

## On Resisting the Distraction of the Red Herring

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### *Abstract*

This response to Hultgren's position paper begins by examining elements of her argument. It weighs up the evidence for the assumptions which lead to her conclusions. Finally, it presents an alternative practical implication of her position.

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Anna Kristina Hultgren's position paper addresses an important topic in a thought-provoking way. By connecting the oft articulated fears about the spread of English with the concept of verbal hygiene, she has provided a powerful metaphor to frame these fears in a novel way. She draws on this framing to present two implications for the field of applied linguistics. First, we should "be mindful of the possibility that discourses about language, although often very strongly felt, will often just serve as a starting point for a deeper, non-linguistic examination" (Hultgren 2020: 25). In other words, we should resist the distraction offered by the red herring of language, and not allow it to draw our attention away from the social justice issues underlying it. From this it follows that we should lift our gaze and take into account material conditions alongside linguistic ones (Hultgren 2020).

These two conclusions are robust and compelling; beyond them, I identify an additional, practice-based implication. My objective in this response is to present it, and in order to do so, I will revisit the three strands to Hultgren's argument, the three assumptions about the spread of English which she presents and challenges. In what follows, many of my examples draw on the presence of English in higher education globally, but the issues about the status of English raised in the position paper have much wider relevance.

The first assumption which Hultgren raises and problematises is the idea that "non-native speakers are disadvantaged by the spread of English" (Hultgren 2020: 15). So widely held is this view that this part of

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the argument is likely to be received sceptically by some, and perhaps rejected out of hand by others. If second language (L2) users of English are not disadvantaged by the use of English instead of the first language (L1), why is there such widespread emphasis on the importance of L1 instruction (e.g., UNESCO, 2016)? If the spread of English does not confer advantages on the people who speak it, why is it so common in so many parts of the world for parents who can afford it (and some who can't) to send their children for private English tuition? Their belief that English language skills will translate to more remunerative employment is borne out by research (Azam, Chin, & Prakesh, 2010).

This is, of course, precisely Hultgren's point: the real problem is not the spread of English itself; the problem is the wage gap between those who speak English and those who don't, along with other forms of social inequality. English indexes the problem; it doesn't create the problem. This argument is persuasive and helps to refute the first assumption, if the assumption is given a literal reading. The *spread* of English does not disadvantage people with another L1. However, the *dominance* of English as a necessary code, and often an exclusive one, for a particular purpose, has created a world in which individuals who do not possess the ability to speak English (in the required register, for the required purposes, with the required proficiency) are disadvantaged compared to those who do.

From this perspective, the problem is not that English has acquired the status of a global lingua franca; the problem is that in the matter of English there are haves and have nots. Is the solution to eliminate the inequalities by giving everyone access to learning English? The difficulty of imagining this happening reinforces Hultgren's point. To achieve a world in which everyone had the opportunity to learn English, a number of conditions would have to be satisfied: for example, it would have to be a world in which every child had access to a well resourced school, and could attend it, being healthy, well nourished, and not engaged in sweat shop labour. In other words, the hypothetical aim of eliminating "English poverty" would require solving the problem of real poverty. The same could be said about other forms of social injustice, for example, the exclusion of girls from education in some parts of the world. Hultgren is right, then, to warn against the danger of scapegoating English if doing so blinds us to the root causes of the disparity in access to the world's lingua franca.

Of course, another weighty concern remains, namely that English, as it spreads, may be supplanting other languages, threatening their health and perhaps ultimately their existence by encroaching on their territory. This is the second assumption which Hultgren tries to disprove. She does this by arguing, first, that charting languages and their domains is a fairly complex task, and languages always change, and cautions therefore against equating “change” with “threat.” She also holds out the intriguing possibility that a healthy, unthreatened language, a “complete and society-bearing language” (Nordic Council of Ministers 2006, cited in Hultgren 2020: 21) is an unrealistic ideal rather than the default condition which it is frequently represented as being.

If Hultgren is correct, if English can continue to spread without turning the globe’s linguistic pasture to monoculture, then it is good news. If English is not a threat to the health of other languages, then it would be possible to conclude that the spread of English is not harmful. Indeed, it would be possible to go further and conclude that it is actually positive: if English becomes more widely used without restricting the use of other languages, then the global spread of English is actually promoting additive multilingualism. While this would be a pleasant conclusion to draw, the “ifs” are significant, and while the perspectives offered in the rebuttal of Assumption 2 are worthy of reflection, they do not, perhaps, constitute sufficient evidence to conclude that linguistic diversity is not imperiled by English.

Indeed, Hultgren makes no such sweeping claim. Her question is whether the culpability should be assigned to English, to or factors which have co-occurred with the rise of English, such as the social or technological or economic changes that lead to updating lexical resources in other languages. While it is right to avoid falling into the *post hoc, propter hoc* fallacy, it seems less urgent to absolve English of being a threat to linguistic diversity than to establish what the risks are and what, if anything, should be done about them.

However, the possibility that English need not be a threat to other languages is very much the assumption which underpins the parallel language policy promulgated by the Nordic Council of Ministers (2018). The idea of parallel languages starts with the realistic stance that the tide English cannot be swept back, so the Nordic languages need to shape a healthy symbiosis with it. Policy brings us to Hultgren’s third assumption, and her challenge to this one is much less likely to attract

dissent. She argues that policy alone will not limit the expansion of English, and this is manifestly true. If policy alone could provide enough inertia to resist the momentum which English has acquired, then the situation in Nordic universities would be strikingly different. If the parallel language policy had borne fruit, the trend in medium of instruction would be moving toward a balance between English and L1 courses and programmes of study. In Sweden, however, the trend has been for the number of courses and degree programmes to remain stable or decrease slightly, while the proportion taught in English has increased (Mezek, Pecorari, Shaw, & Malmström, in preparation). If policy alone had the ability to change behaviour, then the Hong Kong policy of English as the medium of instruction at university would not regularly be flouted by students and teachers who find it more effective to communicate in Cantonese, their L1.

If we believe that the spread of English neither disadvantages individuals nor threatens other languages, then limitations on what policy can accomplish would not be a significant issue. However, as noted above, Hultgren's thought-provoking discussion does not fully dispel all concerns. It follows, then, that what cannot be accomplished at the level of policy must take place in the realm of practice. In this respect, the field of Applied Linguistics potentially has a very down-to-earth, practical contribution to make, by identifying and encouraging multilingual practices.

Recent years have seen the emergence of the concept *translanguaging* and the growth of a body of literature about it (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Wei, 2014). Proponents of translanguaging have convincingly argued that the use of multiple codes has multiple benefits, including increasing inclusivity and signalling that multilingualism is valuable and valued. This is an argument which linguists may find attractive, but which has little traction outside the community of language specialists. By way of example, in Sweden, where internationalisation has been a main driver for English-medium instruction (EMI), there is a commonly held belief that all on-stage communication (e.g., when lecturing, leading a seminar, asking a question) and often other communication (such as taking questions from students during a break) should be conducted exclusively in English. Based on anecdotal evidence, this belief appears to be driven by concerns about practicality and fairness. If the use of Swedish were common, it

would disadvantage international students. Most university lecturers would not be able to take questions or provide the definition of a term in Chinese or Arabic, but if they could, it would disadvantage the majority of students who do not know the language in question. The solution is to restrict communication to English, the common denominator.

However, there are alternative perspectives as demonstrated by among others, van der Walt, whose study of South Africa's universities describes multilingual practices:

allowing questions to the lecturer in other languages, responses by the lecturer to the class (or part of the class) in other languages, presentations by students and lecturers in more than one language, and submitting assignments. . . in more than one language. (2013: 138)

In other words, the fact that a teaching setting has participants who speak multiple languages, with partial overlaps but with English as the only language spoken by all, need not preclude the use of the other languages in pedagogically appropriate ways.

Viewed against such pedagogical practices, an insistence on English only in multilingual classrooms seems not only unnecessary but strangely minimalistic. Most university teachers bring multiple approaches to content delivery: they can lecture, conduct seminars, lead group discussions, organise lab sessions, etc. Most teachers use multiple approaches for assessment: tests, essays, reports, oral presentations, and so on. In other words, most teachers have a whole set of pedagogical tools, and they select the most appropriate one for the task. Why, then, are so many educators (and often students) uncomfortable with the mixing of languages in the classroom?

I would argue that it is because teachers of chemistry and nursing and computer science are not linguists, and so the use of a language other than the medium of instruction is perceived as a violation of policy. They are perhaps less likely to reflect on language (and languaging) as a conscious pedagogical choice, an opportunity to exploit the rich multilingual resources of participants to enrich teaching and learning. By contrast, applied linguists are ideally situated to develop, evaluate and implement multilingual pedagogical techniques, ideally in coordination with teachers from across the university.

What would these techniques and strategies look like? The literature on translanguaging gives some suggestions, but there is not as yet a solid

body of work describing them, much less evaluating their effectiveness. This is an opportunity for the field.

The same opportunity exists in other domains than education. In every domain where English is used as a lingua franca, the development and promulgation of multilingual practices would help minimise the potential risks or actual costs of the spread of English (however great or small we think they are). By turning our attention to very hands-on questions of practice, the field could make a real contribution, and also live up to its name, by going beyond developing linguistic insights, and seeing that they are applied in society.

The absence of work focused on solutions in the literature base is conspicuous by its scarcity, certainly in comparison to works decrying the dominance of English, not least of all in the literature on parallel language policy in the Nordic region. On reflection, this disparity may seem anomalous: an applied field that dedicates a great deal of effort to describing a perceived problem but much less to solving it. Hultgren's provocative analysis offers an explanation for this anomaly, and possibly a way forward. Whether we agree with Hultgren that English is unduly scapegoated, or believe that it may merit some degree of blame, if we shift our focus from questions of culpability, we may be able to direct it toward building a better reality.

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