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# Ambivalent English: What We Talk About When We Think We Talk About Language

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## *Abstract*

The ambivalence of English manifests itself in the discourses that surround it. English may be a resource and consume resources; it empowers and oppresses. The dichotomous discussion around the usefulness or dangers of English as a “global” or “world” language erases problematizations of the layered societal implications of English in localised contexts. English needs to be analysed not (only) as a language but (also) as the ideologies and societal structures intertwined with it. We examine English in two higher education contexts. Our first case deals with the so-called Accent Reduction courses offered for international students in US universities. The second one analyses English as a language political catalyst in a nation state context. We conclude with a discussion of the nativist and nation-state-centred role of global English. We argue that to discuss English as a language oversimplifies the societal implications of the debate. When we think we talk about English, we are, in fact, talking about the various societal, political, economic, cultural and historical power dynamics that accompany it.

Keywords: English; internationalisation of higher education; nation-state centeredness; language as societal structure; language as ideology

## *1. Introduction: From Looking at English to Beyond English*

The Special Issue, invited and edited by Anna Kristina Hultgren, is a welcome addition to the debate on Global English as an opportunity or threat, expanding the discussion outside that dichotomy. Hultgren begins by framing the debate in terms of metaphors that have been introduced as something of a reaction to the apparently neutral or even benevolent lingua franca English; that of the all-devouring “Tyrannosaurus Rex” (Swales 1997); the multi-headed “Hydra” (Rapatahana & Bunce 2012); the “Trojan Horse” smuggling in imperialism or social status (Cooke 2012), a Cuckoo in the nest or European languages (Phillipson 2006), a Killer language (Skutnabb-Kangas 2003), or the monstrous “Lingua Frankensteinia” (Phillipson 2008).

Hultgren’s English as “red herring”, i.e. English as deviating away from the more topical societal issues of power and (in)equality, takes the

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debate further. It proposes much the same question as we do here, paraphrasing Haruki Murakami's 2007 memoir *What I talk about when I talk about running*. We will argue in this paper that it is counterproductive to talk about English, but instead, we should take our eyes off the language and look at the societal, cultural, political, economic, and knowledge structures that all too often remain invisible when our focus is primarily on language. While we want to extend our view beyond English, we are still aware of the fact that we are talking *particularly* about English, not just any language.

We want to poke the idea of English as “global” or “international” from the point of view of discussing its very institutionally localised and contextualised nature. This is not new as such: Global English in one setting is never the same as Global English in another, as discussed for instance by Pennycook (2007) from the perspective of localised uses of English, and his attempt at distancing himself from the two polarities of English as “imperial” and “pluralist”. What we particularly want to do is specifically problematize the situations where English is localised in an institutional rather than geographical sense; i.e. within the societal institution of higher education (Välmaa 2019). For us, this localisation of English is thus structural, always tied to institutionally localised interests and ideologies.

Hultgren's argument about the significance of socioeconomic factors is very relevant empirically, but it is also a more complex epistemological question: how do we know what we know about English, if we focus in our research only on particular kind of English? In this article, we want to discuss specifically the problematics of the institutional setting of (higher) education, where the dynamics of English and “other” languages, or “native” English and “non-native” English help unpack political issues that we are actually talking about when we think we talk about English. What are the historically, societally and materially contingent ways that make English either a benevolent or predatory (or anything between or outside this dichotomy) “global” language, or a catalyst language with very “local” implications? What are the material implications of analysing English in this way? What does global English mean in locally institutional contexts? Whose English are we talking about and with what political consequences?

## *2. Ambivalent English*

English is a resource and it consumes resources; it empowers and is hegemonic. While it may be construed as predatory, its empowering role has been acknowledged in post-colonial settings (Adejunmobi 2004). Access to English can mean social advancement—or not. No access to English may mean social or individual disadvantage—or not. (For a discussion of social history of English, see Leith 2005). A lot of the debate around global English circulates dichotomously around the usefulness or dangers of English as a “global” or “world” language, while the societal implications of worldwide use of English in localised contexts has layered and contingent links to the institutions it is used in. Observed as a language, English appears ambivalent, and that is why we need to analyse it not (only) as a language but (also) as constituting ideologies and societal structures.

English is not a zero sum language in our context, the societal institution of higher education. Academic communities both have to and opt to use English in settings that are often labelled as “international”, while they are simultaneously very local. International students and staff need to use English but also recognize its need in international cooperation. A research meeting with seven colleagues, originally coming from four different countries, with four different first languages, can be labelled as “international” and “local” at the same time, depending on who is asking. Higher education policies in Western countries favour (and financially reward in different ways) politics of “internationalisation”, which has made visible the blurriness of the whole category of international (see Saarinen et al 2016): who is “international” in the first place? When do you stop being “international”? The paradox of internationalisation (Haberland & Preisler 2015) is that it can lead both to an increased diversity of perspectives and a narrowing Westernisation and Anglicisation of higher education at the same time (see also Adriansen 2020).

In our paper, the main tension and source of this ambivalence comes from the increased understanding of the role of individual and societal multilingualism and multiculturalism on one hand, and increased political populism that is often fuelled by the criticism of globalisation and the same multilingualism and multiculturalism (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, 38) on the other. Thus, English acts as a catalyst that

makes visible political and ideological conflicts on an individual and societal level.

We look at two specific cases of this ambivalence. In the first case, English as a locally (USA) hegemonic language is naturalized into a fictional standard that international students are represented as needing to adhere to in order to be more “understandable”, while at the same time these courses, while racializing the students, turn what is essentially a racist structure into an individual problem. In our second case, English acts as a language political catalyst where it is simultaneously presented as a threat to the national languages (particularly Finnish) and, coincidentally, as a convenient ally to pro-Finnish populists, as it can be used as a handy straw man for nativist populist (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017) fears.

With these two examples, we want to challenge the understanding that language is just language. This is particularly true of English; its global position means it will inevitably have an effect on the dynamics of other languages around it, and by having an effect on languages, we in fact mean the speakers of those languages. English should thus not be analysed on its own, but in relation to the speakers and other languages in the society. A more nuanced analysis of English in what is often termed “marginal” (i.e. non-Western, non-Anglophone, peripheral) contexts is called for (for an interesting example, see for instance Bolander 2016 on the role of English with respect to Tajik, Russian and Shugni in Khorog, Tajikistan, or Gilmetdinova & Malova 2018 on English, Russian and Tatar in Tatarstan).

### *3. Unfocussing on English*

English, in all its ambivalence in the discussion on internationalisation, is a terrific magnet. It pulls our attention to it, like any object with a huge mass. The paradox, obviously, is that while we want to look beyond it, we also contribute to its magnetism. The above discussion on ambivalence of English reflects our attempt to understand what is behind or beyond it. Next, we describe our challenge of methodologically *unfocussing* our gaze from language—in this case English—in order to see beyond it.

We as researchers have been taught throughout our training and careers to consider focus in research to be of paramount importance. We

need to focus on a topic, clarify our questions, collect our data in a way that fits the frame, and answer our questions. On the other hand, we also know that the realities of research are often messier (see Enns-Kananen, Saarinen & Sivunen 2018). The benefit and problem of all methods is that they enable us to look directly at what we want to look at, obviously also making us miss what we do not look at. Thus, we need methodologies that help take our eyes OFF the focus; a map and a compass that keeps us OFF the trodden path and helps us understand that thing we only see from the corner of our eye. A particular kind of unfocus has been found to have benefits for creativity of focus group work (Franz 2011). In this article, we cannot go very far in redoing these methodologies, but we want to keep in mind Flyvbjerg's (2006) question as he discusses the usefulness of case studies, asking, "what is this actually a case of". In this vein, we want to discuss our cases from the perspective of "what are we actually talking about when we (think) we talk about English".

We will next move on to discuss two examples from our previous research on English accents of international students as proxies for hierarchizing them (Enns-Kananen, Halonen & Saarinen forthcoming) and English as local catalyst for globally emerging neo-nationalist language dynamics (Saarinen forthcoming).

#### *4. Two Cases of English Beyond English*

##### *4.1. "White English" as racial hierarchization*

To illustrate what we might be talking about when we think we talk about English, we will first use the case of so-called Accent Reduction/Accent Modification (AR/AM) courses. AR/AM courses are commonly offered to "international" (usually non-English L1 speaking) professionals (Blommaert 2009; Ramjattan 2019) and students at US higher education institutions (Enns-Kananen, Halonen & Saarinen in review).

In a study of 26 AR/AM course descriptions and websites from US universities, we analyzed the ways in which these courses were framed in language ideological terms and what kinds of hierarchizations of international students these courses produced. International students are offered these courses on a voluntary basis, in order to modify their accents and with the promise of "increasing their intelligibility" or help

them to better succeed in the labour market or in their studies. However, students have often already had to demonstrate high-level English skills for instance with a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test. Thus, the existence of these courses is something of a paradox, as students with demonstrated high language skills are required to modify their accents with intelligibility arguments. (Ennser-Kananen & al. forthcoming.)

Inspired by Flyvbjerg (2006), we ask: what are these courses actually a case of? While the courses are in principle offered to anyone wishing to modify their accent, the way they are introduced in their websites implies “international”, “foreign” and “non-native”. We will here focus particularly on international students and their consequent hierarchization as a consequence of their depiction in these courses.

The AR/AM course descriptions usually claim to support the need and desire of English-L2-speaking international students to be socially and academically successful. In our study (Ennser-Kananen & al. forthcoming), however, we argue that such claims cannot be linguistically substantiated. For instance, there is no evidence whatsoever, that AR/AM courses would live up to their promise of the speakers’ professional or academic advancement and social integration. More importantly, the ways in which they perceive language and accent are outdated if not inaccurate and actually detrimental to language learning. Most importantly though, the existence of these courses is puzzling, to say the least, considering that they target students who have already successfully completed advanced-level English courses. If students have already been vetted in this way, and if they are understood enough to be described as having a “foreign accent” (i.e. understood well enough to be judged against some imaginary English ideal), it must be that they are understood enough.

What, then, is the actual point of AR/AM courses, if it is not about the language and comprehensibility skills they claim to develop? We suggest that rather than language or accent, what fuels these courses and oftentimes what stands the way of non-white students’ success, are in fact deficit perspectives on racialized students’ linguistic practices, in other words, racism inherent in the US higher education system.

Using language (or accent) as proxy for race has a long tradition (Flores & Rosa, 2015a), some of which has been addressed by scholars who work within the area of raciolinguistics. For instance, Jonathan Rosa

(2016) explains in his article challenging the notion of “languagelessness” of racialized groups, specifically US Latina/os:

[S]tandardized American English should be conceptualized as a raciolinguistic ideology that aligns normative whiteness, legitimate Americanness, and imagined ideal English (Flores and Rosa 2015). This framework helps us to understand how some white people who deviate from standardized English linguistic norms are able to ascend to the highest societal ranks (e.g., George W. Bush and the U.S. presidency), while other racialized persons’ apparent production of standardized linguistic forms can be stigmatized as language-deficient. (Para 6)

Not only have speakers and communities been stigmatized by such ideologies, these oppressive dynamics have undergirded the exclusion, enslavement, and eradication of whole (for instance Indigenous) populations who were constructed as linguistically deficient, a notion that to this day permeates colonial as well as neoliberal efforts of governing (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Martin Rojo & Del Percio, 2019). A key part of these processes is upholding of normative whiteness, which has been documented in many aspects of English learning and teaching, and this is what the AR / AM courses do by promoting a view of a particular kind of “Standard” American English and native speakerism. For instance, white English teachers have been found to be considered more competent and desirable in a variety of higher education and other TESOL contexts (e.g., Japan: Rivers & Ross, 2013; Southeast Asia: Ruecker & Ives, 2014). In these contexts, normative whiteness is typically entangled with language ideologies (e.g. native speakerism) among other things, so that the underlying racialization and racism are not always obvious at first glance.

Flores and Rosa’s concept of the “white listening subject” is helpful in uncovering and understanding raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015a, 2015b). Based on normative white language ideologies, this white listening subject—a person, an institution, a curriculum, or a test, for instance—will perceive non-white language and accent as deficient, regardless of their linguistic characteristics. In a different context but following similar lines of thought, Martin Rojo and Del Percio (2019) draw on Foucault’s (1978), concept of “grids of intelligibility” to explain how linguistic deviance is constructed to benefit colonial and/or nation-building and neoliberal processes of governmentality.

Such attention to what lies behind alleged linguistic arguments is particularly relevant in the context of higher education, where English



proficiency (or what is behind it) has become a powerful (overt and covert) criterion for academic and professional advancement. In all, if we learn to look beyond not merely at the phenomena we study, such as AR/AM courses, we may learn to see them as cases of locally manifest societal power dynamics rather than as cases of linguistic desires and needs.

#### *4.2. English as catalyst for and indicator of politics outside the scope of English*

Our second case looks into English as a catalyst for new nationalist political discourses in Finland, and is based on a recent analysis by the second author (Saarinen forthcoming). English is a major Lingua Franca in European higher education. Non-Anglophone countries provide English language programmes, and particularly in the Nordic context, English language programmes seem to be a proxy for internationalisation (Saarinen & Taalas 2017; Saarinen & Rontu 2018).

Finnish language policy has traditionally been energized by the tension between Finnish and Swedish, the two national languages. Particularly the role of Swedish as compulsory language in all levels of education has been a source of debate and criticism that has received its fuel from political, economic, historical and social sources in turn (Ihalainen & al. 2011). The equally compulsory role of Finnish has received practically no attention in the debate.

English, in turn, has been received in relatively neutral or positive terms in Finland (Leppänen & al. 2011), and particularly in higher education its role has been practically uncontested until the turn of 2010s, making it in some ways “the third domestic” language also in higher education (Lindström & Sylvén 2014; Saarinen & Rontu 2018). Internationalisation of higher education has been operationalised in Finland much in terms of English language programmes since the 1990s first in the form of rewarding higher education institutions and then in the form of political encouragement backed with economic arguments (Saarinen 2014). Around 2010, however, the tide seemed to turn on English, as several complaints and parliamentary questions were presented by students who were not able to conduct their studies in the national languages.

Since then, the role and use of English has been criticized increasingly particularly in the higher education sector, but only a 2018 statement by the Finnish Language Board (*Suomen kielen lautakunta*, an expert authority issuing recommendations and policy suggestions on Finnish usage) did English make it into a national level media headline and an explicit *threat to Finnish*.

With the above described developments, it seems that English has taken the role of a language political catalyst, not just affecting the dynamic of local languages, but making visible political developments and tensions between different languages, domestic and international, as their positions are negotiated and contested (Torres-Olave 2012). Depending on the political viewpoint, English appears both as a threat to Finnish (echoing the “killer language” metaphors) or as a convenient ally to nativist populist politics, by either framing English as a necessary language of internationalisation or helping in societally obscuring the second national language Swedish or minority and migrant languages.

This makes visible a shift in Finnish politics from a post-nationalist (Heller 2011) to a new nationalist or neo-nationalist (Lee 2017) development, linking Finnish language ideological debates to similar ones in other Western European societies (Saarinen forthcoming). Neo-nationalism refers to a “new nationalism based national order in the new global economy” (Lee 2017, 870), thus contrasting with the post-national hegemonic order where nation states were de-stabilized in the global economic system (see for instance Heller 2011). The rise of neo-nationalist policies means that the role of language has become societally visible in a new way (Kelly 2018). The position of English in Finland is thus not just a language policy issue but links it to debates on the role of the nation state in globalization (see Buckner 2017).

Populism and populist movements within higher education and language policy are beginning to receive some attention (see Mathies & Weimer 2018; Kelly 2018). The overall positive attitude towards English in Finland has made Swedish in practice the third rather than second national language in higher education since the 1990s.

This has created an interesting situation, where the right-wing populist concern and criticism of Swedish has turned into a criticism of English, changing the balance of the debate in ways that change when the constellations of languages in the debate change. The recent backlash against English appears largely motivated by the ideological protection

of Finnish rather than of the constitutional bilingualism as such (Saarinen 2014). As the debate turns between Finnish and English rather than Finnish and Swedish, the role of Swedish as second national language becomes obscured, accentuating the national language position of only Finnish.

It is clear that the concern for Finnish and Swedish in higher education does not only have neo-nationalist implications but also, for instance, links to learning and knowledge construction (Kuteeva & Airey 2014). These, in turn, are linked to the basic tasks of universities as providers of knowledge and professionals for the nation state (Buckner 2017). However, the phenomenon of “protecting” national languages also opens doors for more populist and neo-nationalist discourses (Lee 2017; Kelly 2018). This neo-nationalist turn now calls for further analysis both inside universities and societally, and looking beyond rather than at English helps.

To conclude, based on Saarinen (forthcoming), a combination of societal, higher education, and language policy developments has now challenged the constitutional bilingualism in Finland, both in higher education but also societally. The recent post-nationalist and neo-nationalist language policy developments in higher education are relevant to the larger understanding of the (language) ideological debate of the changing role of the nation state in globalization (see Buckner 2017) of higher education in particular and societies in general.

### *5. Discussion*

Focus on Englishization easily takes our eye away from structural political, cultural, or economic issues. The neoliberal global English agenda (Piller & Cho 2013) and the international hegemony of Anglo-American higher education systems is currently being challenged by protectionist (for instance the US) and nationalist (for instance the UK) concerns (see for instance Mathies & Weimer 2018; Weimer & Barlete 2020).

When we think we talk about English, we constantly and concretely talk about various societal, political, economic, historical etc. factors rather than the language itself. The debates framed in a dichotomy between English and the local/minority/other language may be a good starting point for societal critique, but are not helpful in the end. In fact,

we would like to go further and problematize the apparent strong nation state centred position of English as “global” or “world” language. We want to echo Adejunmobi, who suggests that to see English as a predatory language that has disrupted the previous language ideological order is just another way or reinforcing an ideal monolingual order. Instead, as she suggests, we could observe post-colonial contexts as sites for multilingualism where different languages are used for different purposes, and where English does not necessarily signal detachment from the local culture (2004, viii-ix). This kind of change of focus might help us understand Western higher education contexts as well.

What would happen to our understanding of internationalisation of higher education if we looked at English not as the language of internationalisation but as a language with strong national implications? Would that help us see behind English? The societal institution of higher education is an especially fruitful context to study these questions, as it is ostensibly English centred, giving room to alternate interpretations and viewpoints.

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