

Global English and Political Economy, John P. O'Regan

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Global English and Political Economy by John O'Regan is essential reading for applied linguists. It will also interest education policymakers, and anyone who wants to understand the causes of the global diffusion of English. Taking a *longue durée* approach, the author addresses the history and theory of global capitalist expansion over a four-hundred-year period. He identifies English – in particular the formal registers of written English – as a *free rider* on this expansion. In contrast to the territorial empires of continental European powers, argues O'Regan, the globally hegemonic Anglo-American system attained a position of tutelage over industrial and financial processes in extraterritorial regions from Africa to Latin America to East Asia, which endures to this day. This has placed English, as Abram De Swaan puts it “at the hub of the linguistic galaxy” (De Swaan, 2013, p. 6). O'Regan's explanation can be named in one word: capital. This is not uncontroversial, but the arguments presented are compelling. Other factors – geography, culture, migration, education policy – are for the most part regarded as effects of the centre-periphery relation in the capitalist world system rather than as independent variables co-determining language use. This review will engage with the book's theory, the evidence it presents, its critique of English as a Lingua Franca / World Englishes (ELF/WE) approaches, and its outlook for the future.

The theoretical foundation is the view of capital as the global “governing power” (O'Regan, 2021, p. 9) over labour, production, and distribution. Capital accumulates, moves, and reproduces itself in new settings. Where no new settings exist, they must be created through the opening and exploitation of new natural and material resources. Capital is a form

of normative power, therefore it is unsurprising that normative grammar, in Gramsci's sense, aligns closely with it. From these premises, O'Regan develops the concept of English as a *free rider* on Anglophone-dominated capital expansion. To Marx's famous formulae $M-C-M'$ / $M-M'$ he adds a superscripted $M^E-C^E-M'^E$ / $M^E-M'^E$ to represent this relationship. In Marx's theory, M' represents the effect on money of principles of capitalist accumulation, whereby it is no longer merely a medium of exchange for commodities (C), but attains intrinsic value and power. The author provides a detailed explanation of this (p. 13). This formulation is the cornerstone of much of what follows. O'Regan's idea is in some ways closer to what Calvet calls the "parasitic relationship" between languages and their users (Calvet, 1998, p.3). The analogy to *free riding* in the microeconomic sense (Olson, 1965) is imperfect, as a language is not a consumer of a rivalrous good. It is true, however, that a similar rivalrous relationship to that between consumers also obtains between languages: If I board a bus without paying, nobody else can sit in the seat I occupy. Likewise, if English is the sole language of reference in a treaty or contract, no other language may occupy this slot, even if the treaty is multilingual, and even if all parties to the treaty use a different first language in other communicative contexts. This relationship triggers a feedback loop in which the normative grammar of standard written English is "misrecognised" (p.40) as being valuable in and of itself. Accordingly, the author adds a linguistic "edge" to the four edges (production, trade, finance, military strength) from Wallerstein's model of global hegemony (Wallerstein, 2000 [1983]: 257).

Five richly detailed empirical chapters add weight to these theoretical perspectives. We find meticulous ethnographic accounts of systems of language use, from Ireland in the Cromwell and plantation years to the Atlantic slave trade, post-independence South America, the British concession in Shanghai, and, after the baton pass of global imperialism from Britain to the US, the transnational governance institutions: International Monetary Fund,

World Bank and World Trade Organisation/General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade. These sections alone make gripping reading. In each instance, standard written English achieves centrality. O'Regan adduces historiographical literature to argue that early capitalist expansion was driven by a series of accumulation crises, and that while the militaristic hand of Empire was never far away, trade was the preferred *modus operandi*. In the post-1945 iteration of the capitalist world system, the strength of the core was causally linked with recurrent crises in the periphery, leading to a permanent unequal relationship. In all these settings there were, working closely with high-ranking Anglophones (as a rule men of European descent and privileged social class), large numbers of translators, interpreters, teachers, police officers, and clerical workers. Sometimes, the requirement to use English was legal, as when the British stipulated that English was to be the sole language of reference in treaties and contracts with China. Later, the motivation was aspirational, as parents in the periphery perceived the centre as a model of success and wanted their children to learn its language. These thick descriptions of the processes linking empire, finance, working life and education offer readers a satisfying explanatory model of the ways in which professional and economic subalternities structured the language choices of local elites across the globe.

In the later discussion chapters, O'Regan takes on ELF/World Englishes scholarship, asks whether Mandarin might displace English as hegemonic global language, and envisions a world without capitalism, in which “an unalienated, sustainable, humanitarian and linguistically diverse postmodernity which has been absented of the endless accumulation of capital” might prevail (O'Regan, 2021, p. 220). His objections to the World Englishes literature are understandable: there is an inherent contradiction in using normative standard English to criticise normative standard English; in espousing a “superdiverse translanguaging” without enacting it (Ch.7). He attributes this contradiction to the fundamental requirement in capitalism that norms be ongoingly reproduced. He also takes issue with the use, by Jenkins,

Widdowson and others, of the concept of “ownership” of a language (pp.186-187). While these are valid objections, I feel that the author goes too far in accusing these scholars of a “lack of self-awareness”, and of unconsciously reproducing normative grammar “in fetishistic fashion” (p.188). As O’Regan acknowledges, he himself also uses the standard register, but the fact that his own call for a plurilingual future identifies revolutionary change as a prerequisite does not necessarily make his work more reflective than that of others.

Throughout the book, the author asserts the validity of his modified formulation $M^E-C^E-M^E / M^E-M^E$. He acknowledges, with Marx and Wallerstein, the concrete historicity of the analysis, and frequently refers to the problem of overdetermination. This would seem to allow that the mapping of a standard language’s spread onto the growth of mobile capital is not axiomatic, and that many other co-determinants of language choices are in play at any given moment, not all of which are necessarily encompassed in O’Regan’s model. Why, for instance, did the Russian aristocracy in large part speak French for much of the 18th and 19th centuries (Ostler, 2005)? In addition, why did medieval Latin endure as a language of jurisprudence, liturgy, and medicine centuries into Europe’s age of vernacularisation? These questions could be answered in terms of symbolic capital, but it is worth asking whether simple path dependencies also played a role. Like the QWERTY keyboard or a pre-existing road network, one reason the Latin language – more commonly referred to in medieval times as “Grammatica” than as “Latina” (Ostler, 2005) – endured after the fall of the Roman empire was simply *because it was already there*.

In the case of English, no global linguistic infrastructure pre-existed colonial expansion, so one needed to be established, and among the coloniser languages, English won out. Here, it is absolutely plausible that it was the link to capital which gave English the edge. However, with Mandarin, it is different. The coming Chinese hegemony will likely differ in its history from that of the Anglo-American world and its satellites. If China gains the

economic and the technological edge in a world where an established linguistic infrastructure already exists – even if it attains structural power in transnational financial governance – then it is quite thinkable that a highly standardised English, disconnected from native speakers in “inner circle” countries (see e.g. Kachru, 1992), will remain a global norm for centuries, regardless of who is in charge. This is already being seen in the use of English in Sino-Korean-Japanese relations, as the author points out. Like Latin, Global English might well be “kicked upstairs” for this purpose, and the more language change takes place where English is spoken as vernacular, the more the transnational forms will stagnate into a dusty store of highly codified standard constructions.

Readers will find many more interesting cases and perspectives in the book than can be addressed in this review. Essentially, while O’Regan’s analysis may not be all encompassing, his core argument is profoundly convincing. It is backed up by a wealth of research on linguistic processes and user networks. His intervention is bound to play a central role in future scholarship on this topic for a long time to come.

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