

## Response to Anna Kristina Hultgren's Global English: From "Tyrannosaurus Rex" to "Red Herring"

*David Block, ICREA & Universitat Pompeu Fabra*

### *Abstract*

In this response to Anna Kristina Hultgren's paper, 'Global English: From "Tyrannosaurus Rex" to "Red Herring"', I begin by aligning myself with the general thrust of Hultgren's argument, namely that if Applied Linguists really want to help combat social injustice in the world, they will have to abandon the notion that language must be at the centre of all social analysis, realising that this focus is never going to be enough to ensure the achievement of their goal. In addition, they will need to engage with Marxist political economy in greater depth than they perhaps have done in the past. I then devote some space to clarifications of key terminology such as political economy, materialism and class, before moving back to the key idea I mean to convey, namely that a focus on language is not going to make much of a contribution to making world a better place when the real problem is the ongoing march of capitalism and the increasing inequality and the damage to the environment that it engenders.

Keywords: English; Marxist political economy; materialism; neoliberalism; class; language labour; factory conditions

### *1. Introduction*

I wish to start my response to Anna Kristina Hultgren's article by thanking her for taking a stand which will put her at odds with many in applied linguistics who have devoted a good amount of time—and indeed, their careers—to the study of English in the world. Telling a large group of researchers in any field of inquiry that you think that they have, in effect, been barking up the wrong tree, is never going to go down well, especially among those who feel most directly alluded to or who are directly referenced. So, hats off to Hultgren for taking this stand, with which I, in principle, agree. I thus align myself with her view that (1) 'Applied Linguists committed to a social justice agenda are looking in the wrong place if they only accord attention to language and language-related concepts'; (2) a 'focus on language alone is never going to be enough neither for understanding a social problem, nor for seeking a solution to it'; and (3) there is 'an urgent need to provincialize language and to engage to a much greater extent with the underlying factors that

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cause it to spread'. Indeed, I would add that applied linguists are not likely to be able to understand, let alone analyse and eventually offer solutions to the key problems in the world today (especially economic inequality) if they try to do so exclusively *as applied linguists*. As I shall argue here, something else is necessary.

## 2. *For More (Marxist) Political Economy and Historical Materialism in Applied Linguistics*

What Hultgren writes here resonates with an idea that I have been pushing in somewhat different terms over the past decade. Thus, in a chapter in the book *Neoliberalism and Applied Linguists* (Block, Gray and Holborow 2012), I lament 'the paucity of work which has engaged in depth and in detail with debates and research on political economy', arguing for the 'need to redress what is surely an imbalance, and to foreground neoliberalism as the dominant economic ideology today with repercussions for all manners of activity in which we engage' (Block 2012: 82). Two years later, in *Social class in Applied Linguistics* (Block 2014), I continued with this line of argument, in this case critiquing the 'erasure' of class in contemporary applied linguistics, while calling for it to be situated front and centre in language and identity research. More recently, in *Political Economy and Sociolinguistics* (Block 2018), I return to the call for more (Marxist) political economy in research, this time focusing more specifically on sociolinguistics.

This is all fine and it would seem to situate me on the right side of Hultgren's thesis. However, in recent years I have often had the distinct impression that the vast majority of researchers, be they self-defined 'applied linguists' or self-defined 'sociolinguists', are not particularly interested in the kind of ideas that Hultgren and I (and others, of course, as we are not completely alone) are proffering. In this sense it is instructive to note what two reviewers of *Political Economy and Sociolinguistics* have recently had to say about the prospect that this book might have any real impact on scholars and researchers working in sociolinguistics. The first reviewer, Peter Ives, concludes his review by saying that '[t]o actually bring sociolinguistics and political economy closer I think requires more than this book offers' (Ives 2018: 4-5). Ives refers here to what he sees as my tendency to get bogged down in the political economy side, not establishing enough connections with

language-related issues along the way. In other words, and simply stated, I do not make clear what those who don't, in principle, *do* language, might learn from those who do, in principle, *do* language. I think that Ives is right to highlight this missing piece in my book and the issue of linking disciplines is one to which I will return below.

Meanwhile, in another review, Alison Stewart writes that my call for a 'political economy turn' is not likely to be successful, not least because it would involve 'challenging authorities and upsetting the status quo', which she suggests would be 'a risky endeavour for those seeking funding or tenure' (Stewart 2018: 3). This is both an interesting and an unsettling argument, as it points to how applied linguistics, not unlike other academic disciplines, is a *discipline* through and through, ordered and regulated by Foucauldian technologies of power via organizations, conferences, university departments, journals and individuals with conferred celebrity status in the field. Change does not come about because of a few discordant voices, as these can be rewarded with limited recognition and then swept off to the fringes of the field. In recent years I have noticed that my calls for more political economy (actually, more *Marxist* political economy) in applied linguistics is seen by many as a respectable activity. I say this because I am often told that what I am doing is 'interesting'. However, this 'interesting' is usually followed by a noteworthy silence, which makes me think that perhaps my interlocutors are too polite to add 'but it is going nowhere!'. Marxist political economy, which I assume is what Hultgren is referencing when she says that there needs to be more attention to 'the underlying material conditions that produce inequality and injustice', sounds relatively 'cool' (everyone wants to be considered 'left-wing', and Marx and Marxism are still associated with this political positioning). However, Marxism and notions arising from it, such as alienation, exploitation and class struggle, have none of the sex appeal of key constructs in applied linguistics today such as 'superdiversity' or 'translanguaging'.

My mention of Hultgren's reference to 'material conditions' leads me to an issue I have with her piece, namely that she calls for attention to materiality without actually saying what she means by the term. In a recent book entitled *Materialism*, Terry Eagleton devotes 150 pages to this definitional task, as he surveys the X, Y and Z of the notion of materialism in contemporary thought. Among other things, he provides a very useful discussion of historical materialism, which, he argues, 'views

class struggle, along with conflict between the forces and relations of production, as the dynamic of epochal historical change’, adding that ‘[i]t also regards the material activities of men and women as lying at the source of their social existence’ (Eagleton, 2016: 9). Is this what Hultgren has in mind when she says that applied linguists need to pay closer attention to the material conditions of our existence when examining language-related issues? For if she does, then I would say that I also note in Hultgren’s piece the absence of any reference to political economy. Quite possibly, it goes without saying that she is calling for more political economy (and even more specifically, *Marxist* political economy) in applied linguistics when she invokes ‘the underlying material conditions that produce inequality and injustice’. However, as she is not explicit in this regard, I think it necessary at this point to explore what we might mean by political economy.

Some 140 years ago, Friedrich Engels provided what I think still holds up as a fairly good definition of political economy. In slightly abridged form, it looks as follows:

Political economy, in the widest sense, is the science of the laws governing the production and exchange of the material means of subsistence in human society. ... Each of these two social functions is subject to the action of external influences which to a great extent are peculiar to it and for this reason each has, also to a great extent, its own special laws. But on the other hand, they constantly determine and influence each other to such an extent that they might be termed the abscissa and ordinate of the economic curve. The conditions under which men produce and exchange vary from country to country, and within each country again from generation to generation. Political economy, therefore, cannot be the same for all countries and for all historical epochs. . . . Political economy is therefore essentially a *historical science*. (Engels, [1878] 1976: 187–188)

The field of inquiry that Engels describes here should not be confused or conflated with the field of inquiry known as ‘economics’. According to the American Economics Association (n. d.), economics is generally described as the scientific study of how scarce resources are allocated in society. Further to this, it attempts to model said allocation of scarce resources, which often amounts to modelling the production and exchange of goods in markets. Economists also examine human behaviour—how people make decisions as they navigate through the production and exchange of goods. All of these aspects of economics are perhaps more implicit than explicit in Engels’s definition: see his

references to ‘the science of laws’ and the activities of ‘production and exchange’. However, as a political economist, Engels takes an extra step, going beyond what concerns most economists, when he includes in his definition the study of how ‘external elements’—which I understand to be the social, the political, the cultural and the geographical—intersect with what are understood to be economic phenomena. Indeed, from the foundational work of François Quesnay and Adam Smith onwards, what has always characterised political economy, and distinguished it from economics, is this broadened view of how economics cannot stand on its own and is always embodied in the social, the political, the cultural and the geographical. The relative commercial success of Thomas Piketty’s (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* was in no small part due to a relative shift on Piketty’s part: in the book he moved from being a number-crunching economist to being an economist who situates his quantitative analyses in the flesh and blood realities of society. In this sense, Piketty incorporated into his discussion references to government, social interaction, education and even literature, in the latter case clearly following Marx, who was notoriously fond of including literary references in his work.

In addition to citing economics-external factors, Engels refers to the key notion of *historical situatedness*: political economy is the study of variegated phenomena, spatiotemporally shaped. This element is notably missing in much mainstream economics, past and present, as capitalism is taken as a given, in effect, as the natural way that human beings organize the economy and their lives and affairs more broadly, and not as a phenomenon constituted by a constellation of historical circumstances coming together at a given point in time. In this regard, economic alternatives such as communism are seen as aberrant phenomena doomed to failure. The ‘vulgar’ economists denounced by Marx over a century and half ago—those ‘who ... confine themselves to systematizing in a pedantic way, and proclaiming for everlasting truths, the banal and complacent notions held by the bourgeois agents of production about their own world, which is to them the best possible one’ (Marx, [1867] 1990: 175)—are alive and well today. And what is more important (and worse), their views on how economies do and should function are still underwriting the economic policies of global capitalism, despite the fact that these same policies were arguably what caused the 2007-2008 depression (Crouch, 2011). No doubt, this should give anyone who

wishes to take on injustice and inequality in the world today pause for thought, and it may well lead them to adopt a Marxist political economy approach.

As for what I mean by a ‘Marxist political economy’, I would say that it is a political economy inspired in the work of Marx and Engels, and crucially, their successors over the past century and half (e.g. Karl Kautsky, Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Paul Baran, Ellen Meiksins Wood and Gerard Duménil, just to cite a few in somewhat random fashion). It is inquiry that is critical of the current dominant form of capitalism in the world today. Whether we call this form of capitalism ‘neoliberalism’, or ‘late capitalism’, or even ‘business as usual’, is not particularly important; what is important is that a Marxist political economy will always be a critique of capitalism as historically shaped and situated, where class struggle, as the conflicts between people (e.g. capitalists and proletarians) pursuing opposing class interests, is a key phenomenon. And this leads me to an additional question about Hultgren’s reference to ‘the underlying material conditions that produce inequality and injustice’: Is she also referring to class as the focal point of material inequality and injustice?

### *3. Class*

Class would appear to be an unwanted construct in many circles, and this seems to be the case especially in applied linguistics, where, as I have argued elsewhere (Block, 2014), there has been a near exclusive interest in recognition issues, to the near total detriment of redistribution issues (see Fraser 1995, for an early formulation of this idea). In addition, as class in Marxist theory is linked to the means of production, dramatic changes in those means of production, such as the massive reduction in industrial activity which has occurred in the advanced economies of the world, have led many researchers to presume that class has ceased to be a relevant construct. However, class has never really disappeared as a construct deemed worthy of consideration or useful in the social sciences; indeed, if anything, it has experienced something of a comeback post 2007 with authors such as Harvey (2014) and Duménil and Lévy (2011) portraying neoliberalism as class warfare by updated means. Indeed, in all of the claims that class is no longer a relevant construct (or even that it was never a relevant construct), there is an air

of Mark Twain—reports of the death of class have been greatly exaggerated—as well as a whiff of dominant ideology at work—those who most benefit in capitalist economic regimes have always been keen to advocate for the ‘classless society’. Ultimately, a more accurate portrayal of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the following one provided by Will Atkinson:

Class inequalities and differences have not declined or disappeared in the twenty-first century, in other words, they only change their form- they may look very different from the past, but class structures, cultures, struggles and modes of domination persist as doggedly as ever. (Atkinson, 2015: 15)

Following Ellen Meiksins Wood, I see class as a complex construct, understood, in general terms, according to two contrasting views. On the one hand, it may be seen as ‘a form of stratification, a layer in a more hierarchical structure, differentiated according to ‘economic’ criteria such as income, ‘market chances’ or occupation’ (Meiksins Wood, [1995] 2016: 76). On the other hand, it may be seen as ‘a socio-historical ... relation between appropriators and producers, determined by the specific form in which, to use Marx’s phrase, ‘surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers’ (Meiksins Wood, [1995] 2016: 76). With regard to this second view, it is worth noting that the relations between appropriators and producers (or exploiters and the exploited) are typically neither smooth nor harmonious, and they lead to class struggle, that is, conflicts between individuals and collectives over divergent, opposing class interests. In line with Erik Olin Wright (2005), I see the origin of class struggle in these class *interests*, or the material interests of people derived from class-based positions in society, such as their standard of living and work conditions. Class interests are embedded in and constructed by class *practices*, or the activities engaged in by individuals, acting alone or with others. Class interests and class practices may be seen to shape class *consciousness*, or the subjective awareness people have of their class positions and interests, and the conditions for advancing them, which leads to class *formations*, or the collectives people form in order to defend class interests, such as trade unions, political parties and employers’ associations. There is a kind of upward movement going on here, from material realities to sociohistorically-situated ideational realities, which makes this kind of understanding of class imminently Marxist.

#### 4. *So, Where Do We Go With This?*

First, the reader might have noticed by now that since I introduced materialism and Engels's definition of political economy, language and language issues have disappeared from the discussion. I find this happens a lot to me lately when I am thinking about or expressing my views on the state of the world today and it is what prompts some readers of my recent publications (see my reference above to Peter Ives's review of the book *Political Economy and Sociolinguistics*) to point out that I am not only leaving out language issues but also failing to establish links between political economy and sociolinguistics (or relevant here, applied linguistics). Presumably, these links should be bi-directional, with sociolinguistics (or applied linguists) delving deeper into political economy and political economists reading work produced under the heading of sociolinguistics (or applied linguistics). However, this latter flow of traffic does not seem to be very common as one almost never sees references to these publications in political economy publications (actually, my inclusion of 'almost' here is perhaps overly charitable). On the one hand, authors such as David Harvey, Nancy Fraser and Christian Fuchs, who examine society through a Marxist political economy lens, ply their trade from their disciplinary moorings in geography, political philosophy and communication and media studies, respectively. And this means a near-total marginalisation of the kinds of ideas that one finds discussed in applied linguistics publications or at relevant conferences. In this case, we stand before a common phenomenon in academia, one of asymmetrical crossing. Thus, while applied linguists may be consumers of research and theorising in economics, political science, political economy, sociology and so on, academics in these disciplines know nothing of what applied linguistics do. And what is worse, when they are informed, they would appear to be unimpressed enough to continue to ignore the field.

I should make clear at this point that I do not condone this state of affairs, especially when it is a matter of academics in one field looking down on academics in another field, or in any case, ignoring or not being aware of research and theorising taking place within its confines. And I do think that many social sciences and humanities researchers would do well to incorporate a language and communication angle in their work. For example, David Harvey's lucid analyses of the ills of capitalism in contemporary societies would likely benefit from the inclusion of some

reference to—or even better, discussion of—English as a both a mediator and an indexical of inequality in the world. On the other hand, I can understand how non-language specialists might view what goes on in applied linguistics as not particularly insightful, or even as missing the point.

For example, I have often wondered about the centrality in a good deal of sociolinguistics research of notions such as Josiane Boutet's 'the language part of work' (*la part langagière du travail*) which she defines as 'the implementation of the linguistic capacities needed to do a job' (Boutet, 2012: 208). On the one hand, I agree that 'the language part of work' should be the focus of research as there is little doubt that the rise of the service economy worldwide over the past seven decades has meant a rise in the number of jobs in which employees have to use language to carry out their duties. On the other hand, a key question arises here: Are most jobs in the world today language-loaded jobs? The short answer to this question is 'clearly not', if, that is, we move away from the powerful services-driven economies where the vast majority of sociolinguists are located and carry out their research (think North America, Western Europe, Japan, Australia and so on), to the sweatshops and electronic goods assembly factories situated on the US-Mexican border and in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Bangladesh, as well as Southern China. Such locations are where the majority of the world's workers live and labour. As David Harvey explains, 'the labour conditions in the clothing factories of Bangladesh, the electronics factories in southern China, the *maquiladora* factories strung along the Mexican border or the chemical complexes in Indonesia are much closer to those which Marx was so familiar' (Harvey, 2014: 129). To support Harvey's claim, I reproduce below a description of factory conditions in Bangladesh provided by the UK based anti-poverty charity, War on Want:

As well as earning a pittance, Bangladeshi factory workers face appalling conditions. Many are forced to work 14-16 hours a day seven days a week, with some workers finishing at 3 am only to start again the same morning at 7.30 am. On top of this, workers face unsafe, cramped and hazardous conditions which often lead to work injuries and factory fires. Since 1990, more than 400 workers have died and several thousand more have been wounded in 50 major factory fires. Sexual harassment and discrimination is widespread and many women workers have reported that the right to maternity leave is not upheld by employers. Factory management also take steps to prevent the formation of trade unions, a right

protected under the Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining ILO Conventions, which Bangladesh ratified in 1972. (War on Want, n.d.)

In this account, there are references to the outright greed and a lack of concern for human life manifested by local elites in collusion with international corporations that offshore their production to the poorer countries of the world. There, labour and environmental laws are virtually non-existent and operations are infinitely cheaper than in the home countries. I think we need to ask ourselves where in this kind of context we might find the language part of work in the lives of workers. If anything, there is a suppression of talk amongst workers (their line managers would not want them organising themselves) and there is certainly no contact with their world outside the factory.

Bearing this state of affairs in mind, I cannot help thinking that sociolinguistics research based on the premise that language has become such an important part of jobs in the world today is focusing on just small portion of the world's population, even if in the examination of call centres (e.g. Woydack, 2019) or mobile domestic workers (e.g. Lorente, 2016), this research focuses on the vulnerable and disempowered. But in a world where so many workers are employed in Dickensian conditions described above, it seems fairly obvious that a focus on language is not what is required to make the world a better place. In short, it is not going to have much effect on the ongoing march of capitalism and the increasing inequality and the damage to the environment that it engenders. Something far more revolutionary is in order: indeed, a real revolution is in order. And here the kinds of things that have tended to concern applied linguists, such as the different takes on English in the world that Hultgren highlights, are not likely to make a big contribution to the cause.

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