

# Who Profits From Global English? Reply to Hultgren

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## *Abstract*

In my reply to Hultgren, I suggest introducing further aspects into the discussion of ‘global English’, like the question not only of ownership of a language but also of ownership and control of the communication channels, the problematic status of metaphors like ‘market’, the connection between global English and the narrowing of the base of available knowledge, the importance of a shared language, and the relevance of the ideology of globalism for discourses of global English.

Keywords: language ownership; language and control; knowledge and multilingualism; globalism

## *1. Introduction*

When I read Hultgren’s position paper, I immediately agreed with her that it is not language that is the problem at the bottom of it all, but something else—but what? And a sentence popped up in my mind, again and again, something that Bertolt Brecht said in 1935 at the *Premier Congrès de l’Association Internationale des Écrivains pour la Défense de la Culture* in the *Mutualité* in Paris, “Kameraden, sprechen wir von den Eigentumsverhältnissen!”

Talking about ‘ownership and control relations’ requires making clear who owns and who controls what. Not that this has not been done before. Some people have got the impression that Robert Phillipson—in his manifold contributions to the analysis of linguistic imperialism—is mostly concerned with politics, ideology and hegemony (the latter in the sense of ‘dominance with consent’). However, in his analyses he always also has used terms like ‘(distribution of) wealth’, ‘profit’, and ‘capital’ (see, e.g., several of the chapters in Phillipson 2009).

The metaphors of ‘market’ and ‘commodification’ have become fashionable recently, but as mere metaphors they are not analytically sufficient. In connection with the metaphor of the ‘market’, it has never been made quite clear if market in our context is a metaphor for exchange or for competition. Likewise, it is not always clear what exactly has been commodified. While language, or a language, can

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possibly be looked at from the perspective of competition in a ‘language marketplace’, it is hardly a commodity in itself and hence it cannot be exchanged for anything. If at all, a language can be a ‘public good’, i.e. a good that is non-rivalrous in consumption and non-excludable (Haberland, 2011: 944; Coulmas, 2009: 39; Kaul et al., 1999: 3).

In a marketplace, a language can, metaphorically speaking, compete with other languages, but the real competition is between different speakers and their ability to use their linguistic capital in competition with that of other speakers. Hultgren is right in pointing out that merely regulating that market, i.e. a change in our dealing with languages, will not be enough to change the world in the right direction. Unfortunately, history has also shown us that the opposite approach of transferring the ownership of the productive means of society to some collective is not the panacea many expected it to be.

Therefore, we are left with the task of not only finding out what worries so many people and makes them think that the global role of English is at the root of certainly not all, but some, significant evils. In addition, we should find out what we can do about these worries—other than telling them that it all is only in their heads. The Greek philosopher Epictetus told us (*Encheiridion* 5) that what bothers people is not the real world (‘the things’) but what they think about the real world (‘their dogmas about the things’). He was a Stoic and had his own ideas of how to deal with our worries. Even if we endorse his basic observation, we may not agree with his ideas of how to deal with it.

Thus the central question is what exactly is wrong with an uneven and maybe, more than that, unjust global distribution of linguistic capital. It cannot be the mere fact of an uneven distribution, because any attempt at reaching a completely even distribution is not only unrealistic but might also create more injustice in the process of forcing it through.

Blaming the capitalist world system has become fashionable even in circles that would abhor association with Marxism. However, the capitalist world system is smarter than many of us would prefer to think. It is its minor lackeys who think that global monolingualism, or at least a regime with only one shared world language, is the most efficient solution to global communication issues. On the other hand, I agree that the capitalist world system should not be the agent that calls the shots. It should not be whatever it favours—monolingualism, dominance of one language or multilingualism—that prevails in the end.

*2. Who Owns the English Language?*

First of all, we should to ask ourselves what *exactly* is wrong with the present relative dominance of English. It has to be underlined here that while the dominance may be huge and without historical precedent, it is only relative. Even by the least conservative estimates, only just over 1 billion people in the world population can take part in communication in English and have access to discourses in English. That means that about 80% of the world's population have no access to what has been touted the single 'language of wider communication'. This is a fact we have to be reminded of again and again—English is not 'in every corner of the globe', to the extent that a globe has corners at all.

It is my impression (cf. Haberland 1989: 2011) that one of the factors that create the feeling of powerlessness for many people is the combination of the global dominance of English with the idea of ownership by speakers from those countries which Kachru (1985) called 'norm-providing' (later trivialized by some of his readers as the 'Inner Circle'). Many people can see the advantages of a shared means of communication (let us not forget that the discourse about global English mostly goes on in English, as has been pointed out e.g. by Daryai-Hansen 2008). Still, the same people resent that this has to take place on somebody else's linguistic premises. That this actually is a good idea has been advocated by those who want to reserve the right to define norms of communication in English for users from the 'norm-providing' countries in Kachru's sense—the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and, if I may add this to Kachru's list, Ireland. The point of Kachru's exercise was to acknowledge the right of norm-development to users of English from post-colonial contexts (cf. also Afendras *et al.* 1995). Kachru did not go any further than that: the majority of English users (including most scholars that publish academic papers in English, or local journalists writing in daily English newspapers in e.g. Japan), were still excluded by this inclusive move.

On the other hand, English users from the 'norm-providing countries' have stylized themselves as the indispensable wardens of successful communication in English.

The solution to these problems is the empowerment of the non-native speaker—not necessarily in the sense of slackening of norms (which could create communication problems in the same way as post-colonial accents often do at least subjectively) nor in the sense of acceptance of a

diversity of potentially no longer mutually understandable ‘Englishes’, but in the sense of that all users of the English can contribute to norm-building.

(Adherence to native speaker norms does not seem to guarantee mutual understanding. In a survey of transnationally mobile students’ perception of English in EMI contexts, the UK only scored second after the Netherlands on ‘ease of understanding’, cf. also Mortensen and Fabricius 2014: 206.)

### *3. The Decline of the Information Base of the Information Society*

The trend to favour using (and hence learning) the language of ‘maximal minimal’ competence in a population (Van Parijs 2011: 14) does not only work against knowledge being written down in other languages than English. It also helps erasure of knowledge recorded in other languages, because the spread of English and the decline in the spread of other languages makes knowledge not available in English less and less accessible due to the lack of receptive abilities in other languages. Journalists complain that they are getting more and more dependent on what is available in English, because fewer and fewer of them can read other languages. The problem here is not the English language of the accessible sources, but the ownership (hence control) of these media. For these owners, media in other languages are not necessarily competitors to be thwarted because they are not in English (maybe on the contrary, since they also are competitors of other English media they want to out-compete), but the point is of course that they often do not have an interest in their survival. This reduces humankind’s knowledge base even though this never directly was the intention.

Where governments accept the market model for knowledge and education, they do not subsidize e.g. Classical Studies any more, thus contributing to the disappearance of knowledge that is no longer accessible, because nobody can read the relevant texts any more.

In what seems to be developing into what some people see as the new digital world order, a number of paradoxes arise; one of them is that digital storage of many types of data seems to lead to a potential new era of forgetfulness. The digital phone system of my university not only stores the fact that I called a certain number in a hotel in Germany some time ago, it also knows the name of who was staying in that hotel room.

On the other hand, if I try to find out who taught a certain course at my university ten years ago and on which weekdays, I have no way of finding out like in the days of course catalogues. In those days, I could always have consulted that year's catalogue. Now all these data have ever only been available digitally and have been wiped out a long time ago, or are at least not accessible anymore.

Now what does this have to do with global English? On the surface, nothing. However, there is a unpremeditated synergy between global English and digitalization that pushes us into an age of oblivion, since—as Gu and Lee (2019: 401) beautifully put it, “language can and should be considered a means of accessing different linguistic spheres, rather than a competitor for space in educational and social systems”.

Therefore, if something is not accessible in English, fewer and fewer people have access to it (since according to Van Parijs' ‘maximin’ principle, fewer and fewer can be bothered to learn other languages than English). At the same time, digitally stored information disappears at a speed that makes the acid paper crisis appear like a minor bump in the history of maintaining data from the past.

However, how do we make sure that this access to different linguistic spheres and discourses is kept open? Probably somebody has to realize that not only access to culture but also return on capital is at stake.

#### *4. A Shared Language*

The idea of a shared world language is not new; Schleyer called his ‘Volapük’ exactly that: *Volapük* means ‘the world's language’ in Volapük (modelled on English *world* and *speak*; *-a* is the genitive suffix). Zamenhof thought of Esperanto as a world language in the sense that it would not replace but supplement the other languages. The Catalan sociolinguist Aracil stated, “Perquè tothom pugui comunicar-se amb tothom, n’hi prou que cadascú sàpiga només dos idioms: el seu proi i una *interlingua* comuna a tots” (1982: 37). Since Aracil's idea with a language ‘common to all’ is to circumvent the use of the languages of ‘parochial imperialisms’, it is clear that he is thinking of English as such a language (whatever English linguistic imperialism is, it is certainly not ‘parochial’). So while many could agree that a shared language is a good thing, the question seems to be whether it is a good thing that English is

this language. In principle, any shared language could be as good as any other, but there are arguments for and against every one of them nevertheless. Volapük ruled itself out by its idiosyncratic phonetics and grammar. Esperanto had its grammatical simplicity and morphological expressiveness going for it, but has never found the acceptance it deserved (the objection against a Eurocentric vocabulary never seems to have been raised by learners outside Europe). German had to fight the legacy of two lost wars and the Nazis' crimes. France was once the language of diplomacy and international organizations but could not keep its position. English had the backing of two successive imperialisms, the British and the American, in its favour, but is at the same time compromised by this connection. Moreover, economy comes in again: if one looks at figures for the decline of German as a language of science, one notices that in the beginning this decline was due to an absolute increase in publications in English from the USA. This increase led first to a relative, then an absolute decrease of publications in German (and that all happened already *between* WW I and II). So ultimately, the demise of German was due to increased funding and hence increased output quality of American universities.

##### *5. Globalism and Global English*

The prevailing ideology is that in the present world order, former enemies and friends have redefined themselves as competitors, as noted by a "globalization enthusiast" quoted in Coulmas (2005: 9). This is what Beck (2000) and Steger (2002) call the ideology of 'globalism' (cf. Haberland 2009). However, considering competition as something happening between languages is only a metaphor. It is economic interest and a competition about ownership and control not of languages but of profitable non-linguistic but language-related assets like media, teaching, publishing and entertainment we are witnessing. So in discussing global English, we should discuss ideologies, but see them on the background of 'ownership and control' in a concrete manner: who owns and who controls?

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