Language and Social Justice

INGRID PILLER

Macquarie University, Australia

Linguistic injustice

Since the ancients, the answer to the question "What is justice?" has been "Justice is the overcoming of injustice" (Fraser 2012). Our ideas of what social justice might be are fundamentally shaped by the experience of injustice. In today's world, injustices on the basis of class, race, gender, or religion are readily apparent. Indeed, most contemporary liberal democracies have adopted legislation that makes discrimination on the basis of class, race, gender, or religion illegal.

Language is different. Discrimination on the basis of language is widely considered to be perfectly reasonable. For instance, we look back today in horror at the injustice of barring women and minorities from college admission or the vote. At the same time, we think nothing of applying language proficiency tests to determine eligibility for college admission or citizenship.

Research into language and social justice examines how language mediates access to social goods such as college admission or citizenship rights. That language can serve the purpose of social stratification is rooted in the fundamental fact of linguistic diversity.

Linguistic diversity

Linguistic diversity is a fundamental fact of language: no two people use language in exactly the same way. Linguistic diversity becomes most apparent when we think about different dialects (for instance, American English is obviously different from British English) and, even more so, when we think about different languages. English, Chinese, or Swahili are so different that they are not even mutually comprehensible. Humans are not only a linguistic species but also a multilingual species.

Linguistic diversity is further complicated by the fact that no one uses language in the same way all the time. This is most obvious in relation to language across the lifespan (my 50-year-old self speaks differently than my 20-year-old self did) or about language in context (chatting with a friend calls for a different way of using language than presenting yourself during a job interview).

The whole range of linguistic expression that a person has at their disposal is called linguistic repertoire. For most people today, their linguistic repertoire includes both spoken and written ways of using language, although 14% of the global adult population remains illiterate (UNESCO 2017). For most people, their linguistic repertoire also includes multilingual abilities, although exclusively monolingual repertoires remain common, particularly in the Anglosphere.

Linguistic repertoires are learned. Some ways of speaking are learned in the family, others in peer groups, and others still through formal education. Socially valued means of linguistic expression in particular (such as the ability to read and write, speak English, or use formal registers) are closely tied to schooling.

In short, language is highly diverse and the linguistic repertoire of a person is shaped by socialization and experience. This explains how language is different from more clearly embodied categories such as gender, race, or religion. However, it also shows that language can easily become a proxy for these, as people are socialized to use language in group-specific ways. Hearing a person speak without even seeing them will usually give listeners a pretty good idea about their background.

Linguistic hierarchies

Linguistic diversity is an expression of the kaleidoscope of human experience. However, the ubiquitous and inescapable fact of linguistic diversity is rarely as neutral as it is in the famous song line "you like tomato and I like tomato," where "tomato" is prounounced "tuh-mai-tuh" (/təˈmeɪtə/) versus "tuh-ma-tuh" (/təˈmɑ̯tə/). Much more commonly, we find that different linguistic repertoires are hierarchically ordered. The way they relate to each other can be thought of as a pyramid-like organigram (De Swaan 2001). The vast majority of languages, an estimated 98% of all the 5000 to 6000 languages in the world, cluster at the bottom of the pyramid. These "peripheral languages" are languages of local communication. Above the huge layer of peripheral languages sits a thin layer of "central languages." Central languages are usually the official languages of a nation-state. They are used in elementary and sometimes secondary education, in the media, and in national politics and bureaucracies. There are around 100 central languages in the world. The next layer is occupied by about a dozen "super-central languages," which serve in international and long-distance communication. Finally, the apex of the pyramid is currently occupied by only one single language, English, which De Swaan calls "hyper-central language."

Within languages, similar hierarchies can be observed: for instance, it has been estimated that 88% of Britons speak a dialect, 9% speak Standard English with a regional accent, and only 3% of the population speak Standard English with the most prestigious accent, Received Pronunciation (Trudgill 1974). Despite the fact that the details of linguistic variation in Britain have certainly changed since Trudgill conducted his study in the 1970s, the fact of the hierarchical ordering of linguistic repertoires remains; as does the fact that only a tiny minority of any society has the most valued linguistic forms at their disposal.

The latter fact is often met with incredulity. That only around one-tenth of any population would speak the standard language seems counterintuitive. Most people believe that the ratio is close to inverse. This misconception is a key plank in the relationship between language and social inequality. For language to become a site of social struggle it is a precondition "that speakers have virtually the same recognition of authorized usage, but very unequal knowledge of this usage" (Bourdieu 1991, 62).

This state of affairs is brought about primarily by the school system, but also by media and other forms of public communication, where dominant and highly valued ways of using language predominate. People are taught to recognize what the most valuable kinds of linguistic repertoires sound and look like but actual teaching how to produce those forms is patchy at best and intentionally restricted at worst.

The variety of language that is considered the most valuable linguistic repertoire differs from context to context. It is not necessarily the case that the standard language is always the most prestigious. Sociolinguists make a distinction between linguistic repertoires that have overt prestige (usually some form of standard language valued in formal public contexts) and those that have covert prestige (for instance, repertoires that sound streetwise or badass) (Labov 1966). The value of linguistic repertoires is also scaled and will differ along local, national, and global scales (Blommaert 2010). The more power-laden a given context, the more valuable the language associated with that context is considered to be. For the first time in human history there is today, in fact, a global ideal that is regarded almost universally as valuable: English or, to be more precise, Standard English spoken in a "native" American or British accent (Adejunmobi 2004). If 12% of British residents are proficient in that idealized variety, we can extrapolate that, at the most, 1% of the global population is similarly proficient.

The inculcation of a durable linguistic repertoire requires a significant investment: for instance, think of the process required to learn how to speak like a barrister or attorney. Privileged groups manage a seamless socialization into valued linguistic repertoires by aligning language in the home with the public ideal and by spending prolonged periods in formal education.

Because it is a long-term investment that is tied to socioeconomic privilege, socialization into valued linguistic repertoires is relatively rare. However, the connection of valued linguistic repertories with privilege is widely misrecognized (Bourdieu 1991). Instead of seeing valuable linguistic repertories as a result of socioeconomic privilege, they come to be seen as the cause of privilege. This misrecognition and the related desire to advance one's aspirations through linguistic means lead to considerable investment into language learning by the middle classes. This is, for instance, the case in the global English language-teaching industry (Piller and Cho 2013; Proctor 2014).

The processes of linguistic subordination outlined so far carry their own injustices. This is the case when certain linguistic repertoires – and, crucially, their speakers – are represented as inferior and are made to feel ashamed of their language (Piller 2017). What is more, once language has become accepted as an index of speaker status – be it group membership or personal worth – it becomes a perfect gatekeeping mechanism.

Linguistic access

Most social goods are mediated by institutions: education, employment, healthcare, justice, or welfare all require an engagement with institutions. Opportunities to access institutions and, particularly, to access advantageous positions in institutions are not usually equitably distributed. Language constitutes a key gatekeeping mechanism. In

fact, the importance of language as an exclusionary mechanism has been increasing for two reasons (Piller 2016). First, as pointed out above, where legislation has made discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or country of origin illegal but old prejudices have not disappeared, linguistic discrimination can serve as a proxy. Second, in many societies across the globe, migration has resulted in a significant increase in linguistic diversity and institutions are not always well-equipped to adapt to the changing linguistic needs of their clientele. Given that all social life is inevitably conducted through the medium of a particular language, a lack of proficiency in the medium of an institution constitutes a significant disadvantage (Brubaker 2014).

Education is a key mechanism both for individual development but also for the distribution of socioeconomic opportunities. Where language barriers exist in this domain, they constitute an injustice. Schools generally adopt a monolingual ethos, even if they serve highly linguistically diverse student populations (Ellis, Gogolin, and Clyne 2010). Students who arrive at school without proficiency in the language of schooling face a double burden: they have to learn the language of schooling simultaneously with learning new content through the medium of that language. Usually, they do so in the presence of peers who are already proficient in the language of schooling and thus can devote all their energy to content learning. Usually, they are also burdened by deficit views that only focus on the linguistic repertoires they do not (yet) have while rendering invisible or stigmatizing the linguistic repertoires they bring (Mary and Young 2018).

This mismatch between the language of schooling and a child's home language(s) constitutes a major disadvantage for minority children. Its consequences for educational success go far beyond language learning, as is apparent from Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data which show that, in most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, first- and second-generation migrant students significantly underperform in the sciences compared to peers without a migrant background (OECD 2016, 241–262).

It is patently unjust that schools fail to cater to the educational needs of students who arrive without proficiency in the language of schooling. The injustice of lower educational achievement – compared to peers who arrive at school with proficiency in the language of schooling – is compounded over a lifetime, as educational achievement is a predictor not only of career success and lifetime earnings but also indicators of social dysfunction such as teenage pregnancies (Glynn et al. 2018).

Students from language backgrounds different from the language of schooling are disadvantaged because of a mismatch between their language repertoires and those of the school. The same is true with regard to all institutions: linguistic minorities face the double burden of having to learn a new language (or language variety) at the same time that they also have to communicate through that very medium – be that in learning content, job performance, describing medical symptoms, or responding to bureaucratic scrutiny (for an overview of research related to these domains, see Avineri et al. 2018; Piller 2016).

How to overcome linguistic injustice

If social justice is the overcoming of injustice, then we need to ask how the linguistic injustices outlined here can be overcome. Different types of action are called for with regard to the two key areas at the interface of language and social justice – linguistic subordination and discriminatory access to social goods.

With regard to linguistic subordination, anthropologists and linguists have long argued for the equal value of all languages. Ever since the pioneering work of Franz Boas, academics have endeavored to combat linguistic subordination by disseminating knowledge about the equal value of all languages. While they have been largely successful in dispelling ideas about the inherent superiority of some languages (usually European) over others (usually indigenous to former colonies), they have made little headway in changing the social value of subordinate languages. These languages continue to disappear at an alarming rate as the processes of misrecognition outlined above lead evermore people to try and improve their circumstances by joining dominant language groups (Bradley and Bradley 2013) (see Endangered Languages and Language Death). However, the supposed remedy – acquiring valued linguistic capital through language learning and language shift – cannot work as long as language remains a means of social stratification. This is because the goalposts of what constitutes valued linguistic capital inevitably shift: in South Korea, for instance, English language proficiency has long been touted as the high road to socioeconomic advancement. However, as more and more Koreans studied English, it was no longer just "English" that was valued but English with a "native" accent. For the inculcation of the latter extended stays in an Anglophone country at an early stage became necessary. As such study-abroad periods have also become more common, the goalposts are shifting yet again. Now one of the most valued forms of English language proficiency combines a "native" accent with exceptionally good looks as they result from plastic surgery (Cho 2017; Park 2009).

Different ways of seeing the relationship between language and social justice are also needed when it comes to redressing injustices resulting from differential access. Where access to education, employment, healthcare, or welfare is denied on the basis of language, a belief in the personal responsibility of the individual continues to prevail. Not being able to access the social goods of an institution because of a mismatch between the language of the institution and the language of the individual is widely believed to be the fault of the individual, who is then castigated for not learning the language and exhorted to learn the language. However, given the difficulties inherent in language learning, and particularly adult language learning, and the time it takes to be socialized into required linguistic repertoires, this approach is doubly unjust. It denies equitable access and, at the same time, amounts to victim blaming.

The next step in overcoming linguistic injustice thus needs to be the promotion of an understanding that it is the responsibility of institutions to ensure equitable access, rather than the responsibility of individuals. How this can be achieved will differ for different institutions and in different contexts. If schools, for instance, continue to operate largely monolingually and to promote the standard language – and there are good

reasons for doing so – they will need to address students' language needs systemati-cally. This will likely include a combination of explicit language teaching of the school language, home languages and, outside the Anglophone world, foreign language teach-ing. Additionally, it will include the integration of language and content learning across the curriculum and, hence, the integration of language modules into teacher training (Gogolin et al. 2011). Some multilingual service provision might also be required to ensure strong school–parent partnerships so that all parents, irrespective of language background, can take an active role in their children's education. Institutions outside the education sector will require different approaches but a mix of language-learning support and multilingual service provision is likely to enhance access throughout. At this moment in time, the main challenge is the recognition of linguistic disadvantage. Researchers conducting institutional ethnographies and undertaking advocacy roles have a key contribution to make.

SEE ALSO: Bilingualism and Multilingualism; Boas, Franz; Bourdieu, Pierre; Bureau-cracy; Diversity, Linguistic; English as a World Language; Halliday, Michael; Inter-cultural Communication; Immigration; Language, Globalization, and Colonialism; Language and Power; Language Prejudice; Linguistic Diversity and Plurality in Africa; Linguistic Diversity and Plurality in East Asia; Stereotype; Workplace Communication

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Adejunmobi, Moradewun. 2004. *Vernacular Palaver: Imaginations of the Local and Non-native Languages in West Africa*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Avineri, Netta, Laura R. Graham, Erin J. Johnson, Robin C. Riner, and Jonathan Rosa. 2018. *Language and Social Justice in Practice*. London: Routledge.

Blommaert, Jan. 2010. *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bradley, David, and Maya Bradley, eds. 2013. *Language Endangerment and Language Mainte-nance: An Active Approach*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Brubaker, Rogers. 2014. "Linguistic and Religious Pluralism: Between Difference and Inequal-ity." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41 (1): 3–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.925391.

Cho, Jinhyun. 2017. *Interpreting English Language Ideologies in Korea: Dreams vs*. Realities. Ams-terdam: Springer.

De Swaan, Abrams. 2001. *Words of the World: The Global Language System*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ellis, Elizabeth M., Ingrid Gogolin, and Michael Clyne. 2010. "The Janus Face of Monolingual-ism: A Comparison of German and Australian Language Education Policies." *Current Issues in Language Planning* 11 (4): 439–460.

Fraser, Nancy. 2012. "On Justice: Lessons from Plato, Rawls and Ishiguro." *New Left Review* 74: 41–51.

Glynn, Judith R., Bindu S. Sunny, Bianca DeStavola, Albert Dube, Menard Chihana, Alison J. Price, and Amelia C. Crampin. 2018. "Early School Failure Predicts Teenage Pregnancy and

Marriage: A Large Population-based Cohort Study in Northern Malawi." *PloS One* 13 (5): e0196041–e0196041. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0196041.

Gogolin, Ingrid, Inci Dirim, Imke Lange, Drorit Lengyel, Ute Michel, Ursula Neumann, Hans H. Reich, Hans-Joachim Roth, and Knut Schwippert. 2011. *Förderung von Kindern und Jugendlichen mit Migrationshintergrund* [Supporting children and youths with a migrant background]. Münster: Waxmann.

Labov, William. 1966. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Mary, Latisha, and Andrea Young. 2018. "Parents in the Playground, Headscarves in the School and an Inspector Taken Hostage: Exercising Agency and Challenging Dominant Deficit Discourses in a Multilingual Pre-school in France." *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 31 (3): 318–332. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2018.1504403.

OECD. 2016. *PISA 2015 Results,* Volume I. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/publication/9789264266490-en (accessed 6 December 2019).

Park, Joseph S.-Y. 2009. *The Local Construction of a Global Language: Ideologies of English in South Korea*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Piller, Ingrid. 2016. *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Piller, Ingrid. 2017. "Explorations in Language Shaming." http://www.languageonthemove.com/explorations-in-language-shaming (accessed 6 December 2019).

Piller, Ingrid, and Jinhyun Cho. 2013. "Neoliberalism as Language Policy." *Language in Society* 42 (1): 23–44.

Proctor, Lavanya M. 2014. "English and Globalization in India: The Fractal Nature of Discourse." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 24 (3): 294–314. https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12056.

Trudgill, Peter. 1974. *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

UNESCO. 2017. "Literacy Rates Continue to Rise from One Generation to the Next." http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs45-literacy-rates-continue-rise-generation-to-next-en-2017.pdf (accessed 6 December 2019).