

## Sociolinguistics, Indexicality and “Global English”

*Anne Fabricius, Roskilde University*

### *Abstract*

This paper presents a critique of the paper “Global English: From ‘Tyrannosaurus Rex’ to ‘Red Herring’” from a sociolinguistic perspective. The paper takes the position that it is undeniable that the English language’s presence on the world stage, alongside the various political, cultural and economic hegemonies that continue to support it, reverberates down to many varied local linguistic contexts of different time depths. Taking these seriously, sociolinguistically, means paying attention to the subtle indexical, sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological groundings of contexts as a precursor to any type of ‘applied linguistic’ approach. The paper therefore argues for a dissolution of the term Global English and increased awareness of sociolinguistic and semiotic values in many and varied situations. The paper also discusses one online media example of linguistic ideologizing on the role of English and Danish in Denmark. We take the stance that inter-disciplinarity on this issue, as Anna Kristina Hultgren envisages it, is best built upon strong disciplinary foundations.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; Global English; verbal hygiene; linguistic ethnography; applied linguistics; indexicality

Many thanks are due to Anna Kristina Hultgren for bringing up this important debate in her position statement in this present issue. Although it has not been a research focus for me hitherto, I am sympathetic to the theoretical position that verbal hygiene is a significant sociolinguistic process with, as Hultgren shows, potentially far-reaching implications. Verbal hygiene plays not just a policing role, but also a constitutive role in speech communities and commonalities at any scale that we care to examine. It seems to me that Hultgren’s verbal hygiene analysis is pertinent and compelling, and sheds light on a number of lived realities (medium of instruction in schooling, competition in academic publishing, the politicization of language policy) that could be amenable to this analysis. The essence of Hultgren’s argument, as I understand it, is that applied linguists can regard linguistic commentators’ critical attitudes to the spread of Global English as “red herrings”, as pieces of verbal hygiene, and that looking at language alone (as linguists by nature are wont to do) can never be enough. One of her central claims is that language itself cannot constitute a material condition leading to

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inequality, but is always entwined with non-linguistic factors, and in consequence, applied linguistics needs to expand its lens to encompass areas that have traditionally been the territory of economics, political theory and sociology (and, one might add, history).

While I am sympathetic to this interdisciplinary cause, I have to say that I find it odd to challenge, as Hultgren does immediately in her abstract, “the assumption that the spread of English causes or exacerbates inequality and injustice in the world”. It seems to me undeniable that English’s presence on the world stage (alongside the various political hegemonies that continue to support it), its prominence in many forms of global media distribution, and world-wide school systems that give increased access to English language-learning do indeed potentially, in a fundamental way, reverberate down to any local linguistic situation. However, we need to remember that the actual details of what English language users and their language resources can and will do in any setting will vary and will need to be studied carefully and sensitively, not least by the individuals who are affected most directly by these societal changes, often over generations. In Australian Aboriginal and Canadian First Nation contexts, for instance, the presence of the English language as part and parcel of colonial and missionary activity has had a truly devastating impact on language transmission and language ideologies over the last 150 years, a history which is well documented and should not be downplayed. In that sense, verbal hygiene (in the sense of a strong belief in the importance of a language to people and a place) can constitute an important part of a life-sustaining effort for indigenous language groups. The conditions of e.g. the European national languages in higher education in Western Europe in the early twenty-first century are at a huge remove from these more historically-entrenched situations around the globe. Nor should we marginalise efforts to redress these historical injustices. 2019 is UNESCO’s Year of Indigenous Languages, intended to celebrate and support indigenous linguistic resources in the settings that matter to people culturally and emotionally, and precisely this sort of campaign highlights a need to redress social injustice based on linguistic *and* extra-linguistic conditions.

I’ve already said something about what I find to be good about the paper: its grappling with the concept of verbal hygiene. What I also find in the paper, however, (and perhaps this is a lacuna in the applied linguistics field altogether) is a risk of losing touch with a more subtle

sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological grounding of this whole issue, and I will expand on this below. My second point of critique is that we are not pseudo-sociologists, -economists, or -political scientists. All of these fields can be inspired interdisciplinarily by sociolinguistics, but our understandings of language processes in all their manifestations are our scientific insights to give the world. Hultgren writes, “language is always a contingent and secondary factor and not a root cause of inequality. Nor will any intervention focused solely on matters of language put things right.” By contrast with her position, I *do* think there is such a thing as linguistic inequality, expressed and experienced in terms of differentiated access to power, differentiated access to resources mediated by at least partly by language, of the experiences of learners of a language not being taken seriously by speakers of the majority language in a national context. I acknowledge the observation that language does not explain all power differentials, as Hultgren rightly points out. However, the contributions of language and discourse to inequality are well understood, not least by the discipline of critical discourse analysis, seen in the manufacture and manipulation of linguistic resources, and we are uniquely placed as language analysts to contribute to exposing and building a deeper understanding of this.

Moreover, in the extreme case I am actually sceptical as to whether it makes sense to talk about “Global English” at all. Isn’t this term an ideology in itself? Isn’t it a piece of constitutive verbal hygiene? How can you say something remedial about an object that seems to be everywhere and nowhere? Perhaps we need to recognize that the concept of “Global English” is itself, of course, a red herring, and to see the implications of this. The idea that there is any sort of global unity to the ways in which English-language resources are employed by multiple speakers/writers/readers/listeners in multiplex settings across the world, or in their attitudes to these uses of resources, whether critical or celebratory, may simply not be a useful sociolinguistic generalisation. I could be polemical here and say that it verges on meaninglessness. “Global English” might itself be a myth, a reified construct, an enregisterment. It stems from a reification of a process: if English is used all over the world, there must be an object called Global English. Hultgren’s article uses a similar reification in the term “English” in her claim “English has spread especially fast in transnational areas of life, such as business, science, popular culture and online communication”,

which carries the existential implicature that there's a unitary object behind all of these settings. But all of her examples (business, science, popular culture and online media) are complex areas with local anchorings and indexicalities and we know they are by no means simple to understand—or easy to generalize over all national and international contexts. This ultimately suggests that scholars working on “Global English” are working with an ideological resource (and a piece of verbal hygiene in itself in Hultgren's terms). Building any sort of applied theory across these situations is a formidable task indeed.

At one point in the position paper, Hultgren contrasts her own position and Ingrid Piller's by bringing up a debate between bringing linguistic diversity into social justice or bringing social justice into linguistic diversity. Both of these positions seem to be potentially fruitful (Piller's is the former, Hultgren's the latter) but I want to argue here for eliminating a binary thinking that separates the two, and instead conceptualising them together. Moreover, what I would ultimately like to see is an opening up to a sociolinguistic and more specifically a linguistic-anthropological perspective before we tackle these diverse and multiplex situations from an explicitly applied linguistic angle. In other words, it might be important to get the sociolinguistic/anthropological diagnosis right before we administer the necessary applied linguistic medicine.

And if social conditions as such are not our specialty, but language is, then what? I don't think we should abrogate our responsibility to say something about linguistic artifacts and enregisterments as they are entwined with many social conditions and processes within and across social fabrics. Our first contribution to this could be to abandon the use of the term “Global English” altogether. As I have said above, I think this term itself is so vague and unconcrete as to be directly unhelpful. There is no global English, just as there is no global any kind of language, except as an ideological position. What there is ‘out there’ to be understood is the use of a vast range of English language resources in a multitude of locally-bound and overarching contexts. There are small instances of language use and individual and group semiosis that accrete into positions and stances and political pictures through discourse, through language use and attitudinal takes, and the factor of time. All of this can be seen as impinged upon by material circumstances: politically-engineered and increasingly wide discrepancies in the distribution of

wealth and economic capital, national social policies that may distribute influence and autonomy differently to different groups of people, education systems that struggle to deal with the ongoing ramifications of past pedagogical practices and stances. The common denominator here is the human faculty for language as a social semiotic process and affordance and as analysts, we have to be able to see a linguistic forest for the trees, but also the grain of the wood; in other words, whatever scale it is relevant to look at. In addressing that task, we're not about to become pseudo-sociologists or pseudo-economists or pseudo-political scientists, but are compelled to remain empirical linguists with a unique contribution to make.

In that sense, applied linguistics, to the extent it isn't already (and it is in some places), perhaps needs to be better embedded with and engaged with sociolinguistics and ethnographic/linguistic anthropological approaches that have cross-fertilized each other. The sociolinguistic speciality is to be able to investigate the contributions of language resources (or languaging, if one prefers that term) to the structuring, functioning and agentive possibilities of actors in the social world. The linguistic work of speakers, listeners, readers and writers is in this optic a social semiotic process, encompassing, realizing, reworking a range of meanings or indexicalities, *n*th-order meanings, all of which are changeable and malleable through time. To be able to understand the implications of this, we need as analysts to have a social embedding in a context, as participants and observers.

What's needed here is a sociolinguistic understanding grounded in language contexts, which are multiplex, in multi-style speakers, who enact variation, and communities that undergo language change through contact and generational change, that have sustaining language ideologies, that all work with the very human process of semiosis and indexicality, meaning-making at many levels. To that end, we need to ask several pertinent empirical questions, such as what second-order indexicalities are brought out by specifically English accomplishments and achievements and affordances, as differentiated from other languages in a semiotic sphere? What does it mean, indexically, to be a migrant child in a society that does not value one's own home language resources, for example? What does it mean to need to write up a biology paper using English, as a Brazilian M.Sc. student in the United Kingdom? What does it mean to grow up in Singapore now, within a

state that has an ambiguous attitude to markedly localized Singaporean English? What did it mean thirty years ago? What does it mean, sociolinguistically, to be a Danish business leader trying to establish a working relationship with a company in Korea in 2019?

I want to offer an example of this perspective on the debate by examining in detail one tiny case of explicit evidence of linguistic ideological work from a recent event in Denmark, the country where I have lived now for twenty-five years. In common with the rest of Scandinavia, Denmark is what I would describe as a highly 'sound aware' linguistic community. Foreign-accented language is often noted and commented on, subject to labelling, and divisions between the Scandinavian languages and other languages are well-established and the subject of much ideological work. There is also a strong ideology of language and place, a rooted 'linguistic soil' in the country.

Against that backdrop, within recent generations, English has gradually become an expected and unremarked linguistic resource that many Danes have and use to varying degrees. It is a valued language resource for many, although using the English language in specific contexts can also generate antagonism if it is felt to be inappropriate, which it can be in certain contexts, because of the 'linguistic soil' ideology I cited above. General conversational competence in English is at a fairly high level in the population at large, and there is a societal expectation that this will be so for most people (to the extent that those without English competence can experience disadvantage). Danish speakers can use English words for certain indexical effects within Danish utterances. At the same time, other European languages have been falling in popularity for a considerable period, now being chosen less often as high-level school subjects than was the case a generation ago. For that reason, English can be seen to varying degrees to be a 'vernacularised' resource in the society, even to the extent that there are now parts of the Danish population who feel in a position to point out gaps and mistakes in other speakers' English explicitly.

The situated example I am citing here took place when the national broadcaster, Danmarks Radio (DR), set itself the task of exploring childhood in Denmark in 2019 in a series of programmes, and along the way tackled the issue of children's upbringing and language in Denmark. The TV programme *I Danmark er jeg født* (literally, *In Denmark I was born*, also the title of a patriotic song by Hans Christian Andersen) was

broadcast in March 2019, and presented one example of a Danish born-and-raised couple, parents of Bella, without familial ties to English, who nonetheless wanted to raise their child with the father speaking English and Danish to his daughter. The programme video spawned a series of, at times, heated exchanges on the Facebook page of DR.<sup>1</sup> The debate, although small in scale by social media standards, with 356 comments and 284 ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’, nonetheless clearly had social traction, as it was subsequently taken up by a range of news outlets all over the country. The written responses constitute an instantiation of a series of ideological positions on English in Denmark, and in fact concern themselves with more ‘verbal hygiene’ than just the issue of English. Many commentators were actually supportive of the bilingual situation the parents were trying to engender, and proffered examples of multilingual, cross-national family members and acquaintances of their own experience, for whom this multiplex situation was unproblematic. Others, however, were much more critical, and in these responses, we see a range of attitudinal stances foregrounded. These included: the place of the Danish language in Denmark (which means people should use the language that belongs to the territory); the concept of ‘authentic English’ (that it’s not acceptable to use ‘Danish-sounding’ English); the view of languages as ‘coming from the heart’ (one needs to use a mother tongue to engage authentically with growing children); and whether or not people have a right to criticise others’ language use. The father’s spoken English competence was subjected to a series of direct criticisms as being markedly Danish-sounding (‘Bad English’, ‘bad accent’) and therefore inadequate as a form of English to model for a child. The mother involved in the story felt (justifiably) that the episode prompted a ‘shitstorm’, as she wrote on a blog post afterwards.<sup>2</sup> To some, including the moderators of the chat for Danmarks Radio, the public’s responses to the programme were unacceptably bullying and intolerant.

We can understand the meaning-making around these reactions as verbal hygiene of a kind not unrelated to the anxieties about Danish in higher education in Denmark that Hultgren has investigated. The general Danish language ideologies cited above are all instantiated in the specific

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/dr1/videos/293321061349718/> (Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2019).

<sup>2</sup> <http://maithitrucpham.bloggersdelight.dk/2019/03/08/shitstorm-efter-vi-var-med-i-dr-tv-program/> (Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2019)

case of the ‘Bella debate’. Verbal hygiene processes in Denmark do regularly include “complaints about language changes” that are, in Hultgren’s words “usually symbolic expressions of anxieties about larger social changes”: accelerated globalisation and immigration being two prominent examples of such social changes. As Cameron (2012) writes: “The rules of language stand in for the rules that govern social or moral conduct and putting language to rights becomes a sort of symbolic surrogate for putting the world to rights”. On the other hand, if a society lacks this sense of there being a socially-constituted linguistic order, if a language community lacks that linguistic and indexical glue, then it may well be in danger of dissolution of the kind that many linguistically-challenged societies around the world can attest to.

I offer this example as an illustration of what sociolinguistics can contribute to a linguistic perspective on a larger societal issue, and I will use it to end this essay with a plea for sociolinguistic sensitivity in applied linguistics and more deconstruction of the indexicalities of situations and contexts, and of reifying terms, of the kind AKH has begun for us. I think we need to place social semiosis and small-scale language processes front and centre in our work. Linguistic ethnography is key here. Language has its place, and we are uniquely poised to understand it, and so my suggestion is not necessarily broadening our analytical scope as Hultgren suggests, but focussing the sociolinguistic lens more closely. Arguing that we should abandon studying language in operation would be like saying that if we can’t build a functioning house just by nailing pieces of wood together, we should abandon using hammers and give up carpentry. Economists, sociologists, and political scientists are akin to the plumbers, electricians and bricklayers who alongside the carpenter(-linguists), have a part to play in building the empirically-grounded theoretical house. Rather than abandoning the sociolinguistic hammers, it seems to me, applied linguists need better knowledge of them and what kinds of nails they can be used with, in what material conditions, by way of more contact with sociolinguistic concepts such as indexicality and a more sensitive view of what language is and does in material circumstances. As Nicholas Evans writes<sup>3</sup>:

Linguistics has a unique but unfulfilled destiny, as the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences. Our quest for meaning within

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<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.linguistlist.org/fund-drive/featured-linguist-nicholas-evans/>



and across languages is intimately tied in with our quest for meaning in life more generally. Linguistics is also a field with a thoroughly democratic appreciation of human creativity—as well as an ability to give voice to every one of the world’s cultures. With the right balance of humanistic insight and scientific rigor, it has the potential to reach what Ortega y Gasset referred to as the revelation of the secrets that peoples and epochs keep from each other and which contribute so much to their dispersion and hostility—in sum, an audacious integration of humanity.

Only by a firm grounding in the social semiotic and linguistic conditions we see around us can the field as a whole be equipped to engage in interdisciplinary work of the kind Hultgren is advocating, and that is certainly a cause worth fighting for.