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POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ENGLISH AS A “GLOBAL” LANGUAGE¹

Abstract:

The under- (or non-) specification of terms such as globalization and neoliberalism in the sub-field of Language Policy leads to disputes and contrary positions on important issues where there might otherwise be greater agreement, or at least a basis for identifying common ground. This, in turn, could lead to a greater possibility of consilience, a term coined by biologist E.O. Wilson (1998), in which “principles from different disciplines...form a comprehensive theory” (Merriam-Webster dictionary). This article argues that Language Policy scholars’ lack of sophistication in political economy impacts their ability to critically address the effects of neoliberalism on language policies and practices in many parts of the world today, including in high-income countries. Furthermore, a greater understanding of how globalization interacts with national economies—and how those interactions may influence both the trajectory and fate of languages—might serve as a starting point for new research directions in the field of language policy and planning.

Keywords:

globalization ♦ neoliberalism ♦ language policy ♦ English as a Lingua Franca ♦ social justice

In this paper I consider how the under (or non-) specification of globalization and neoliberalism in the sub-field of Language Policy leads to disputes and contrary positions on important issues where there might otherwise be greater agreement, or at least a basis for identifying common ground, which could lead to a greater possibility of consilience, a term coined by biologist E.O. Wilson

(1998), in which “principles from different disciplines...form a comprehensive theory” (Merriam-Webster dictionary). I argue that Language Policy scholars’ lack of sophistication in political economy impacts their ability to critically address the effects of neoliberal economic policies on the status and utility of both global languages, such as English, and of non-global languages that could play an important role in local economic and social development in low-income countries.² Currently, there is not enough understanding of how the interests and values of transnational corporations, and the policies of states and international organizations that support those interests and values, may influence the trajectory and fate of languages.³ This is not to posit a deterministic model of cause/effect, but rather it is to say that, in the absence of clearly articulated views on political economy with empirical evidence to support those views, we may have fewer tools—that is, theories and associated research methods—with which to argue in support of the maintenance of minority languages and cultures, as well as societal multilingualism.

The Case of English as a “Global” Language

To illustrate my argument about under-specification, incompleteness, or problematic appropriation of ideas from various branches of political and economic theory in research in language policy, I consider competing views on the role of English in non-English dominant countries in the world today as either (1) a form of linguistic imperialism, or (2) a vehicle for social and economic mobility, or (3) a global lingua franca necessary for a global *demos* that could achieve global justice. I will discuss the work of three scholars whose published research has advanced arguments associated with these three positions, respectively: Robert Phillipson, Janina Brutt-Griffler, and Philippe Van Parijs.

The first problem with these views, or ways of thinking about English in these stark terms, is that they are not falsifiable positions except on mostly ad hoc grounds, often based on case studies that are then generalized (in the case of positions (1) and (2)), or based on abstract normative political theories (in the case of position (3)). Additionally, a number of constructs are used, such as social class, that are not defined, or are ideologically problematic (a well-attested

problem within variationist sociolinguists research⁴), and are usually not historically contextualized, leading to generalizations that are untenable. Finally, there is often a tendency to accept *doxa* uncritically, often reflexively. This combination of factors often results in arguments and claims that are easy to criticize as merely opinion or as unprovable generalizations. We need to provide more consistent and well-articulated arguments, bolstered with empirical evidence, if we are to have any hope of influencing public discourse and debates on social justice by explaining why cultural and linguistic diversity are integral to meaningful democratic participation of all citizens in a polity.

Position 1: English as an agent of linguistic imperialism

Robert Phillipson (1992) is most closely associated with this position, and his work has been influential in the language policy literature. Phillipson (2001, 187) argues that “English is integral to the globalization processes that characterize the contemporary post-cold-war phase of aggressive casino capitalism, economic restructuring, McDonaldisation and militarization on all continents...The dominance of English is also being consolidated in other dimensions of globalization such as military links (NATO, UN peace-keeping operations, the arms trade), and culture (Hollywood products, BBC World, CNN, MTV).” Phillipson acknowledges that “While there is no simple correlation between the use of English and either British culture or US corporate interests, these developments embody and entail hegemonising processes that tend to render the use of English “natural” and “normal” and to marginalise other languages” (191). There is undoubtedly a relation between the global economic, cultural, and political influence of the United States and the growth in the popularity of English in many countries today. Phillipson’s response, an alternative to this “diffusion of English paradigm,” is what he labels the “ecology of languages paradigm” (193), which “...builds on our linguistic and cultural diversity, attempts to ensure equality for speakers of all languages, and uses the human rights system as a counterweight to the ‘free’ market...To advance the cause of the Ecology of Languages requires efforts at all levels from the local to the global” (193). Whereas the conceptual apparatus for linguistic imperialism

depends on an analysis of the negative effects of Western economic and political Imperialism on mostly low-income countries, with putative bad effects on their thousands of languages under pressure from (neo)colonial languages, the construct “ecology of language” is undefined and abstract; how can “equality for speakers of all languages” be understood, let alone attained? What would such “equality” look like? Phillipson says that efforts are required “at all levels from the local to the global”; but if English has gained its great global power because of a complex set of developments in global expansion, especially in the last 60 years, what actions could be implemented to halt this expansion that are relevant for the protection of languages and for achieving “equality for speakers of all languages”? This seems to be conceptually, and programmatically, an untenable project.

Part of the problem is the weight Phillipson gives to English in his argument. It isn't really – or only – English, per se, that is the problem; Phillipson reveals as much in his own recitation of the components of the “ecology of languages paradigm” which calls, among other things, for “economic democratization...protection of local production and national sovereignties...[and] redistribution of the world's material resources” (193). This is a call for a fundamental reformation of the current world economic order (and not for finding an alternative to the role played by English in global economic activity), which, I believe, is highly relevant to the status of local languages; however, it appears in a long list of items that are not ordered or prioritized in any coherent way. Does this paradigm presuppose economic democratization as a *condition* for “equality for speakers of all languages,” or will regimes of language rights (a component of the “ecology of languages paradigm”) somehow be conducive to changes in political, and eventually, economic relations? We can't know, or even guess, how this paradigm might unfold, or be operationalized, as the nature of the relations between the various components described by Phillipson (193) is not discussed. As with normative political philosophers, Phillipson is presenting particular values that he believes are consonant with a “better world”; but his alternative paradigm to the “diffusion

of English” paradigm is not particularly coherent with regard to a discernable philosophical position or framework.

Position 2: English as a vehicle for social and economic mobility

Janina Brutt-Griffler has been a strong critic of Phillipson, particularly with regard to his supposed downplaying of the positive role that English can play in promoting social mobility in low-income countries in Africa and elsewhere. She argues (2005, 29), for example, ventriloquizing for two South African women—Mrs. L and Pamela—that “exclusion from high proficiency [in] English [is] a prime determinant of lack of access to wealth in the world they [Mrs. L and Pamela, indicative of poor black South Africans, generally] inhabit.” She criticizes those who support the teaching of mother tongues over English as being insensitive to the economic aspirations of oppressed and impoverished people as they seek to escape poverty with the aid of English. This argument has also been associated with supporters of the “English Only” movement in the United States and by proponents of “English First” in American public education (Pogge 2003). Brutt-Griffler (2002) argues that the denial of English-language-medium education helped maintain social and economic segregation in the former British colony Basutoland (Lesotho) during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and that this pattern persists in South Africa today. However, in a critique of Brutt-Griffler (2002), Pennycook (2004, 148) points out, “Part of the argument here about access hinges on whether we are looking at individual rights to English or whether we are looking at how access to English can alleviate poverty across a broader domain. It is perhaps disingenuous to argue for a need to deal with class, and then to argue in terms of individual access.” Further to the point that individual access to English does not correlate with poverty reduction that is class-related in low-income countries, Bruthiaux (2002) argues that for many of the world’s poor, English language education is “an outlandish irrelevance” and “talk of a role for English language education in facilitating the process of poverty reduction and a major allocation of public resources to that end is likely to prove misguided and wasteful” (292-293). Pennycook concludes that “...we need to distinguish very clearly between individually-oriented access

arguments about escape from poverty, and class-oriented arguments about large-scale poverty reduction” (148). In summary, Brutt-Griffler uses a case study to make a general claim about the relation between access to English and economic mobility in South Africa; yet, even as a case study, the evidence that English plays anything more than a trivial role in reducing poverty in South Africa is lacking.

Position 3: English as a global lingua franca necessary for a global *demos*

Of the three positions briefly described in this paper, the third one, represented in the work of Philippe Van Parijs, is perhaps the most ambitious and most coherent, if flawed, account. Van Parijs is a political theorist who has written extensively about the benefits of a lingua franca, such as English, in helping to promote social and economic justice globally. He argues (2000) that the promotion of the teaching and learning of English in low-income countries could help reduce out-migration of highly trained, English-speaking citizens, who flee in great numbers to the wealthier ‘knowledge economy’ countries. He argues that the reclamation of lost income and increased corporate taxes could be used for massive investment in English language teaching, leading to an increase in productivity and gross domestic product (GDP). Even more ambitiously, in his latest book, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* (2011), Van Parijs argues that we need a lingua franca in Europe and across the world because:

Its adoption and spreading creates and expands a transnational *demos*, by facilitating direct communication, live or online, without the cumbersome and expensive mediation of interpretation and translation. It enables not only the rich and the powerful, but also the poor and the powerless to communicate, debate, network, cooperate, lobby, demonstrate effectively across borders. This common *demos*...is a precondition for the effective pursuit of justice, and this fact provides the second fundamental reason why people committed to egalitarian global justice should not only welcome the spread of English as a lingua franca but see it as their duty to contribute to this spread in Europe and throughout the world (31).

Van Parijs is a native francophone from Belgium, fluent in English and a number of other languages, a world traveler who has certainly benefitted from his multilingual abilities. However, part of his plan for dramatically increasing the numbers of English-speakers globally includes massive subsidies from the “free-riding” Anglophone countries who benefit unfairly in a number of ways by the arbitrary “luck” of having been born in English-dominant (and wealthy) countries, such as the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. His argument for a global lingua franca necessary for the strengthening of global networks and institutions that could serve to advance global interests of economic justice, environmental sustainability, and the reduction of conflict is certainly appealing (if not original), as it could (at least, hypothetically) help move the world towards communication networks less tethered to ethnic and nationalistic identities and the myriad languages that reflect and constitute those identities. The most significant problem with the position of Van Parijs is his downplaying of the contradictions between the values and goals of economic neoliberalism, which disproportionately benefit the interests of wealthy nations, and the values and goals necessary to promote a meaningful “democratic world order” in which social and economic justice could *only* be feasible if the debilitating values and manifest negative effects of the current neoliberal global regime were reversed, or at least severely modified. A global lingua franca cannot overcome such contradictions. Another major weakness in Van Parijs’ argument is his somewhat idealized conception of language, a view that sees named languages as discrete vehicles for communication in which the symbolic/affiliational aspects can be abstracted out for particular and defined instrumental purposes (see Ives in press), and which has little to say about the matter of language varieties, code-mixing, pragmatics – in short – the complexity and limitations of language in interpersonal/intercultural communication. Beyond the fact that the language called English exists in myriad forms and varieties, many of which are not mutually intelligible, there is no reason to believe that a global lingua franca – and Van Parijs argues that English (presumably an idealized international variety that no one speaks) is currently and for the foreseeable future, the only candidate for this role – would be neutral with regard to the dominant political, economic, cultural and symbolic values

that gave rise to a particular, globally popular variety, in the first place (British, then American), at least for the foreseeable future. There is little guarantee that the interests of groups represented by spokespersons using a variety of English as a second or third language would be fairly heard, let alone acted upon, as if interests were unrelated to social positions in unequal power hierarchies. Furthermore, what would motivate the states, corporations, and institutions that have benefited from English-based information technology and communication systems, with their built-in ties with Western values and economic advantages, to “democratize” the world system by changing the “rules” that have benefitted them for so long, especially given the inability of institutional “referees” in global trade (such as the World Trade Organization) to level the playing field among historically unequal nations? The European Union has not been successful in developing policies to make the Eurozone function. If Europe cannot get its own economic house in order, why should we suppose that the 200+ countries in the world would work toward a common purpose, aided by greater access to a lingua franca, given the massive social and economic inequality that currently exists? The elaborate (and often impressive) argumentation and economic analyses Van Parijs provides to justify his pro-English as a lingua franca argument cannot overcome these fundamental, seemingly intractable obstacles to finding common ground and common purpose in a world in which everything has been, or will soon be, commodified, owned, priced, with the owners increasingly controlling decisions about economic inputs and outputs on a global scale in the service of their own economic interests. Yet, Van Parijs does provide a coherent and well-reasoned analysis that takes into account economic, political, social, and (to a limited degree) linguistic factors in an integrated way, and in this regard his work can be viewed as exemplary, and as a useful starting point for further discussions and research on the role of language(s) in the promotion of social justice on a global scale.

Liberalism and the Role of States in Protecting Language Minority Groups' Rights

Although the three positions briefly outlined in this paper appear to place English in somewhat incommensurate roles, i.e., as a language of oppression, a language of economic opportunity, and a language necessary for global democracy, I argue that the economic dimension of neoliberalism in the world system today and its role and relationships with flows of opportunities that might advance or retard the interests of differently positioned individuals in various contexts, globally, informs all of the positions discussed in this paper. At this point, skeptics might argue, "But the problem is with unrestrained capitalism, not with liberal political philosophy! Besides, what does political philosophy have to do with the status and viability of languages?" To address these questions, I evaluate the core tenets of orthodox liberalism and consider whether those tenets have any direct bearing on the rights claims of speakers of minority languages within modern liberal democracies for equal access to the same social goods available to majority language speakers. Following this brief discussion, I consider an alternative to orthodox liberalism—communitarianism—and explain how it differs from orthodox liberalism in its refusal to separate citizenship from one's identity as a member of an ethnolinguistic group.

If we look to orthodox political liberalism⁵ for guidance about whether language minority groups have legitimate rights claims to maintain their language(s) in the face of pressures from dominant, national, and/or official languages to assimilate linguistically, we do not find much encouragement, whether in the writings of Locke or Bentham, or of modern (re)interpreters of 18th- and 19th-century theorists, such as Rawls (1971).⁶ This is so because language is a *social* phenomenon, spoken and written by communities of people, and the core of liberal political philosophy is the essentialness of *individual* liberty and rights to satisfy the supposedly unquenchable acquisitive desires of individual human beings.⁷ However, as not all languages are equal in their social status, both within and across societies, with this inequality extending to individuals as members of language communities, individuals who speak primarily lower-

status languages or language varieties (usually non-national/non-dominant ones), may well be disadvantaged unless and until they acquire the higher-status language(s) spoken by other social/cultural groups, if they want to pursue their “acquisitive desires,” be they material or non-material in nature. The fact that language is mutable, that is, humans are able to learn other languages, given access and opportunity to do so, leads many supporters of modern orthodox liberalism to argue that minority languages (and their speakers) need no special protections, while non-mutable characteristics, such as ethnicity, race, and gender, may lead to overt discrimination against individuals as members of defined groups, and, therefore, may require extra protection in the form of civil and even constitutional enactments. Yet, learning a second, or third additional language is not always a realistic option, and it certainly is not easy or without costs (as Van Parijs correctly notes). Further, since within liberal political theory, the state should *not* favor one language over another, as that (according to Patten and Kymlicka (2003)) would constitute an impermissible abuse of government’s proper role of impartial protector of fundamental *individual* human rights for all citizens, the de facto, and usually de jure, privileged status of official / dominant / (inter)national languages unfairly provides an advantage to those who acquire it natively and who are able to be educated in it. Although supporters of modern liberalism, such as Patten and Kymlicka (2003, 13), argue that “[A] common national language helps to promote a common civic identity without denying the ‘fact of reasonable pluralism’ or the ‘liberal commitment to neutrality regarding conceptions of the good life’,” this is more of a theoretical position than an empirical statement (as we will see in the following paragraph). In this regard, the role of a lingua franca in Van Parijs’ conception of a global *demos* is analogous to the role of a national language in modern liberal democracies; yet, the unwarranted belief in the neutrality of the state with regard to languages within its jurisdiction (including colonial languages) applies equally to warrants on the neutrality of a global lingua franca/s within international bodies, with regard to their particular and interested values and institutionalized systems of governance and decision-making.

Critics of orthodox liberalism, many of whom identify with the label of communitarianism, do not view national/official languages as neutral instrumentalities that do not lessen the status or viability of multilingualism in which 'other' languages are recognized and afforded space in public domains, for example, to access public services and other public goods. These critics have a problem with the strict separation of citizenship and identity and the view that "...personal *autonomy*—based on the political rights attributable to citizenship—always takes precedence over personal (and collective) *identity* and the widely differing ways of life which constitute the latter" (May 2001, 103). Philosopher Charles Taylor (1994, 33-34) argues that identity "is who we are, 'where we're coming from'". As such, it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinion and aspirations make sense." Sociolinguist Stephen May (2001, 104) points out that the problem with orthodox liberal normative philosophy is that proponents believe in the ethnic neutrality of the state: "In other words, for orthodox liberals, the civic realm of the nation-state is a forum in which ethnicity does not (and *should* not) feature. However...ethnicity is *never* absent from the civic realm. Rather, the civic realm represents the particular (although not necessarily exclusive) *communal* interests and values of the dominant ethnies *as if* these values were held by all." Or, in Charles Taylor's (1994, 43-44) words, the "supposedly neutral set of difference-blind principles [that constitute the liberal] politics of equal dignity is in fact a reflection of one hegemonic culture...[it is] a particularism masquerading as the universal." May (2001) argues that at least some minority languages and their communities of speakers merit the same sorts of language rights and prerogatives afforded to speakers of the majority / dominant / (inter)national language, since many, but not all, of those who speak a minority language would find it difficult—if not impossible—to have the means to "...lead a good life, in having those things that a good life contains" (Kymlicka 1989, 10) if they were detached from the cultural moorings that provide an important—but not exclusive—means (through *their* language and the cultural meanings made available through it) for making sense of the world and their place in it. Such connections, critics of orthodox liberalism argue, are *requirements* for meaningful participation in the polity for many, though not all, members of minority communities. Even Philippe Van Parijs

(2011, 119) argues that “parity of esteem,” or equal respect for people’s collective identities, “...constitut[es] an important aspect of what matters for a society to be just,” even though he extols the many benefits of a global lingua franca (see my comments above on this point).

To summarize, critics of orthodox political liberalism argue that the state is not neutral with regard to language policy, and this has some negative consequences; it demonstrably favors usually one language as the national language through a variety of institutional, political, and legal policies and practices. In general, the national language, which may or may not be officially recognized as such, and which is not always the language of the numerical majority in the country, is the predominant medium of instruction in schooling, in the courts and legislatures, the media, public services, entertainment, and so on. The process by which a language becomes the national language very often involves the marginalization, suppression, and restriction of other languages (see Ricento 1998 on the situation in the US), along with the construction of a national identity (Ricento 2003). In other words, illiberal means have often been used to impose a particular language as the national language⁸, and attempts to expand domains for other languages in public life, for example through provision of bilingual ballots, bilingual education, and access to services in “other” languages, have frequently, and ironically, been viewed as being ‘illiberal’ (i.e., they favor one group’s interests over those of other groups’ interests), and contrary to the “natural” order of things, linguistically-speaking, when in fact there is or was nothing at all natural about how most national languages came to enjoy their current privileged societal status in the first place.⁹ These empirical facts and findings should not be removed from debates on normative political philosophy; indeed, history and politics should be taken fully into account and inform normative theory-making if these theories are to have usefulness in understanding the world as it is, as well as providing feasible means for achieving justice (Honig 1993; Honig and Stears 2011).

Globalization and English

When we look at English in its global role, the economic dimension—and not the identity aspect—is what determines its value and status in countries with aspirations to participate in the knowledge economy. While proficiency in English, whether as a first, second, or third language, *may* provide an advantage for careers and employment in certain sectors of the global economy, the number of available jobs and the number of jobs being created that require significant knowledge of English is very, very small compared to the numbers of workers seeking jobs world-wide. While there are many factors that impact labor markets, it is possible to look at sectors of the economy and investment patterns, and from the data make informed judgments about the relative values of languages within identified employment sectors. We can also discern correlations between capital investments and the relative presence of particular educational and linguistic resources, globally. Even a cursory examination of one economic sector—the knowledge economy—reveals the ways in which knowledge of certain “world” languages, and especially English, provides a competitive advantage, but only if coupled with appropriate educational credentials (Grin et al. 2010).

However, before examining data on jobs, investment, and the role of lingua francas in knowledge-economy employment, we should note that it would be wrong to conclude that what is being described here is simply the efficient operation of a self-equilibrating global market, in which (in classic market economic terms), price determines everything. No such market exists, and has probably never existed in a global context, despite claims made by (neo)liberal economists to the contrary. There are many ways in which decisions about the production, distribution, and, crucially, prices of goods and services are influenced, and often controlled, by the political class in those countries with the most to gain—and lose—in global commerce of all types. Institutions with the ability to lend money, determine interest rates on loans and terms of lending (often referred to as conditionality in the economics literature), are generally controlled by nations with the most wealth, and the means to protect it (Harvey 2005; Stiglitz 2007). The agendas and policies of the International Monetary

Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, for example, are determined largely by self-interested governments of the original G-7¹⁰ countries, which in turn are greatly influenced by the largest banks and corporations, all of whom seek to maximize their self-interest when it comes to investment and trade policies. The jobs in low-income countries are disproportionately very low-wage jobs for which only minimal competence – if any – in English is required. In those cases in which a high degree of English is required, as with Call Centers in India (Sonntag 2009) and elsewhere, educated workers who also happen to speak, or can master, a variety of English acceptable to American consumers (Blommaert 2009) will have an advantage over those who don't speak this variety of English. As we will see below, a person with a high level of English literacy and tertiary educational attainment has an advantage in competing for knowledge economy jobs in the *formal* economy compared to a person with neither English literacy nor a tertiary level of education; however, given the relatively small numbers of these jobs available, globally, and the relatively low numbers of persons who meet these minimal requirements, the bald claim that English is a means to social mobility, let alone necessary to promote global justice—even in the long run—while not acknowledging and addressing the underlying dynamics of transnational capitalism, the role of high-income states in maintaining and benefitting by the current system, and the effects on employment and migration patterns that often work against the sustainable development of local economies, especially in low-income countries, cannot be justified.

Neoliberalism and Work

Castells (2006, 58) estimates that only about 200 million of the world's [formal] workforce of three billion workers (about 7%) find work through the 53,000 or so Multinational Corporations and their related networks; yet this workforce is responsible for 40% of global GDP, and two-thirds of world trade (Williams 2010, 50). Lingua francas are frequently used in these companies, regardless of their location, and English is by far the most common. Ammon (1995) reports that the German Chambers of Commerce recommend the use of English as the sole language of communication for transactions with 64 countries; German is

recommended as a co-language for 25 countries and Spanish for 17. These data suggest that English is a global lingua franca for players in the knowledge economy, and English, French, German, and Spanish are European lingua francas. Given that trade involving Japan, the US, and Europe accounted for 50% of world GDP in 2000, the special status of these languages appears to be justified.

Again, we can turn to the processes of neoliberalism and their globalized effects to account for the movement of skilled labor to countries whose state or national language is English or to companies who use English as the primary language of their activities. European mergers and acquisitions exceeded \$1 trillion during 2005 (Williams 2010, 28). The US alone accounted for another \$1.16 trillion in the value of mergers and acquisitions in 2005, followed by the UK (\$305 billion)(Williams 2010, 28). Many of these mergers involved technology companies. These new mega-companies have no obligation to retain their headquarters in the “home” country and they increasingly tend to move to countries with the most favorable corporate taxation regimes (Williams 2010, 30) (for example, 600 American companies are in Ireland employing 100,000 people). In 2010, the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) consisting of 30 member countries with combined corporate income tax rates significantly lower than the US, included Ireland (12.5%), Iceland (15%), Switzerland (21%), Denmark (25%), Finland (26%), Sweden (26%), Norway (28%), the UK (28%); by comparison, the US rate was 39%, well above the OECD average rate of 25.5%. Clearly, English is the dominant language in technology and the knowledge economy, and these countries have English either as the national language or a language spoken by high percentages of the relevant workforce. The combination of favorable corporate tax policies, a highly developed infrastructure, a highly educated workforce, and one that speaks English helps perpetuate and increase disparities between rich and poor countries by attracting corporations, beholden to shareholders’ interests, to these rich countries.

Only the countries that invest massively in education and research can appropriate the foreign technologies necessary to catch up with the rich countries. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development claims that the poorer countries are the origin of only 8.4% of the spending on R&D in the world, with 97% of this being in Asia.¹¹ Therefore, foreign companies are not likely to locate in these countries, but rather will locate their head offices with high-paying jobs in the rich industrialized countries. As the London Times (2006) noted: "This should be a major concern since what we are witnessing is a consolidation of the global division of labor. The collusion between the states of the developed countries and multinationals in the various trade negotiations works against the poorer countries. It is estimated that the Doha round of trade talks will benefit the rich countries by \$80 billion, and the developing countries by \$16 billion, while the poor countries will lose" (*Times*, August 11th, 2006; cited in Williams 2010, 34).

As David Harvey (2005, 176) puts it: "Neoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities."¹² Commensurate with the current and growing concentration of economic power in a relatively small number of transnational corporations and banks, a relatively few "world" languages serve the economic interests of these entities, even though those in the world's formal workforce that benefit are disproportionately the most highly educated people from the richest countries. However, even in Europe, only about 4.5 million European citizens with tertiary level qualifications are mobile across state boundaries within Europe, which is only about 1.4% of the total population (Williams 2010, 50). The massive inequalities in global wealth occur not because not enough people speak English or some other language. Patterns of investment reveal the roles different countries play in those aspects of their economies that are involved in the global production and sale of goods and services. Thus, many of the poorest countries play a very particular and narrow role in the global system, which is to provide cheap labor and natural resources to richer countries, to be used in the manufacture of finished goods, with rich countries blocking the export by poorer countries of locally manufactured products, such as textiles, through the

protectionist policies of the wealthy countries (see Stiglitz 2007 for an extended discussion). This has the effect of retarding local economic development, as targeted investments are made by the rich countries for the benefit of rich countries' short-term economic gains, with no consideration of the long-term economic or social sustainability for the less powerful nation, which would likely entail the development and use of local resources, including local/regional languages, and some level of literacy in those languages, necessary for local micro-economic projects (Bruthiaux 2002; Batibo 2009).¹³

The belief that expanding access to English, or providing low-paying, temporary work to poor people will contribute to an "economic takeoff" (Rostow 1963) has been discredited many times over. From a macro-economic perspective, Macpherson (1973/2012, 7) notes that "[T]he claim that the capitalist market economy maximizes individual utilities has already been pretty well destroyed by twentieth-century economists, although few political theorists seem to realize this." However, even in low-income countries, there are class divisions, and therefore a relatively small number of socially advantaged citizens will benefit from neoliberal policies, because they have access to the "right" education (we can see this, for example, in India and South Africa, as discussed in Ricento 2010) and they have political power, or access to it. Despite efforts by many states to safeguard and promote national and regional languages (Ricento 2007), through constitutional and other legal provisions, transnational economic factors diminish the power and authority of states to compete globally using primarily national and regional language resources. This tends to strengthen the attractiveness and influence of global lingua francas, such as English, but the use of a global lingua franca does not necessarily lead to broad-based social or economic development, except in those countries that already possess highly developed educational and economic infrastructures. Attempts by low-income states to develop language policies to support education in local languages, based on principles of universal language rights, or because they have been given official recognition and status, e.g., as with the nine African languages recognized in the South African Constitution, are difficult to implement as a result of the legacy of colonialism, coupled with the effects of transnational

economic forces. This is because the relatively small number of people who already speak and have literacy in the preferred “global” language(s), and have advanced educational credentials and training, will not need any more rights, and those who speak the “wrong” language and lack appropriate education in the colonial language will not benefit by the granting of such language rights and protections.

The Overall Picture with Regard to Language Rights and Language Policy

Although inequalities between languages would still exist irrespective of political domination or social stratification (Hymes 1985, vii), the ways in which inequalities evolve and are maintained can be analyzed by looking at the historical record (see Ricento, 2010, for elaborated case studies), and especially by considering how prevailing models of development work against the ending of poverty, in part, by under-valuing and under-utilizing local cultural and linguistic resources in low-income countries (Romaine 2009). I have suggested that the preference for English as a global lingua franca, especially over the past half century, is conditioned by and correlates with processes of economic globalization and expansion of the digitalized knowledge economy, which greatly, and disproportionately, benefit some workers in some sectors of the formal economy in certain geographical regions, but mostly benefits the corporations which employ those workers.¹⁴ This preference has a secondary effect on the utility of local/non-dominant languages in local and regional economic development that, in the long run, will influence the status and viability of non-dominant languages in those societies. These effects are especially pronounced in the most linguistically diverse countries, a large proportion of which are in Africa (Romaine 2009, 133).

At this point in history, it is the case that knowledge of certain varieties of English, coupled with particular skill sets obtainable only through high levels of education generally not universally accessible, is likely to enhance the social mobility of some individuals. States that have English as the dominant/national language, and those relatively wealthy states that are able to provide affordable access to high-quality English language learning, and which have highly

educated workers with skills in demand in knowledge economy-related services, will be relatively advantaged compared to workers in states lacking in both. There definitely is a brain drain, but mostly of well-trained people from relatively high-income countries moving to other higher-income countries, with the greatest percentage of movement of this select population from one European country to another, and from Europe and other parts of the world to North America.¹⁵ Certainly, English has value for many of these mobile individuals; however, I have tried to demonstrate that English is not the inherent hegemon, nor the de facto oppressor, nor the ticket to social or economic mobility, nor the crucial factor in promoting a global *demos* that it is claimed to be, to varying degrees, by the scholars whose positions I have described in this paper (Phillipson, Brutt-Griffler, and Van Parijs, respectively). All of these scholars make valuable contributions to our understanding of how language(s) play important roles in social, political, and economic development in various contexts. What is missing, I have argued, is an over-arching framework to account for English both as a means of social mobility *and* as an inhibitor of local development, especially in low-income countries, which can be accounted for through critical analysis of neoliberal economic policy and its attendant values, goals, and effects on the status, learning, and usefulness of languages, including in sectors of the knowledge economy. The purpose of this paper is to serve as a starting point for new research directions in the field of language policy and planning, in which economic systems and processes, in interaction with national and global political systems and processes, inform analysis of the status, utility, value, and long-term viability of minority languages, and their community of speakers, and which can provide evidence that economic and social development are aided by investment in local cultural and linguistic resources, especially in those low-income countries, many of which are in Africa, that have the greatest amount of linguistic diversity (Romaine 2009, 133), and some of the highest levels of poverty.

Editors' Note: A link to the talk upon which this essay is based, from April 15, 2012, is available [here](#).

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Notes

- ¹ I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments, criticisms, and suggestions of Peter Ives and Jeff Bale on earlier drafts of this paper; the author, however, is solely responsible for the content and views expressed.
- ² In a similar vein, Bruthiaux (2008) notes that "...the recent applied linguistics literature on globalization shows that most applied linguists have little to say regarding its economic dimension" (19). He goes on to argue that "...the reluctance of many applied linguists to consider the economic dimension of globalization and the tendency for discussions of that dimension to be cursory and one-sided severely limit the contribution the field might make to a key contemporary debate" (20).
- ³ The fact that languages are always changing, and that most languages that have ever existed are now "extinct," even though language itself perseveres, is not in question. Rather, the question is: How can we understand the social, economic, and political factors and forces that lead to/accelerate language attrition and obsolescence apart from the "natural" internally-motivated linguistic processes which lead to syntactic, morphological, and semantic changes within named languages over time? And how do these factors correlate with the socio-economic status and prospects of marginalized peoples with little or no political power or access to power, and therefore, with few if any options or choices as to what language(s) they will be required to learn, and which one(s) they will be forced to give up?
- ⁴ Williams (1992), for example, argues that sociolinguistics is based on outmoded and ideologically questionable social theory which views society as consisting of rational subjects manipulating language, and sees language as reflecting society within a process of consensus-building.
- ⁵ This leaves aside, for the moment, the ways in which industrialized capitalism is inconsistent with many—but not all—of the stipulations of 18th-century versions of liberal political theory, along with 19th-century (re)formulations; see, e.g., Macpherson (1973/2012) who argues that "...the liberal-democratic

society is a capitalist market society, and that...by its very nature compels a continual net transfer of part of the power of some men to others, thus diminishing rather than maximizing the equal individual freedom to use and develop one's natural capacities which is claimed" (10-11).

- ⁶ However, see Kymlicka (1989) who argues that Rawls' framework has been misconstrued and is not incompatible with communitarian or even leftist conceptions of justice.
- ⁷ See however Taylor (2006, 53) who demonstrates the vacuousness of Rational Choice theory in which "everything is to be explained in terms of fundamental, unstructured, competing desires."
- ⁸ Williams (2005, 25) notes, and not in a critical way, that "the circumstances in which liberal thought is possible have been created in part by actions that violate liberal ideals." Although this may pose a problem for many liberals, it is openly acknowledged by political theorists who make the case for "realism" in political theorizing.
- ⁹ There is a tendency in the normative political philosophy literature to accept "national" languages as necessary, inevitable, even natural. My point here is that the processes by which a language becomes the "national" language has generally co-occurred with processes of "othering" particular ethnic/racial/national/religious groups along with their languages, so that inequalities become "normalized," eventually institutionalized, with long-term social problems and tensions that are not resolved (see Ricento (under review) on the Canadian situation).
- ¹⁰ Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, United States.
- ¹¹ These data were reported by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and are cited in Williams (2010, 33).
- ¹² Harvey argues that the human rights movements over the past 30 years fit well within the trajectory of neoliberalization: "Undoubtedly, the neoliberal insistence upon the individual as the foundational element in political-economic life opens the door to individual rights activism. But by focusing

on those rights rather than on the creation or recreation of substantive and open democratic governance structures, the opposition cultivates methods that cannot escape the neoliberal frame” (2005, 176).

- ¹³ As Neville Alexander (2009, 62), commenting on the South African context, observes: “Unless African languages are given market value, i.e., unless their instrumentality for the processes of production, exchange and distribution is enhanced, no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high-status functions and, thus, eventual escape from the dominance and the hegemony of English (or French or Portuguese where these are the relevant postcolonial European languages).”
- ¹⁴ This more recent history, of course, is not unconnected to the much longer history of colonialism and its attendant economic policies and practices.
- ¹⁵ According to Williams (2010, 43), “...there are nearly 2 million immigrants from the EU in each of Canada, Australia, France and Germany, and over 4.5 million in the USA,” and of those European-born living in the USA, almost 50% have tertiary level qualifications. More than 440,000 foreign-born persons in the USA hold a PhD, which is about 25% of the total number of PhDs. in the country, while In Australia and Canada, the percentage of foreign-born PhDs. is 45% and 54%, respectively (46).