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## 'Global English': Linguistic Imperialism or Practical Lingua Franca?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Despite its obvious political significance, political theory has not played a prominent role in the debates around the spread of 'global English'. Given the explosion of literature within political science and political theory on so-called 'globalization' and its effect on the nation-state together with the highly influential argument of Benedict Anderson on the historical role of language and print in the modern 'imagining' of nationhood, one would have thought political theorists would have a lot to contribute. However, even the recent growing literature on language and language rights within liberal political theory add little to the issues raised by the advent of 'global English'. This article aims at beginning to redress this situation by using several examples, especially the work of Philippe van Parijs and Abram De Swaan, to show how separating the communicative aspect of language from issues of culture, identity and power creates an abstract and rarified conception of language that avoids any adequate approach to the politics of global English. By turning to the work of Antonio Gramsci and his argument for how a truly common Italian national language should be formed, we can find a more suitable framework and set of concepts including his well known, hegemony.*

**Keywords:** *global English, Gramsci, language politics, van Parijs, De Swaan, linguistic imperialism, lingua franca*

In this court we will speak English for the benefit of foreigners...

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, 'Cross Examination'

'What is grammar?'... in all the countries of the world, millions upon millions of textbooks on the subject are devoured by specimens of the human race, without those unfortunates having a precise awareness of the object they are devouring.

Antonio Gramsci, Letter of 12 December 1927 (Gramsci 1994a: 160)

### Introduction

Media and academic treatments of the (uneven) spread of the learning and usage of English across the globe run the gamut from depicting English as an 'imperialist', 'predatory' or 'killer'

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language that threatens linguistic diversity on one hand, to it being a great benefit and gift to the world enabling world citizens to communicate freely with one another, on the other hand. For some, it holds out the potential of true cosmopolitanism eradicating the ‘linguistic barriers’ and the curse of Babel. For others, it is a sign of the coming of monocultural total domination. Not to be hyperbolic, but this would seem to be one of the most important debates of our times, if as David Graddol estimates, by 2010-2015, two billion people, a third of the entire human population, will be learning English (Graddol 2006: 14). Add this to the billion or so people who already have some competence in English and, according to these calculations, half the world’s population will have a degree of facility in the English language as compared to a mere 250 million in 1952 (Crystal 1997: 25).<sup>2</sup> This is a world historical phenomenon that presumably has massive political consequences.

Barbara Seidlhofer and Jennifer Jenkins take both sides of the debate on ‘global English’ to task for “failing to problematize the notion of the linguistic entity ‘English’”. They write, “the politics of English as a World Language will depend very much on ... how ‘English’ is conceptualized” (Seidlhofer and Jenkins 2003: 141). Their response is an empirical one. They are working to construct a “corpus capturing successful use of English among non-native speakers, as a lingua franca...” They have started by focusing on whether specific linguistic ‘errors’ actually impede communication between non-native speakers of English (Seidlhofer and Jenkins 2003: 143). There is tremendous value to be gained by such empirical research on how non-native speakers of English are using, adapting and transforming it. As will become evident below, I am hesitant about Seidlhofer and Jenkin’s own assumptions that language is primarily a communicative vehicle. However important the field of ‘world Englishes’, for the *politics* of English as a world language be understood, for us to really delve into how ‘English’ (or any language) is conceptualized in a political context, there needs to be a more theoretical and historical investigation into the connections between language, common languages, political community and its impact on the possibility of democratic governance.<sup>3</sup> And these questions need to become part of public debate and policy discussions.

One would have thought that political science and political theory, more specifically, would be rich resources for such questions. Not only have key figures in European political theory been intimately concerned with the connection between language and politics – Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, to name a few – but in the 1990s many of the prominent debates in political theory involved linguistic questions including multiculturalism, minority rights, nationalism, citizenship and identity. However, until very recently, language as a topic *in its own right* has not received adequate attention from political theorists (Patten 2001; Patten & Kymlicka 2003). Nor has language played a suitably central role in debates over

globalization and its impact on democracy and the nation-state. One explanation for this is related to the dominance of liberalism within political theory. As Kymlicka and Grin suggest of the liberal tradition, “[o]ne explanation for this surprising omission is that language turns out to be rather embarrassing for liberals [and] cannot easily be accommodated within the standard framework that liberals adopt for dealing with diversity” (Kymlicka & Grin 2003: 8).

While Will Kymlicka and Alan Patten’s collection, *Language Rights and Political Theory*, begins to rectify this situation considerably, it does little in the way of adding to debates on ‘global English’ per se, especially as they relate to ‘globalization’. None of the thirteen contributions in their collection offers a thorough discussion of how ‘globalization’ beyond its relationship to multicultural societies within nation-states, or whether linguistic diversity should be conceived of as a public good (e.g. Boran 2003). They mostly revert back to national analyses of language rights within nation-states (e.g. Kymlicka & Patten 2003: 43; 189; Réume 2003: 280). Even Stephen May’s engagement with liberal political theory commendable in its interdisciplinarity does not seem to be able to derive from these debates a suitable contribution to the larger debates around ‘global English’.<sup>4</sup>

As a whole, the field of political theory seems to be tacitly accepting Janina Brutt-Griffler’s contention that ‘political terminology’ such as *imposition*, *dominance*, *subordination* and even *hegemony* are metaphors that are not “particularly apt from a linguistic standpoint” and that political theory should leave ‘global English’ to applied linguistics (Brutt-Griffler 2002: 10). This article is an attempt to contribute to debates concerning the politics of ‘global English’ from within political theory. I look specifically to the writings of Antonio Gramsci, most known precisely for developing the concept of ‘hegemony’ in the manner it is often employed in debates on ‘global English’. This raises the irony of Brutt-Griffler’s contention since Gramsci borrowed the concept of ‘hegemony’ from – among other sources – his studies in linguistics (Ives 2004a and 2004b)! Since this is a beginning, it is important for me to sketch out some of the key problems with how language is understood within political theory – which is not altogether different from assumptions made in other academic fields and in the media. This will throw the importance of Gramsci’s approach into more clear relief.

Daniele Archibugi’s critique of Kymlicka’s multiculturalist liberalism offers a potentially more ‘global’ approach to language politics and democracy. He advocates a cosmopolitan approach using the metaphor of Esperanto arguing that “democratic politics *must* be in Esperanto” (Archibugi 2005: 544). As is not uncommon, he utilizes the prevalence of English as a “dominant lingua franca worldwide” and addresses the supranational context of the European Union, but concludes that “cosmopolitans would prefer an impoverished but directly understandable language to a myriad of more colorful yet non-accessible languages” (Archibugi 2005: 548, 552). So while he states that “A cultural cosmopolitan is inclined to see

an intrinsic and not only an instrumental value in the opportunity to know an extra language,” he repeatedly accepts the notion that the fact of multilingualism is an ‘obstacle’ and ‘barrier’ to democracy that must be overcome (Archibugi 2005: 547). Gramsci, as we shall see below, offers a trenchant critique of just this approach to cosmopolitanism and Esperanto. I will argue that the fundamental questions of language and democracy are more or less side-stepped by such analyses which in effect separate the communicative aspects of language from the role of language in identity and cultural formation intimately bound up with the development of the nation-state, and now questioned with developments often called ‘globalization’. Other political scientists such as Selma Sonntag have contributed greatly to the theoretical questions presented by ‘global English’ but her goal and strengths lie more in her application of the insights of Gramsci than any theoretical developments (Sonntag 2003).<sup>5</sup>

This general paucity of contribution of political theory to ‘global English’ debates is particularly surprising in light of the rich connection between the development of the modern nation-state and the ‘standardization’ of languages. For example, Benedict Anderson’s astonishingly influential book, *Imagined Communities*, argued specifically that a crucial element of the unique characteristic of the way in which modern national communities are ‘imagined’ is connected to the rise of vernacular national languages and print capitalism (Anderson 1991). The rich literatures in political sciences, history, anthropology and sociology on the resurgence of nationalism place linguistic issues at centre stage, integrally related to the emergence of the modern nation-state, citizenship and national consciousness. Anderson is habitually cited by Archibugi, Kymlicka and many others, but the complex questions of a potential transformation in the role of language and print in how post-national political communities are ‘imagined’ is not taken up.

This raises the intriguing question about why within the truly massive literature on so-called ‘globalization’ and all the debates about its relationship to capitalism and democracy, language plays a relatively small and secondary role. I obviously cannot adequately fill this ‘gap’ in the field of political theory between research on the history of language and politics concerning the nation-state and that of contemporary research on so-called globalization. Instead, by beginning with two specific examples of how ‘global English’ is abstractly theorized, I want to draw a more specific link between the ideology of individualism and its effects on how English is being understood.

It seems to me symptomatic of larger ideological issues that many political theorists have accepted the inadequately examined presumption of the ‘inevitability’ of the spread of ‘global English’. It is true that language issues are commonly mentioned in analyses of the shifting nature of citizenship and the nation-state in the context of so-called ‘globalization’. However,

these analyses are rarely cognizant of the more sophisticated research conducted in sociolinguistics, education, language planning and language studies. Rather than providing insight into how language relates to questions of political community and cultural identity, most political theory treatments side-step these issues by dividing the 'communicative' or instrumental functions of language from what is often labeled the 'expressive' or 'symbolic' dimensions (e.g. Rubio-Marín 2003: 56). Yet, as Ryan Bishop and John Phillips summarize, "Developments in several strands of literature, philosophy and linguistics since the 19<sup>th</sup> century have made it difficult to maintain instrumentalist assumptions..." (Bishop and Phillips 2006: 51). I will argue that those instrumentalist assumptions seem to be at the heart of the way 'global English' is treated, implicitly or explicitly, by much of political science, the social sciences (outside sociolinguistics, language planning and education) and the media.

The polarization of the positions for and against 'global English' can fairly easily, if perhaps deceptively so, be traced to different traditions in the history of European political philosophy. It is not mere coincidence that John Locke, one of the founders of liberalism, provides a fairly influential theory of language as primarily a vehicle for transferring ideas from one brain to another (Locke 1995: 321-423; Losonsky 2006: 1-21). This vision of language and political community is at the heart of most positions in favour of global English. On the other side, republicanism and especially German Romanticism take the more general position of 'continental philosophy' in rooting language as an integral part of culture, identity, power and conceptions of the world in a manner more clearly aligned with the critics of global English (see Ives 2004d).

My aim here is to draw on my previous work on Antonio Gramsci's writings on language to provide a deeper theorization of language in the context of 'global English' in order to overcome this theoretical impasse. Gramsci is a key figure partially because his notion of hegemony is often employed by those critical of the potential imperialistic aspects of 'global English' (e.g. Phillipson 1992: 65-76; Pennycook 1994: 149-52; Shannon 1995; Parakrama 1995: 60-5; Tsuda 1997: 22-23; Romaine 1997: ix; Holborow 1999; May 2001: 12, 92, 215; Sonntag 2003: 6). But my more fundamental interest in Gramsci is that he approaches language as a human institution subject to historical change and open to humans collectively and consciously determining its role in society. This poses a significant alternative not only to those who see the spread of 'global English' as inevitable and unstoppable, but also because it is distinct from other approaches that begin from specific assumptions about the nature of language seen in theorists as diverse as Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas and most interpretations of Mikhail Bakhtin (Ives 2005; Ives 2004a). Most importantly, Gramsci demonstrates how the communicative aspect of language must be taken hand in hand with the power relationships and cultural and symbolic effects of language in his context and

ours. Thus, I will focus on, how, in a very different context, Gramsci was both highly critical of the imposition of a 'standard' Italian language, and the irradiation of dialects, but also in favour of a 'truly' common national language and equally fearful of linguistic parochialism and fragmentation.

To highlight Gramsci's potential contribution to the political debates concerning 'global English', I will first turn to two the different approach to the question of 'global English' provided by Philippe Van Parijs and Abram De Swaan for three reasons. Firstly, scholars like Van Parijs and, in a very different way, Abram De Swaan make explicit several of the unexamined assumptions that underpin many of the media pronouncements about the 'inevitable' spread of English. Neither Van Parijs nor De Swaan, assume that the global spread of English is inevitable or somehow natural, they *attempt* to demonstrate it – De Swaan empirically and Van Parijs normatively. Secondly, their methods allow us to highlight the manner in which they separate the entity of language itself into two elements. The first element – that both Van Parijs and De Swaan then hold as primary – is language as a communicative vehicle. And the other category is articulated in different ways, but can be described as language as everything else, its symbolic dimensions, didactic dimensions, cultural dimensions, etc... The third reason for considering De Swaan and Van Parijs is that it allows us to highlight the one-sided-ness of the progressive potentials for a 'global English' and see why Gramsci's theorization of language issues is so crucial in its ability to address these points, without severing it from the other aspects of language use, that inevitably involve power relations and asymmetries at the heart of criticism of 'global English'.

### **Global English as a vehicle for communication and progressive struggle**

Philippe Van Parijs argues that English should be adopted as Europe's lingua franca (and then by extension the world's lingua franca) because

we do not want Europeanisation, and beyond it globalisation, to be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy and the powerful who can afford quality interpretation. If we want all sorts of workers', women's, young people's, old people's, poor people's associations to organise on the every higher scale required for effective action, we must equip them with the means of talking to one another without the need for interpreting boxes and the highly skilled and paid professionals who go in them. One way of putting this is by saying that we need to meet the linguistic preconditions for turning Europe, and ultimately the world, into one *demos*, without this needing to mean that Europe, or the world, is thereby turned into a single *ethnos*: a forum can be shared thanks to a common language ... (Van Parijs 2004: 118).

This is perhaps one of the most important arguments in favour of global English from a social justice perspective. As we shall see, it mirrors Gramsci's argument about the need for a truly common national Italian language in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But, unlike Gramsci, for Van Parijs, this position is part of an analysis of European language politics premised on individualistic and rational-choice presumptions or methodology. But in contrast to other rational-choice individualists, Van Parijs highlights the detrimental effects of the use of English as a lingua franca. He is most concerned about the linguistic injustice in that language as a common good is 'paid for' both literally and figuratively very disproportionately by non-English first language speakers, but it is first language English speakers who benefit as much or more from this 'common good'. Thus, for him, it is a classic 'free rider' problem and he specifically presents strategies for ameliorating these injustices. In essence, he argues that it is fully possible to compensate for the unfairness created by the "countless uncoordinated choices" which have selected English as the world's lingua franca (Van Parijs 2004: 148). The originality and audacity of these suggestions are, in my opinion, quite commendable. For example, Van Parijs suggests that the dubbing of movies and television should be banned based on evidence that the original audio with subtitles helps audiences learn the original languages which is especially likely to be English given the prominence of English-language television and movies. He also proposes subsidies across language groups based on cost-benefit analysis of English as a 'public good'. In addition, he highlights that there are some disadvantages that native English speakers have such as not having a 'private' language nor having as good opportunities to learn new languages. But regardless of his concerns with the injustice of 'global English', his analysis serves to highlight the problems involved with conceptualizing language as being primarily communicative. It is for this reason that it provides a rich example for me here of how language is not fully conceptualized.

Van Parijs begins with two basic propositions. The first is that "The extent to which people maintain and improve their linguistic competence in some particular language" is a matter of 'motivation' caused by the usefulness of competence and the 'opportunity' to actually use the language. He labels this probability that an individual language learner will 'have to' function in the new language, "probability-sensitive learning"(Van Parijs 2004: 114).<sup>6</sup> The second is what he calls the "maximin law of communication" – the notion that the abstract individual (which he calls 'you') "will systematically tend to ask yourself whether there is any language that is known to some extent by all" of those you want to communicate with. In other words, speakers will try to maximize the minimum competence within their audiences (Van Parijs 2004: 115).

He argues that “*as soon as* efficiency in communication prevails over pedagogical or expressive concerns, perceptible inequalities in the minimum knowledge of the various languages involved will generate a hardly resistible pressure for all to adopt the maximin language” (Van Parijs 2004: 116 emphasis added). Van Parijs offers us an explicit division between the communicative dimensions of language and the symbolic (or ‘expressive’) dimensions. To this common division, Van Parijs adds a ‘pedagogical’ or ‘didactic’ dimension. Again, in a relatively common procedure, Van Parijs uses these distinctions in order to de-emphasize the ‘symbolic’ and ‘pedagogical’ dimensions, and focus solely on language as a vehicle for communication, “Hence, although didactic effectiveness and symbolic impact may sometimes strongly constrain language choice, this will not prevent the maximin criterion from running the show whenever communication is the prime concern, i.e. in the bulk of spoken and written language use” (Van Parijs 2004: 116).

This is a more systematic example of perhaps the most common assumptions that enables liberal individualist perspectives to grapple with the complexities of language usage. Given the abstract nature of Van Parijs’ description here, it is unclear what he means by the “bulk of spoken and written language use”. But if we think about the history of languages across the globe or even within Europe in the past three hundred years, it is highly dubious that the ‘communication dimension’ has been running the show or ‘prevails over’ (Van Parijs 2001: 116) the symbolic or didactic dimensions. If we take a more historical approach like that of Gramsci’s, it is precisely the ‘symbolic’ and ‘didactic’ dimensions of language that were central in the creations of ‘standard’ national languages used by a majority of citizens of countries like France, Italy and Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (e.g. Weber 1976; Steinberg 1987; Crowley 1996; Moss 2000). The abstract individualistic approaches of Van Parijs and De Swaan, as we’ll see below, certainly cannot explain the ‘standardization’ of national languages and demotion of vernacular and dialects throughout Europe from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries that involved massive state involvement and national mandatory education systems. Thus, to sustain their positions, either normative or empirical, it would have to be shown how the relationship between language and political identity has or should substantially shift in such a way that language is primarily a means of communication separate from being intimately tied to political and cultural identity.

Van Parijs’ approach to language politics is very different from that of Abram De Swaan, in that he focuses on the normative dimensions, but they share a central feature. In order to endorse the spread of ‘global English’ both separate this communicative dimension from other central aspects of language and then down play these other aspects. Because Van Parijs accepts an explicitly normative approach, his separation of these various aspects of language, namely the communicative from any others, can be viewed as a normative desire.



But how do we make this separation in practice? Moreover, in what ways is it normatively superior? We shall see Gramsci's approach to how power relationships come into play in language usage. And the onus will then be on Van Parijs to show how to overcome the effects of what Gramsci will call the imposition of a 'normative grammar' of global English. We turn to De Swaan precisely because he takes a more objective and empirical approach.

In his wide-ranging study, *Words of the World*, Abram De Swaan concludes that "a single coherent world language system has emerged; at its core is hypercentral English, which is linked to a dozen supercentral languages... the world language system now connects all known languages in a strongly ordered, strongly connected, hierarchical, four-tiered pattern" (De Swaan 2001: 177). He argues that the "hypercentral position of English at the hub of the world language system is not just self-perpetuating, it is self-expanding" (De Swaan 2001: 187).

He is very clear that a simplistic notion of what Graddol calls 'English triumphalism' is not adequate for understanding the current state of world language usage (Graddol 2006: 10-13). Despite this, his assumptions, and the fact that they remain assumptions and not political ideals, lead to a de-politicization of language and in effect to 'English triumphalism'. To arrive at his conclusions, De Swaan applies Immanuel Wallerstein's notion of a 'world system' to the realm of language and various language constellations throughout the world. He attempts to map the relation of languages and their speakers to one another categorizing them as 'peripheral languages', central or 'planetary languages', 'supercentral languages' and then the category made up only by English, the 'hypercentral language'. He adds to this world systems theory of language model a quantitative and rational choice theory approach to analyze why people choose to learn the languages they do. Working through economic concepts, he defines language as a 'hypercollective good' and then applies a quantitative measure of a Q-value to each language. The Q-value is the measure of the communicative potential of a language, or the language repertoire of an individual (the combination of languages that an individual has abilities to use). So it is an attempt to go beyond just measuring a language by the number of speakers who use or know it, or learned it as a mother tongue. Rather a Q-value is "the product of the proportion of those who speak it among all speakers in [their language] constellation *and* the proportion of multilingual speakers whose repertoire includes the language among all multilingual speakers in the constellation" (De Swaan 2001: 21).<sup>7</sup> Thus, he wants to provide a more detailed map of how individuals can be related to one another through mutually understandable languages.

Putting the methodological questions of this study aside for the moment,<sup>8</sup> De Swaan's analysis is useful for us here because it seems to interrogate the reasons why it is 'inevitable' that English has already become a world lingua franca. De Swaan describes this

current state in the “evolution of human language” as “blind process” resulting from the “unintended consequences of a myriad of individual decisions (and non-decisions, resignation and compliance) ...” (De Swaan 2001: 176, 186). Similarly, Van Parijs argued that “countless uncoordinated choices” which have selected English as the world’s lingua franca (Van Parijs 2004: 148). Brutt-Griffler’s account is much more nuanced argument that “Imperialism is only the unwitting, even unwilling, *instrument* of the spread of English” (Brutt-Griffler 2002: 111). But for each, this conclusion rests substantially on their initial assumptions that the communicative aspect of language can be easily separated from, and held as primary over, its other dimensions.

While De Swaan is at pains to emphasize that his analysis is not just about English, but about the make-up of the constellation of languages and how they interact within a world language system, he presumes that individuals choose the language they wish to learn based on its Q-value. It may indeed seem very counter-intuitive since most individuals are given very limited choices about what languages they can learn. Moreover, the variations between a child of immigrant parents ‘choosing’ the level at which to learn and use her family’s language versus that of the larger society, a student choosing among a small set of languages to learn in school and a business person choosing to take classes to improve or learn English take place only after a myriad of policy and educational questions that occur not at the individual level but at the social and especially the governmental level.

De Swaan addresses this problem in a similar way that rational choice theory generally does. He argues that as a generalization its proof is seen in the outcome. As he states early in his book, “Whether [the Q-value] is an empirically valid construct will appear from subsequent chapters that discuss factual language constellations. If it works, it is real” (De Swaan 2001: 39-40). But this approach has two very real consequences for de-politicizing language, making it seem as if changes in language usage are ‘natural’ or not connected to systemic issues of economic and political power or cultural prestige and identity.

First, it de-emphasizes the roles of states in having specific policies concerning language education and the like that have been well documented by scholars such as Robert Phillipson (1992) and others. Second, it presents language as solely a question of communication separating it from issues of political identity, symbolic and cultural community. These are not just criticisms of De Swaan’s approach, but centrally important as tenets of how the international spread of English is often understood implicitly or explicitly.

Those who hold a more critical evaluation of the role of ‘global English’ in global capitalism, imperialism and neo-liberalism, may find it difficult to see how this discussion of Van Parijs and De Swaan contributes to the debate. But we have to address the influence and attractiveness of their presumptions, however unsound, that language is or should be

primarily about communication and that this aspect of language can and should be separated from questions of power, culture and ideological perspectives. This is where Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the Italian language situation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is pertinent.

### **Antonio Gramsci as theorist of language politics**

Antonio Gramsci is an interesting figure in this context for several reasons. His conception of 'hegemony' has been influential in the way of understanding and analyzing how dominant groups exert their power through the organization of consent and acquiescence to their power. His concepts have been widely utilized across the social sciences and humanities including discussions of 'global English' as noted above. While Gramsci is known as a working class leader, theorist of culture and prisoner of Italian fascism, what is less well known is that he was also keenly interested in Italian language politics and standardization. I have argued elsewhere that his university studies in linguistics and life-long concern with the 'standardization' of Italian was central to his social and political theory especially his conception of 'hegemony' (Ives 2004a and 2004b). Specifically as will be discussed below, he was very much in favour of a common national language for all of Italy – which might on the surface lead one to ask why are critics of a 'world common language' using his notion of hegemony.

A partial answer lies in the fact that Gramsci was very critical of the method by which the Italian government attempted to achieve a common national Italian language and more crucially, what that language turns out to be and how it is conceptualized. Gramsci attacked the strategy for 'standardizing Italian' at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century advocated by Alessandro Manzoni, the renowned author of *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*). Manzoni was appointed to the head of a government commission on unifying Italy linguistically in 1868, just 7 years after the political unification of Italy. His strategy was to adopt the dialect of Florence, especially that of the bourgeoisie, as the model for 'standard' Italian, to be used for dictionaries and grammar books. Moreover, Manzoni proposed that school teachers for all of Italy should be recruited from Tuscany, or as close to Florence as possible. This would enable school children from Sicily to Venetia to be taught a 'common Italian'. In a fascinating comparison that may have made Manzoni roll over in his grave, Gramsci compared Manzoni's strategy to Esperanto.<sup>9</sup> He argued that this language that was supposed to be a 'common national language' would be as artificial and imposed, especially for those farther from Tuscany, such as southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia. As early as 1918, drawing on the linguistic arguments of G. I. Ascoli, Gramsci argued that this strategy would be ineffective as there would be continual pressure exerted by what Ascoli called the 'linguistic substratum' – that is the existing dialects – that would alter this supposed 'standard' language. As we shall

see, this argument has significant parallels with Braj Kachru's approach to world Englishes focusing on how English is changed. This is what Kachru calls the 'nativization' of English (Kachru 2005: 29-54). This dimension of the debate needs to be included in the empirical sociolinguistic research on non-native users of English that Seidlhofer and Jenkins advocate, discussed at the outset of this article. Archibugi's cosmopolitan vision described through the metaphor of Esperanto also needs to pay much greater attention to how that common lingua franca, in this case global English, is formed.

Part of Gramsci's political and cultural critique of Manzoni's method is comparable to critics of 'global English' who note that language is tied to culture and ways of understanding the world, so that the use, adoption or imposition of a 'foreign' language includes values and beliefs as well as questions of inferiority and prestige of speakers' identities. Kachru extends this to argue that English is an Asian language and becomes fully capable of expressing various different Asian values and identities *because* it is altered. So he is not arguing that because language is a neutral vehicle for communication, as an empty conduit, it can be filled with any set of values and identities. On the contrary, his research focuses on how the very language of English is adapted and altered in order to express diverse identities, and this often means that it is non-longer understandable and the communicative element between these Asian Englishes and English English or American English may be lessened. Kachru argued that 'Asian Englishes' are 'Asian' languages in that they contain Asian values, identity and distinct possibilities of creativity (Kachru 2005: 137-54).

This notion that language can not be properly understood by making its communicative aspect primary is evident in Gramsci's concern with children and language learning. He specifically advocated teaching children in their dialect. He wrote from prison to his sister urging her to let his nephew speak Sardinian (Gramsci 1994a: 89). He showed great concern with how this language imposition could have harmful results developmentally and culturally if it resulted in disconnections between children and the communities and cultures in which they lived (Gramsci 1994b: 356; Gramsci 1994a: 240). He shows astute awareness of intellectual and identity issues concerning the *imposition* of 'foreign' languages. He also made the connection often central to the critics of 'global English' between language and culture and perceptions of the world, as opposed to viewing language solely as a conduit for communication (Ives 2004a).

Despite all these similarities with the critics of global English and his own rejection of Manzoni's method for creating a national Italian language, Gramsci was not against the creation of a truly 'common national Italian.' Quite the contrary, in no uncertain terms he proclaims:

it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language, the non-existence of which creates friction particularly in the popular masses among whom local particularisms and phenomena of a narrow and provincial mentality are more tenacious than is believed (Gramsci 1985: 182).

I have explored at length elsewhere how this position is related to his better known political and cultural theory concerning hegemony (Ives 2004a and 2004b). But suffice it to say here that he clearly connected the fragmentation of the subaltern classes of Italy, especially the lack communication between the southern peasantry and the northern urban workers, as an integral part of the conditions that allowed the Fascists to create a successful alliance between the northern industrialists and the southern landowners. Gramsci argues that the emergence of fascism was in part due to their ability to pit various subaltern groups against one another, especially the northern petit bourgeoisie against the working class, but also both of them against the southern peasantry. He thus agrees with the central point of supporters of 'global English' made by Van Parijs discussed above, that communication among disadvantaged social groups, marginalized and oppressed peoples is essential and its absence often facilitates dominant 'hegemonies' together with injustice. In such analyses, Gramsci is clearly more attuned to the political nature of the debate and the nuances of power dynamics than is Kachru, who commonly falls into more blanket assessments focusing on an overly positive outcomes of Asian Englishes. For example, he concurs with Thomas Friedman that India has successfully capitalized upon its ability to assimilate, synthesize and hybridize what is required of it by globalization (Kachru 2005: xvii). And while at moments, he is acutely aware of the negative impacts of colonialism and on-going attempts like that of the British Council to maintain the power of its cultural prestige, he also tends to put 'colonialism' in the past and argue that Indian English has been liberated from historical structures of imperialism (Kachru 2005: 20, 28).

However much Gramsci favours a common language for all of Italy in ways that resonate with Van Parijs' concerns and Archibugi's cosmopolitanism, he does not follow Van Parijs in separating language into two aspects, the communicative and the symbolic or cultural. Nor does his desire for a common language lead Gramsci ever to think of language providing a space for communication outside of questions of culture or power differentials and, in a word, politics. In a crucial section of the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci argues against the elitist conception of philosophy as "a strange and difficult thing" and turning Benedetto Croce's slogan, "all men are philosophers" on its head, Gramsci writes that spontaneous philosophy is contained in three things, 'common sense', 'the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things, ... and, the first on the list, "*language itself*, which is a totality

of determined notions and concepts not just words grammatically devoid of content” (Gramsci 1971: 323). Later in the Notebooks, he writes, “Language also means culture and philosophy (if only at the level of common sense) (Gramsci 1971: 349). Gramsci’s diagnosis of the need for a truly ‘common language’ in Italy is due in large part to the connection between language as a vehicle for communication and as a crucial aspect of culture and identity.

Gramsci develops two concepts that I think get to the heart of the matter because they involved power relationships in any language learning and usage situation. They are ‘spontaneous grammar’ and ‘normative grammar’. As is typical of Gramsci, he uses existing terms and modifies their meaning to make them more critical and often more analytic than how they had been used previously (Showstack Sassoon 1990). He starts out by accepting the common notion that everyone speaks ‘according to grammar’ without necessarily knowing it. This ‘immanent’ or ‘spontaneous’ grammar is contrasted to ‘normative grammar’ with its long history dating back to Port-Royal. But Gramsci quickly breaks down this simplistic contrast between spontaneity and normativity. Thus, he argues that ‘normative grammar’ is:

made up of reciprocal monitoring, reciprocal teaching and reciprocal ‘censorship’ expressed in such questions as ‘What did you say?’, ‘What do you mean?’, ‘Make yourself clearer’, etc. and in mimicry and teasing. This whole complex of actions and reactions come together to create a grammatical conformism, to establish ‘norms’ or judgments of correctness and incorrectness. (Gramsci 1985: 180).

So here we have a clear picture of the power relationships involved in language learning which Gramsci further describes with examples of peasants moving to cities. To the extent that this is internalized, it becomes spontaneous, “One could sketch a picture of the ‘normative grammar’ that operates spontaneously in every given society, in that this society tends to become unified both territorially and culturally, in other words it has a governing class whose function is recognized and followed” (Gramsci 1985: 181). Thus, no language is structured around a truly ‘spontaneous’ grammar that arises from nowhere or is divorced from the power relationships amongst its users. To the extent that language is structured making communication possible – and Gramsci describes this limit by connecting the etymology of ‘idiot’ with ‘idiom’ (Gramsci 1985: 124) – it also involves the power relationship of some users controlling and defining the ‘norms’ by which others speak or write. The crucial thing is that for Gramsci, normative grammar is not simplistically aligned with force or coercion or domination and spontaneous grammar aligned with freedom and democracy. He actually argues that spontaneous grammar, those rules that we speak without thinking about

them, are the historical result of fragmentation and sedimentation of various normative grammars.

Moreover, Gramsci argues that normative grammars always face pressures from the spontaneous grammars that someone speaks. This was another aspect of his critique of Manzoni that I mentioned earlier. He argued that you could try to impose 'standard' Italian across Italy, but as you moved farther away from Tuscany and the dialects were more distinct from this new standard, speakers would continually change that standard.

This is a very useful contribution to current debates on 'global English' however different from the context of Italian language 'standardization' precisely because it does not deny, as so many proponents of 'global English' do, the fact that the communicative function of language is tied to the cultural choices and power dynamics amongst the users of that language.<sup>10</sup> But it also does not valorize 'spontaneous' grammar or vernacular languages as somehow authentic or natural or even inherently more in tune with a particular group of people.<sup>11</sup> For Gramsci, there is nothing akin to what Wilhelm von Humboldt called the *energia* of language that is unstructured prior to being expressed through the *ergon* of communal structure (von Humboldt 1988; see also Ives 1997: 86-7).

### **The communicational benefits of 'global English'**

Gramsci then gives us more insight into what seems like a common sense proposition, that the spread of global English facilitates global communication. On one level, of course this is true. On another level, we have to ask two questions. Who specifically is engaging in this communication that stretches more frequently across wider portions of the globe? And what are the other larger contexts of this communication? How does miscommunication affect our lives and politics (Pennycook 2003)? Again, this assumption lies at the heart of De Swaan and Van Parijs' entire projects, as well as political theorists like Archibugi. And again, turning the Gramsci's writings provides some insight.

Prior to Gramsci's imprisonment, in 1918, he wrote a scathing article about Esperanto, that I referred to earlier. He then developed 'Esperanto' and 'Esperantism' as metaphors in the *Prison Notebooks* to describe various positivistic and overly abstract philosophical positions especially in relation to science (Gramsci 1995: 303-4; Gramsci 168, 268). In his initial critique, he criticized a proposal that the Milan section of the Communist Party adopt Esperanto. Gramsci rejects this proposal precisely because he sees the communicative function of language inextricable from the cultural questions. But he goes further problematizing the very desire or need for a common or single lingua franca. It is worth quoting a long passage from this article because it could be applied to many arguments in favour of global English:

The advocates of a single language are worried by the fact that while the world contains a number of people who would like to communicate directly with one another, there is an endless number of different languages which restrict the ability to communicate. This is a *cosmopolitan*, not an international anxiety, that of the bourgeois who travels for business or pleasure, of nomads more than of stable productive citizens. They would like artificially to create *consequences* which as yet lack the necessary *conditions*.... (Gramsci 1985: 27)

Thus, Gramsci interrogates the most prominent economic and class reasons that underlie the need for a ‘world’ language. Here he is critical of such a ‘cosmopolitan’ perspective because it presupposes class and cultural inequalities. This, of course, mirrors the dynamic that he develops more extensively in his *Prison Notebooks* with his concepts of a ‘passive revolution’ – a ‘revolution’ without a revolution – whereby superficial alterations are made to avoid the economic, social and political crises that are coming to the fore. But such ‘passive revolutions’ do not address the profound reasons for such crises (see Gramsci 1971: 104-20; and Ives 2004b: 102-10 for its relation to linguistic metaphors).

Ultimately, Gramsci makes the argument that De Swaan, Archibugi and others side-step and ignore. Van Parijs, as I will discuss, does touch on it. As Gramsci summarizes:

Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to recognize the cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1985: 183)

Thus, the very political nature of ‘global English’ is directly connected to broader changes in global politics. When Van Parijs discusses the ‘linguistic preconditions’ of a *demos* he is showing a degree of awareness of Gramsci’s point here. However, he continues, as quoted above, “without this needing to mean that Europe, or the world, is thereby turned into a single *ethnos*: a forum can be shared thanks to a common language” (Van Parijs 2004: 118). This avoids the key question of linguistic hegemony by relying on an overly simplistic separation of language as communication needed to create a *demos* that is not connected to that language containing cultures, values, perspectives on the world and political identities of an *ethnos*.<sup>12</sup> By assuming that these preconditions can be met through individuals choosing which language to communicate in through his maximin law, he fails to grapple with the real issues at stake. When and where English as a second language was taught primarily in private schools or is limited to children of the middle-class and wealthy, it becomes a crucial



element of an international business class structure. It facilitates the growth and spread of multinational corporations and trade.

## Conclusion

It may seem a little like preaching to the converted to argue in the pages of *Studies in Language and Capitalism* that the spread of 'global English' is rife with politics and power relationships. Nevertheless, I hope to have contributed to the debates on how to approach the complex politics involved in two ways. I tried to highlight the mechanisms by which political theory (dominated by liberalism) tends to side-step the heart of the matter as well as flesh out, to some degree, Antonio Gramsci's approach to the politics of language. But at the same time, I have aimed at recuperating the basic notion of the progressive potentials of a truly common language. In the process, my goal has been to provide at least a partial theorization for the type of empirical approach utilized by political scientists such as Selma Sonntag and the suggestion that critical scholars of 'global English' go beyond utilizing Gramsci's concept of hegemony in isolation from his more general framework of analysis that includes his conceptions of 'passive revolution', 'subalternity' and 'common sense' and more specifically his analysis of language politics including his use of normative and spontaneous grammar.

## Notes

1. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, University of Malta, Msida, July 28, 2006 and "Antonio Gramsci: Materialism and Culture", University of Toronto, Italian Studies Department, Oct. 14 & 15, 2005. I am grateful to the organizers and participants in those conferences.
2. For a discussion of the accuracy and meaning of such numbers, see Holborow 1999: 54-60. My point here is just to give an indication of the general presence of English throughout the world.
3. There are obviously other investigations into how 'global English' or language in general is conceptualized that include similar concerns with political issues and in many senses my analysis here shares much with that of Alastair Pennycook. My aim is to add to such approaches through a political theory approach especially one that draws on the work of Antonio Gramsci. See Pennycook 1994, 1998, 2000 and 2003.
4. By 'global English' I mean the use of English across the globe (although very unevenly in terms of geography, economic class and social groupings), but also the use of English by speakers for whom it is not their first language, in a wide range of language domains encompassing all aspects of life (see Crystal 1997 among others). In this context, it is clearly important that we examine the implications of such labels as 'English as an international language,' 'world English' (or Englishes), 'global English' or the 'global spread of English.' I use the term 'global English' partially because it shares with 'world' English a wider sense than 'international' which suggests a more limited usage of English being used among speakers from different nations and less specifically in the daily lives of many people. I choose 'global' over 'world' somewhat arbitrarily, but partially to highlight the overlaps between *problems* within the discourse and conceptualization of 'globalization.' I think 'global English' helps to emphasize the relatively insignificant attention that has been paid to language issues in the massive literature on the wide variety of dimensions of 'globalization.'

5. I do not mean to call for a separation between theory and empirical research, but rather to concur with Thomas Clayton that Sonntag is much more successful in her case studies than in cutting the theoretical knots of the politics of 'global English' (Clayton 2005).
6. The ambiguity between 'having to' function in a learned language (i.e. English) and having the choice to (and presumably choosing not to) is telling in this case. It obscures the fact that most students of language are either forced by their school systems to learn a language, or are given a choice among a very limited number of languages to learn or are in contexts where the disadvantages of not learning a language are significant.
7. Van Parijs criticizes the effectiveness of De Swaan's Q-value formula providing numerous instances where it produces the opposite effect than De Swaan's correct general idea that the more prevalent a language, especially among multilingual speakers, the more attractive it is to potential language learners (Van Parijs 2004: 150-1). However, Van Parijs agrees with the general individual rational choice underpinnings of De Swaan's position.
8. Robert Phillipson provides a scathing and convincing critique of De Swaan (Phillipson 2004). My use of De Swaan here is thus for the purposes of example of a particular and common method of separating communication from questions of power, culture and identity.
9. Where Manzoni was a committed Romanticist who rejected the written literary Italian as a model in favour of a spoken, living vernacular, Gramsci argued that his strategy called for the imposition of what was in effect a foreign language on top of the diverse Italian dialects.
10. In this sense, I argue that Gramsci augments along a different axis Pennycook's move beyond the dichotomy of the homogeneity versus heterogeneity theses of global English (Pennycook 2003).
11. Gramsci does make the argument that "In language too there is no parthenogenesis, language producing other language (Gramsci 1985: 178), which I have argued has parallels to Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, and leads to a normative judgement in favour of multilingualism in itself (see Ives 2004a: 54-55 and 75).
12. François Grin provides an approach that addresses the economic aspects of language politics that could be much more complementary to Gramsci's than is Van Parijs (Grin 2003; and Grin 2001).

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