Linguistic Injustice for the Sake of Greater Social Justice: A Response to Anna Kristina Hultgren

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Abstract
In her lead piece, Hultgren challenges three common assumptions: (1) "Non-native speakers are disadvantaged by the spread of English"; (2) "English threatens other languages"; (3) "Language policy will curb the spread of English." Under some extreme interpretation, each of them is indefensible, but I would be surprised if anyone held such interpretation. Under some other, more natural interpretation, each of them is close to self-evident. Consequently, I doubt that focusing on these assumptions is the most fruitful way of identifying the really controversial issues. However, I do agree with Hultgren that linguistic injustice is only one dimension of social injustice and one that is generally of secondary importance relative to more material dimensions. As a result, some degree of linguistic injustice—in particular what is inherent in the adoption of some natural language as a global lingual franca—is the price we need to pay for an effective pursuit of social justice in all its dimensions.

Keywords: linguistic justice; social justice; Global English; language policy

When addressing issues of linguistic justice, in particular those raised by the "tyrannosaurical" domination of English, one should adopt a resolutely interdisciplinary perspective. This I take to be the most general claim defended by Anna Kristina Hultgren in her paper. Failing to adopt such an interdisciplinary perspective, she argues, leads many of her fellow applied linguists to subscribe too easily to three questionable assumptions, which most of her paper consists in challenging. I fully agree with her general claim, but am not sure that her arguments suffice to refute the three assumptions, at least charitably yet plausibly interpreted.

To discuss the first one,—"non-native speakers are disadvantaged by the spread of English"—Hultgren uses two illustrations: the adoption of English as the medium of instruction in the schools of former British colonies, and the systematic use of English as the language of international scientific publications. In neither case, it seems to me, does Hultgren show that there is no disadvantage. In the first one, her

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argument supports only the more modest claim that educational achievement "can in all likelihood not be assigned to a single factor such as medium of instruction". And as regards the unequal ability to publish in international journals, she convincingly argues that "economic factors are more important than linguistic ones in explaining these inequalities." These far weaker claims, I take it, are pretty uncontroversial but they are consistent with Hultgren's Assumption 1.

Secondly, Hultgren challenges the assumption that "English threatens other languages." She does so by relativizing the threat presented by borrowing. Not only is the magnitude of it, at least in the case of Danish, pretty insignificant. But it can also be regarded as a form of "domain gain" rather than domain loss, since it makes a language fit for talking about new objects and phenomena created by technical change. However, I presume that she would not deny that there may be some cases in which communication in the home language in some domain is so perforated by lexical borrowings that switching frankly to the language from which one is borrowing is likely to happen soon or later. Nor would she deny, it seems to me, that, whether or not accompanied by borrowing, domain loss may be such, for some languages, that the very existence of the borrowing language can be threatened, whether by English or by other locally dominant languages. Hultgren's position, as I understand it, is that a repressive language police aimed at preserving the purity of a language is futile, but not the concern for the rights of minority language speakers: "there is a lot of work still to do in granting marginalised groups the cultural, political and linguistic rights that are enjoyed by more powerful groups." Since linguistic rights feature in this list, it must mean that "weaker" languages sometimes need protection against the threat presented by more "powerful" ones, including English. This amounts to conceding that Assumption 2 may hold, after all, in some circumstances.

Thirdly and finally, Hultgren challenges the assumption that "language policy will curb the spread of English." She argues—quite convincingly in my view— that the spreading of English in higher education was not the intended consequence of any explicit linguistic policy, but rather the side-effect of policies that had altogether different objectives. The root causes of this striking linguistic trend lie in such factors as the way in which researchers' publications are assessed, the importance attached to internationalization in university rankings and the

promotion by the European Union of trans-national student and teacher mobility. The best solution for a problem does not always consist in removing what created it. But in the search for a solution, it is always a good idea to reflect on the causes. Hence: "Such policies will continue to promote and increase the use of English as long as they are in place and no policy focused on language alone will reverse this." From the claim that language policy alone will not curb the spreading of English, however, it does not follow that it has no effect. Assumption 3, therefore, which makes no claim of exclusivity, may still be true.

My conclusion, consequently, is the same as regards all three assumptions. Under some extreme interpretation, each of them is indefensible, but I would be surprised if anyone held such interpretation. Under some other, more natural interpretation, each of them is close to self-evident, and even Hultgren does not really challenge them. Perhaps there are some interpretations that would allow for meaningful controversies, but they need to be formulated more precisely. Whether or not a focus on the three assumptions provided the most helpful way of addressing it, there is, however, one important controversial issue on which Hultgren's paper invites us to reflect and on which I believe she and I are on the same side. By way of closing this short discussion, I shall try to formulate it, starting from her own formulations.

I do not think anyone would deny "that language and English may not always be the sole or even the most important cause of inequality in the world." I certainly would not. But I do think that some would deny that "assigning injustice and inequality to the linguistic sphere amounts to misdiagnosing" in all cases. I certainly would. It is obvious enough that in many cases "the real cause of disadvantage and injustice lies not in Global English, but in the distribution of material resources". However, this does not prevent the adoption of a particular natural language (or of something quite close to it) as a lingua franca from generating inequalities, indeed unjust inequalities. It simply cannot be asserted as a universal truth that "language, and in our case, English, is not the cause of inequality and linguistic intervention is not the solution".

In my book on linguistic justice[1], I investigated the three forms that can be taken by unjust inequalities generated by the dominance of a

[1] *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011; German translation: Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2013; Dutch edition: Tielt, Lannoo, 2015). See also Helder De Schutter and David Robichaud eds.,

particular natural language: free riding or cooperative injustice, unequal opportunities or distributive injustice and deviation from what I called, following the South African Constitution, parity of esteem. And I explore what can and should be done about each of these three forms of linguistic injustice, whether or not by means of "linguistic interventions." In many of the cases I discuss, it is simply true, it seems to me, "that language is the root cause of injustice and language intervention the solution to addressing this injustice."

Yet I agree fundamentally with what I believe is driving Hultgren's piece, namely het irritation with a narrow, mono-disciplinary focus on linguistic injustice, however understood, and with obsessive attempts to eradicate it at all cost. I do agree with her that language "is secondary to the more material changes we are witnessing" and I do believe that linguistic injustice is only one dimension of social injustice and one that is generally of secondary importance relative to more material dimensions. As a result, some degree of linguistic injustice is the price we need to pay for an effective pursuit of social justice in all its dimensions. The fundamental reason is that more and more decisions that have a massive impact on social justice—national, international and intergenerational—have to be taken on a scale that involves people with different native languages. And effective coordination and mobilization across national and linguistic borders requires the availability of a cheap means of communication. Once tempting yet unrealistic alternatives are discarded—such as Esperanto, Pixel Buds, passive mutual intelligibility or lingua franca pluralism—we are left with Global English. The linguistic injustice intrinsically linked to it can be significantly attenuated, but it cannot be entirely removed, and what is left of it must and can be justified as being required by the pursuit of social justice. So at least I am prepared to argue. And Hultgren too, I believe.

Linguistic Justice. Van Parijs and his Critics (London, Routledge, 2016) for a critical discussion.