Global English and Social Injustice: The Need to Listen

David Crystal, University of Bangor

Abstract
Examples of a new climate in community partnership projects, where a priority is given to listening, provide a perspective for studies of language and social injustice. We need to spend more time listening to how global learners, especially in the most disadvantaged communities, actually describe their needs. A utilitarian view of English soon emerges. It is difficult to generalize about causes and solutions because of the diversity of situations, but a useful perspective is provided by the notion of empowerment, illustrated from the situation of those who teach English as a Foreign Language. The current state of Welsh illustrates some practical ways of taking forward the relationship between linguistic and economic factors, which should not be seen as being in contrast or in competition, but as forces operating in synergy.

Keywords: listening; Global English; Welsh; empowerment; synergy

1. Listening to the Community

Earlier this year I attended a meeting at the local town hall in my home of Holyhead, Wales, to do with developments within the town. The mayor drew attention to the way the new local council had been promoting a fresh approach to its work. Rather than the previous "top-down" approach, in which councillors thought up ideas that they felt the community would like, they were adopting a "bottom-up" approach, in which they actually asked people in the community what they wanted to see happen. They had begun this last year, via Facebook and other social media, as well as in public meetings, in relation to the town park. What would people like to see in it? One answer came back loud and clear: a skateboard installation. That now exists. At this year's meeting, another round of consultation produced a further idea: a paddling pool. This is now being planned. Neither had been anticipated by the councillors in their previous thinking.

In a word, the elected councillors were *listening* to the people who had elected them. And while every council probably believes that it does this, it actually takes a huge amount of time and effort to put a "policy of listening" into practice. The theoretical and methodological issues informing such a policy are now explored in several journals, in fields

such as language learning and speech pathology, but they are especially the focus of *The International Journal of Listening*, the periodical of the International Listening Association, which in one form or another has been publishing papers in this area since 1987—an example is Purdy (2009). But the new climate goes well beyond academia. For instance, the role of listening to the community has become a major criterion in organizations whose remit is to use public funding for charitable purposes. It would now be virtually impossible to get funding for a project from the National Lottery or the Arts Council in the UK without having made the effort to establish that it meets a real need—which means listening. Here's a typical statement from one website (National Lottery Awards for All England, 2019):

> It's important to us that you involve your community in the design, development and delivery of the activities you're planning.

In practice this means providing evidence, in the form of testimonials from individuals and community groups—and the more the better. In 2018, I was told the results of a set of competing applications to the Arts Council of Wales. The one that came top of the list contained a huge dossier of supporting correspondence from "persons in the street"; the one that came bottom had next to none. The mood has changed. Formerly, a drama company could propose, for example, a production of a Shakespeare play and ask for funding to help put it on, and they would get it, as long as it satisfied the usual criteria of quality as judged by arts professionals. Today, the primary question is whether "the people" really want to see such a play. The top-down approach to programming has been replaced by one that is bottom-up. And arts organizations are slowly getting the message. A representative comment is this one, from the co-director of the newly renovated Châtelet theatre in Paris (Prévost, 2019):

> The barriers are not only financial. There are people who feel, this place is not for me, I don't belong in this magnificent 19th-century theatre. That's why it's important for our artists to go regularly outside the theatre … to reach out to audiences and not just expect them to come to us.

How far does this paradigm of enquiry obtain for the world outlined for us by Anna Kristina Hultgren?

2. Listening to Social Injustice

A disclaimer: I haven't read most of the references in her excellent overview, so I may be wrong, but I don't detect much of an emphasis on listening in the applied linguistic field in relation to this topic. Yes, we are "empirically committed scholars", but where do we direct our empiricism? Take the point, for example, that there is a "pragmatic view that English is but a tool for communication", and that "most linguists ... would take issue with such a utilitarian view of English". Have linguists actually gone out into the streets and asked "ordinary" people—not just elite groups, such as "scientists at the Englishized Nordic universities"— why they have adopted English, or want to do so? Have we been listening to them? Whenever I have had the opportunity to ask the question, I get a utilitarian answer almost every time, especially in the so-called "third world".

Here is an example—and I imagine every writer in this volume could tell a similar story—from a lecture tour I made in southern Africa a few years ago. I was being driven around in a British Council car, for several days, and got to know the driver very well. His English was enough for us to have a conversation, but it wasn't easy. He could understand me, as long as I didn't speak too colloquially or too fast, but his production was fractured. At one point we began talking about his mother-tongue, Xhosa, and I was going on about what an interesting language it was. He stopped me in my tracks. 'I want my children to make English their goal,' he said. That set me off on a monologue about language diversity, identity, the importance of maintaining such wonderful languages, etc etc. Again, he stopped me. 'this is all true", he said, and then repeated, "but my children must make English their goal." "Why?," I asked. "So that they can do better than me, just a driver". He had great hopes for his children. A doctor, perhaps, he said. Or a teacher.

"Economic factors are more important than linguistic ones in explaining these inequalities." How could we ever have thought otherwise? Again and again I encounter the unassailable argument that it is individual quality of life that counts. How dare I, with my nice computer and my nice TV and my nice garden, lecture someone who has none of these things, who is struggling to keep a family alive with a reasonable quality of life, about the importance of language diversity! Of course we all affirm the necessity to find solutions that maintain an equilibrium of some kind between a language of identity and a language

of (international) intelligibility, and there are many places where we have the chance to shout from the rooftops about the importance of multilingualism and to draw attention to the plight of endangered languages. We need to seize every opportunity to bring language into the public domain (which is what I conceive the primary role of applied linguistics to be). But when we take the trouble to listen to the nature of the need, as expressed by "ordinary people" in the disadvantaged world, where issues of social injustice are so much in evidence, I find it is intelligibility (which in this context means access to global English) that invariably takes priority. The very different experience of those who live in the well-heeled parts of Europe, where a basic quality of life is much less of an issue, has also to be respected, of course, but it shouldn't blind us to the fact that the majority of people who are trying to learn English live in countries where well-heeledness is a distant dream.[1]

In these countries, it is really difficult to find a way of listening to the aspirations of those most affected by the global role of English. It is easy to listen to the problems of social injustice experienced by people in the advantaged economic situations of Western Europe or North America, with their ready access to electronic, postal, and other services. It is not so easy to listen to the voices of people who have little or no such access—such as those I saw in one southern African community where people were queuing up to send messages on the village computer. It was an old machine located in a large shipping container by their village. The container actually had several machines in it, but the only power supply

---

[1] They are the majority of users, in any count of global English use. Hultgren cites a 2008 estimate of the number of English speakers in the world, a third of the world's population, and comments: 'an estimate that may have grown in the ten years since it was made'. I recalculated all the figures for the third edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Crystal 2019: 114), using the same criteria as in earlier editions. From around 1.5 billion in 1995 (1st edn) to 2 billion in 2003 (2nd edn), the total in 2018 was 2.3 billion. Still (just under) a third, it seems—but the rate of increase apparently slowing. If the rate between 1995 and 2003 had continued—half a billion in eight years—we would have expected almost another billion by 2018, approaching 3 billion in all, but the reality is around 2.3. It should also be noted that the pattern of development has not been entirely one-way. It is true to say that "others are considering making it an official language"; but in some places, the official status has been reduced in recent years, as in Tanzania and Madagascar (*ibid.* 109).

was from a small generator outside, which couldn't cope with more than one machine at a time. How do I listen to *their* views about the role of English in *their* world?

One of the problems with the contrast Hultgren draws between linguistics and economics is that we are trying to generalize across groups of people where generalization is impossible. I accept the spirit of her argument that 'If we want to stand a chance with the social justice agenda, we need to redirect our attention away from language and towards economic, social and political inequalities'. But this need has different answers depending on which part of the world we are looking at. Saving the world? There is no such thing as "a" world, with respect to the argument of her paper. There are many worlds, as the traditional characterization (of 'third world', and so on) suggests. And a solution that works for one of these worlds may not work for another. Also, the role of English, with respect to these inequalities, has to be seen as part of a larger pattern. Whatever the factors involved in social injustice, they apply just as forcefully to parts of the world where English has never been a primary influence, and where other languages have been the "Trojan Horses", such as Spanish and Portuguese in Central and South America, or Russian or Chinese or Swahili in other places.

3. Listening to Disempowerment

A word that is missing from Hultgren's paper is "empowerment". It is a word that has come increasingly to the fore in recent years. Once restricted to such domains as religion and law, since the 1970s it has come to be used in relation to any group where there is a perceived inequality. But here too there is a need for a bottom-up approach, and in many areas this is still some distance away. As an illustration, I consider the opening plenary given to the 2019 annual conference of IATEFL (the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language), which addressed this point in relation to the field of language teaching. Paula Rebelledo tellingly called her paper "Teacher empowerment: leaving the twilight zone". A message I took from this paper is that the way to light up the twilight zone is by listening.

A great deal of her research involves listening to teachers in their classroom situations. Her aim is to discover how empowerment actually happens, and she explores this by first asking teachers for their stories of

disempowerment—the situations they have experienced where their knowledge and expertise have not been taken into account. Her questions are very specific, such as "Do you take part in decisions concerning the size of your class?" Another is "Do you take part in decisions about your daily teaching schedule?" And there are several more. "Do you have a role in course-book selection?" "Do you have any say in curriculum design?" When the IATEFL audience (of over a thousand teachers) was asked to raise their hands if the answer to each of these questions was "yes", it was very clear that the vast majority of people kept their hands down. They felt they had no opportunity to influence these areas—a cruel irony, she observed, as these are the areas that most affect their classroom practice and their ability to teach.

I accept Hultgren's general argument: we do "need to widen the lens and engage with the underlying material factors". But this means looking at these material factors in very specific and language-engaging ways, as Rebelledo's questions illustrate. And money is at the bottom of most things. For example, we can accept the balanced assertion that "non-native speakers may or may not be disadvantaged" in everyday communicative situations, but when it comes to teaching practice, there is no balance. Non-native teachers of English are certainly disadvantaged, for the pay differential between comparably qualified and comparably fluent native-speaking and non-native-speaking teachers is a scandal that IATEFL attendees from all over the world tell me about. The vast majority are not native speakers—though apart from a local accent expressing their identity, their fluency is such that I would never otherwise know. Personally I have no trouble in resolving this issue. Who would I rather begin to be taught English by? A native speaker who knows little or nothing about the English language and language teaching methodology, or a non-native speaker well versed in both of these? No contest. The qualified non-native every time. I'm talking here about the recognized levels such as we see in the Common European Framework, not the more sophisticated mastery needed to develop such abilities as a critical approach to literature, where I suspect most learners would want native speaker guidance. But at those earlier levels teachers from all over the world have told me that in their country there is still an unthinking preference for the native speaker, and the latter is *always* paid more. This is the reality of social injustice for them.

Rebelledo's listening only works because she asks the right questions—specific questions that are of perceived and maximum relevance to the practice of teaching. And the same principle needs to inform our approach to any questions we might ask in relation to the theme of this volume. We too need to ask the right questions. We also need to know how best to report the answers we are given, which involves being aware of what happens when we transcribe, paraphrase, interpret, and summarize what is said. As anyone who has devised a questionnaire (or a referendum) knows, the type of question we ask conditions the type of response we get. Unprompted insights, such as those given by my British Council driver, are gold-dust, but these take time—and, more important, trust—before they will be offered, for it isn't easy for those who suffer from social injustice to articulate their personal stories to a stranger, such as a passing applied linguist. The effective management of listening is something that field linguists and anthropologists have grappled with for the best part of a century, bringing to light issues that are now well appreciated, for example, by those who do research into endangered languages. There are hidden dangers if we enter indigenous communities without a full appreciation of the attitudes and rights of the people whose language we are trying to document or save. It is a recurrent theme in the latest handbook summarising the state of the art in his field (Rehg and Campbell 2018), and a perspective that might usefully be applied to the world of global English studies. Hultgren's emphasis on empirical study is to be applauded. There are still far too few accounts of individual situations of social injustice in which Global English supposedly plays its part. Here, as with endangerment linguistics, we need case studies (Crystal, 2018).

In practical terms, empowerment involves three factors, which I have explored in relation to endangerment in my *Language Death* (Crystal 2000). To empower a language community, there has to be top-down interest, on the part of the local and national government, and from international bodies such as UNESCO. There has to be bottom-up interest, in that the community itself must want its language to be documented or revitalized. And there has to be financial backing, for both these processes require funding. If all three are present, the future is promising. And one of the best examples of this happening is in my own country, Wales, where a combination of Language Acts, grass-roots activism, Welsh Assembly funding, and a lot of listening to local

communities has resulted in one of the success stories of 20th-century revitalization, with census returns showing a steady increase in the numbers who speak Welsh.

4. The Welsh Solution

The story has not been without its difficulties, however, and the chief one relates directly to Hultgren's argument. How should the funding be spent? There were—and to some extent still are—two viewpoints. In one view, the money should go directly into Welsh language teaching, teacher-training, translation and interpreting services, bilingual publications, street signs, and so on. In the other, the money should go to improving the economic situation in Wales, so that the thousands of young people who left the country during the later decades of the 20th century, to find jobs in England or elsewhere, might be tempted back, and thus provide a fresh injection of potential Welsh-learning talent. In many cases, they would already know the language, having learned it as children before they went away.

The aim is to have a million Welsh speakers by 2050, and several reports have now focused on how this goal is to be achieved. In 2012, the then Minister for Economy, Science and Technology, Edwina Hart, established a Welsh Language and Economic Development Task and Finish Group. This reported in 2014, making no less than 27 recommendations (Welsh Government, 2014), and it was rewarding to see how the relationship between language and economy was teased out. The recommendations included such practical proposals as providing business apprenticeships in Welsh-speaking areas (Rec. 16) and developing the role of housing associations in promoting and facilitating community economic development (Rec. 19). Another focused on returnees: 'activities relating to promoting trade and investment have a potential role in promoting the opportunities Wales offers to expatriates' (Rec. 9). The overall theme was one of collaboration, as in Rec. 14:

> The Group recommends that there should be a joint approach to economic development and the language, adopting an area based approach which would facilitate the designation of "special economic language zones".

The Minister wrote in her introduction:

> Our response to this review recognises the synergy between nurturing economic growth, the provision of jobs, the creation of wealth, and the well-being of the Welsh language and will create a stimulus to better support business to exploit these relationships.

The key word here, to my mind, is *synergy*. Whereas previously the goals of language development and economic development were often seen as being in contrast with each other, or even in competition (for funding), now the two are being seen as operating within a strategy of mutual support. It seems an eminently sensible way forward.

5. The Importance of Synergy

Synergy is another word missing from Hultgren's paper. There is perhaps too much emphasis on contrasting the two approaches, when we read such statements as "The real cause of disadvantage and injustice lies not in Global English, but in the distribution of material resources" or we need to "redirect our attention away from language and towards economic, social and political inequalities". We see it again in "language is always a contingent and secondary factor and not a root cause of inequality" This may be so in relation to causes, but in relation to solutions I don't think we should be talking in such terms as "primary" and "secondary". They are co-equal.

There's a subtle but crucial difference of mindset when Hultgren says "unless language policies are *co-thought* with more material aspects, they stand little chance of having a real effect" [*my emphasis*]. That suggests synergy. I agree that "Applied Linguists need to widen their lens and acknowledge that a focus on language alone is never going to be enough neither for understanding a social problem, nor for seeking a solution to it." But equally, a focus on economy alone is not going to be enough either. We will make real progress only if we can move towards the emphasis expressed in her final paragraph: "Material conditions must be considered *alongside* linguistic ones." And to do that, we must do more listening.

References
Crystal, David. 2000. *Language Death.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, David. 2018. Afterword. *The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Eds. Kenneth L. Rehg and Lyle Campbell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crystal, David. 2019. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

National Lottery Awards for All England. 2019. https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/national -lottery-awards-for-all-england accessed 28 April 2019.

Prévost, Lauriot dit. 2019. Quotation in "Paris's grand Châtelet reopens as activist theatre inspired by Robin Hood". https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/mar/27/theatre-de-chatelet-paris-ruth-mackenzie accessed 28 April 2019.

Purdy, Michael. 1991. Listening and Community: The Role of Listening in Community Formation. *The International Journal of Listening* 5, 51-67.

Rebelledo, Paula. 2019. Teacher Empowerment: Leaving the Twilight Zone. Paper given to IATEFL 2019, Liverpool, to be published in its *Proceedings* (2020).

Rehg, Kenneth L. and Lyle Campbell. 2018. *The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Welsh Government. 2014. *Response to the Welsh Language and Economic Development Report*. https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/det/ report/140717-welsh-lang-economic-dev-response-en.pdf   accessed 28 April 2019.