or even irrelevant requires some degree of cultural knowledge as well, a knowledge of the entire process of publishing for academic purposes. Without that knowledge, recipients of these emails may be able to read them as genuine rather than fraudulent, regardless of the micro-level flaws and errors, much like what happens in more general scam emails (see Blommaert and Omoniyi 2006). So, it is both linguistic and non-linguistic variables (including one's accumulated cultural capital) that play a role in the process of decoding and interpreting academic spam emails.

In another study (Soler 2019), I interviewed six early-career scholars from two fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences (three of them from English Linguistics, the other three from Political Science). All six of them were active in Swedish academia and were at the time working towards securing a permanent position for themselves. From their narratives, it emerged that while acquiring the appropriate linguistic competence during their studies had been a central matter, there were other more important factors that had played a role in their route towards successful academic publishing. In broad terms, these other factors can be summarised as all things that are involved in becoming and growing as a scholar: getting advice and help from one's supervisor, learning from peers, learning to read and deal with reviewers' comments, and crucially, becoming part of the relevant academic networks. Some did express a sense of unfairness with the fact that they had to produce their work in English, but overall, non-linguistic factors were highlighted as more important. Working from relatively well-resourced positions, they all had managed to establish a successful publication track record. In fact, for the three scholars in Political Science, the language question was relevant in a different sense, in that they felt they had to frame their topics of interest, which were highly relevant on a local (i.e. Swedish) level, for an international, academic audience. This navigating between two cultural levels, in two different languages, was a higher source of concern than having to produce their work in a second language, i.e. in English.

In sum, the central message that I want to highlight from these two studies is that, indeed, linguistic factors (specifically language competence) are an important element in accounting for the success (or lack thereof) in publishing for academic purposes; but, at the same time, such factors alone are not enough in justifying the idea that English L2

scholars by definition are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their English L1 counterparts. Because of the range of non-linguistic factors involved in the publication process, L1 status will always be something of relative importance. However, whether such non-linguistic factors outweigh linguistic matters is a different story. What is important, for my line of argument, is that both linguistic and non-linguistic variables are indeed present in the publishing cycle, and that both do play a role in explaining writers' successes or failures in this process. Insisting on seeing it as an either one or the other does not help clarify the debate, and much of the discussion in the literature suffers greatly from this shortcoming, much like it suffers from a lack of clarity in connection to the idea of 'linguistic injustice', to which I turn in the next section.

3. Linguistic (In)justice and Its Ambiguities

Linguistic injustice encapsulates the idea that in a given societal constellation, injustices exist that are based on linguistic factors. As we have seen above in the introduction, in debates about English for research publication purposes, the assumption is that given the current state of affairs, where English is overwhelmingly used as a language for disseminating research globally, linguistic injustice inevitably exists given that L1 speakers of the language are privileged by default in such scenario. This line of argument resonates in more broadly conceived discussions on the issue, whether from an applied perspective (e.g. Piller 2016) or from a normative and philosophical point of view (e.g. Van Parijs 2011).

With that in mind, following this reasoning, in order to attain linguistic justice, we need to understand how to overcome the existing linguistic injustices in a given society, which entails understanding linguistic privilege and linguistic domination (Piller 2016, p. 208). As we have seen above, linguistic privilege is indeed part of the ERPP discussions (Politzer-Ahles et al. 2016), but when we start narrowing down the focus, things begin to appear less clear and straightforward than they look at first sight. Still referring to Piller, the author notes that "the dominance of English means that academics who are native speakers of English or who are affiliated with universities in Anglophone centre countries are advantaged when it comes to disseminating and publishing their research" (2016, p. 180). This statement nicely illustrates

the ambiguity that prevails in much of the debates on ERPP. Which is the source of privilege, exactly: the status of native speaker of English, or the fact that one is affiliated with an institution at an Anglophone country? Talking more specifically about the connection between English and academic excellence, Piller retells how the education scholar Po King Choi metaphorically frames this connection: "in the same way that water does not start to flow if all you do is install a tap without having the plumbing in place, you do not get excellence by simply switching the language of instruction [into English]" (2016, p. 181). It would seem, then, that the problem is not so much the tap (i.e. the language), or even the installing of a new tap, but rather the issue is with the entire system.

Arguably, then, there exists some degree of confusion about what linguistic injustice in the end really is, and whether its source is to be found on linguistic or on non-linguistic factors. Other authors, most notably Philippe Van Parijs (2011), have addressed this problem from a normative angle, one that, because of its conceptual nature, might be in a better position to tackle the structural limitations of an applied linguistic perspective. In Van Parijs' theory of linguistic justice, the global spread of English is not only a welcome phenomenon, but a necessary development in order to enhance the emergence of a global demos that can pursue more actively a global democratic agenda. Combined with a strong application of the principle of territoriality and with the sharing of the costs of English learning globally, this would ensure a sense of a parity of esteem amongst English and other (national) languages and it would lead to a more solid feeling of a global linguistic justice. However, in this account, it seems as if language competence is the only thing that matters, the key that will lead to a more egalitarian global society. In short, once everyone is proficient in English, everyone will enjoy the same opportunities to access the same social spaces. This seems highly questionable and, indeed, this has been highlighted as one of the major problems of Van Parijs' theory of linguistic justice (see in particular May 2015 and Wright 2015). Here too, then, we seem to be caught by the same dilemma: where do we put our focus? Is it language that is the source of inequality, or should we look at factors outside language to better understand it?

4. Accounting for Linguistic Injustice in ERPP: Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Factors

With the above discussion in mind, it seems almost inevitable to posit that in order to understand linguistic injustice better, we need to consider both linguistic and non-linguistic factors equally in our analyses, as I have already hinted at in Section 2. Focusing on either one or the other vectors in the equation can easily turn against our efforts in making sense of the issues we wish to analyse. So, in debates about English for research publication purposes, we should avoid seeing English (particularly as a named language, in the abstract) as the single source of injustices suffered by L2 speakers of the language; at the same time, we should also be cautious of readings that emphasise non-linguistic factors as the primary source of the injustices in the area, claiming that regardless of language status (English L1 or L2), all scholars need to undertake a degree of acculturation in their fields and to learn the specialised jargon in order to get published.

So how do we combine both linguistic and non-linguistic factors in an attempt to build a more solid interpretation of the linguistic injustices in ERPP? To do that, I believe we need to look at the issue from at least two angles: from the point of view of scholars' individual trajectories and biographical paths, and from the point of view of the scholarly publishing system as a whole. From the perspective of scholars' trajectories, I would argue it is inevitable that a degree of unfairness exists that is based on language factors. The reality is that, for many scholars around the world, English is not a language they grew up with; all of them, at some point in their lives, will have to have invested time and effort in acquiring the language and learning it well. Many will certainly become highly proficient in it, and at that point, language-based injustices will likely decrease, but the fact remains that English L1 scholars will not have had to go through the process of learning and acquiring a new language as scholars from other linguistic backgrounds will have done. Oftentimes, the counterargument here is that academic language is a very specialised form of the language and regardless of linguistic background (English L1 or not), all scholars have to go through the same process of learning the appropriate genre conventions and so on. There is no denying that that is the case, but I believe it is also true that the distance that one needs to travel in order to learn the specialised jargon in one's disciplinary area is different if one's L1 is English or if it

is another language. When it comes down to micro-level language issues (e.g. subject-verb agreement, word collocations, use of prepositions, turns of phrase, etc.), English L1 scholars will likely benefit from a more intuitive and faster access to what is acceptable and what is not. It is at that point in the writing for publication purposes where language-related injustices might be more vivid and more strongly felt by English L2 scholars.

Writing for scholarly publishing, however, entails much more than becoming proficient in a specialised form of the language (in this case, English). Indeed, there exists a constellation of factors that can play a role on scholars' route towards publishing for academic purposes, determining their success or lack thereof in their enterprise. As Lillis and Curry have consistently argued for some time already (see most recently Curry and Lillis 2017), the politics around publishing in English include a complex matrix of variables that affect scholars around the world. Most importantly, institutional policies for research evaluation seem to be amongst the most powerful factors driving scholars towards needing to publish more and more (Lillis and Curry 2013). Such policies, almost invariably, value most highly research articles published in high-impact factor journals, journals that in their almost totality operate in the English language. In institutions all around the world, researchers are expected to have their work published in as highly ranked journals as possible, as publications in such outlets may translate into economic rewards for university departments, and into higher chances of career progress for individual researchers.

With the above in mind, one can be tempted to conclude that once again, because journals with a high-impact factor publish articles almost exclusively in English, then here too we need to be looking at language as the main source of injustice in academic publishing. However, institutional policies are not the same all around the world, both in their shape and in the intensity in which they are applied. Moreover, institutions in countries that spend more money on higher education and scientific research will have more resources at their disposal, resources that might benefit their faculty staff in getting more support in their efforts to have their work published in high-ranking journals. This support might be in the form of language services (e.g. translation services, proofreading, copy-editing, etc.) or in the form of traveling for research and academic purposes. The latter can have a real impact on

scholars' capacity to publish in relevant outlets, as research networks can play a big role in that respect (Curry and Lillis 2010). Networks can offer highly useful and relevant feedback that can help shape and improve scholars' written work, and more importantly, networks are also key in making apparent who one's audience is and how one might enter into scholarly debates more meaningfully.

So, it is clear, then, that depending on one's position in the field (i.e. one's institutional affiliation), access to key resources will be more or less available, and that will have a powerful impact in determining one's way to getting published. At that level, the fact that English is the most commonly used language for research publication purposes becomes a less relevant factor that can account for the injustices in academic publishing, and whether one's L1 is English or not will be of much less importance. Instead, structural inequalities seem to matter much more powerfully (Hultgren 2019). Here, then, we need to be looking at the entire system that legitimises the practices and the beliefs of scholars all around the world, because once again, regardless of L1, everyone who participates in this system is affected by the types of pressures that push scholars towards the need to publish more and more. English does indeed mediate all these pressures and as such, it occupies a highly visible position in the system. As a result, we need to develop analyses that tackle the problem as both a linguistic and a non-linguistic (systemic) problem.

5. Conclusions

In this short piece I have argued that in debating the question of linguistic injustice in the context of English for research publication purposes, adopting an 'either-or' position (either linguistic or non-linguistic factors) is not useful and it can blind us from seeing the depth of the issue. True, for many scholars around the world, English is a language that comes with certain costs, costs of time and effort to learn and to master it. Even if the specialised academic jargon is a form of the language that has to be learned by all scholars, regardless of L1, we can concede that L2 speakers of the language will have had to travel a longer path to get there. However, language proficiency alone is not enough to explain the entire story. In addition to that, the focus needs to be placed on scholars' access to and their capacity to use key resources, including

financial ones, in order to be part of the right kinds of social spaces where they can develop their own academic networks, build a sense of community belonging, know who one's audience is and be socialised in the different practices of academia, including, importantly, academic publishing.

Rather than obsessing ourselves on whether global English is the agent of linguistic injustice in academic publishing, or whether it is non-linguistic factors instead, I will conclude by hinting at the idea that we should be asking ourselves a different question, namely: in the context of the neoliberalised academia, what are the processes, the practices, and the ideologies, that make it possible that academics all around the world, regardless of language background, subscribe to the idea that they need to publish more and more, and that they need to try as hard as they can to publish in as highly-ranked journals as possible. The role of English as a mediator of these processes, practices, and ideologies is key, but it is in that role that we need to interpret English, not as an abstract, named language. This question is not new in ERPP debates, but it certainly seems to me that if we keep presenting the issue as a black-or-white, linguistic vs. non-linguistic factors, we run the risk of obscuring it, and in my view, this is a much more fundamental issue that needs to be addressed in a much more decided way than it is at the moment.

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