1 Do Linguists Need Economics and Economists Linguistics?

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1.1 Preliminaries: Is It Useful to Bridge Economics and Linguistics?

As much as interdisciplinarity has been acclaimed during the last half century or so, academic disciplines still operate like “churches,” with their practitioners still adhering faithfully to their traditional theoretical frameworks, research paradigms, and methodological toolboxes. Most of the relevant self-proclaimed interdisciplinary scholars have typically imported, from the other discipline, a superficial or incomplete understanding of how its practitioners approach the relevant subject matter.

Unfortunately, when ideas or approaches from a discipline are adopted inadequately, those who claim ownership of these are critical and sometimes prompted to focus more on the shortcomings than on redressing them constructively. The clashes may be more significant when, in the present case, one camp, economists, swears by modeling and big numbers, including statistics, whereas the other, linguists, relies on fieldwork and messy data.

The goal of the workshop that resulted in the present book was to better understand the other discipline’s theoretical and methodological toolbox, especially how its practitioners conceived of notions such as market, resources, capital, language, indexicality, and commodification/commoditization, to cite just a few notions of common currency in both linguistics and economics. In other words, we wanted to find out whether linguists and economists can communicate and collaborate productively, despite differences in the ways we have invoked notions from each other’s discipline.

A question that readers may want to ask is why, in the first place, linguists should want to engage with economics and economists with linguistics. The reasons for linguists are both scientific and political. Economists’ discussions or invocations of language in their scholarship, especially those pertaining to economic development, prompt us linguists to re-examine our own disciplinary traditions about the relevance of languages to the welfare of their speakers, particularly in their socioeconomic and political structures.
In the same vein, we are reminded that languages have many facets and are not the exclusive research domain of linguists. Thus, economists’ interest in language challenges us linguists to ask what we could do more adequately or how we could enrich our accounts with explanations that can better inform economists’ interest in language, if we are not satisfied with their discourse about it. Since languages are evidently not the exclusive research domain of linguistics, it should benefit our discipline to check whether the professional preoccupations of economists and their approaches may not inform in useful ways our discussions of non-structural aspects of languages. We hope that they may overcome some of the shortcomings we perceive in their invocations of languages, especially in their applied scholarship from, for example, our ethnographic and sociologically based accounts of language use.

We believe that an improved cross-disciplinary dialogue can be productive and help both economists and linguists move forward toward empirically more adequate ways of formulating research questions where we share interests. In the process, we can better engage each other in our respective fields, making them also mutually more accessible, for example, in the area of language policies for formal education and the workplace. Why do we linguists insist on the benefits of education in the mother tongue when we could also be speaking of education in the dominant vernacular of the child or the lingua franca of the social environment? And why have economists focused typically on the financial costs (as opposed to the social benefits) of implementing formal education in a particular language? Can we not sit together and try to find out whether there is room for compromise?

We are not at all advocating an “economics turn” in linguistics or a “linguistics turn” in economics. At a time when interdisciplinarity is highly prized, it should help linguists and economists to educate each other on issues that involve language and economic development, language and poverty (the title of two books in linguistics, viz. Williams 1970; Harbert et al. 2009), the economics of language practice, economic practices and language vitality, and so forth.

On the other hand, important sociopolitical stakes appear to be at play in the proposed dialogue between linguists and economists, especially for those linguists whose work is animated by social justice. Despite their extensive contributions to some pressing sociopolitical issues such as the role played by language in the (re)production of socioeconomic inequality, the voices of these linguists have typically remained ignored by political actors (with some exceptions), compared with those of economists (Vigouroux 2014). Unlike their economist counterparts, linguists have been unable to make their findings relevant to decision makers in politics. Are they just unable to state in concrete...
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terms the social implications of their analyses and especially to articulate specific ways in which the social inequalities engendered by institutionalized or grassroots language policies can be addressed?

In a noteworthy article, aptly titled “Economic Imperialism,” Stanford University economist Edward Lazear explains the success of his discipline as follows:

[T]he weakness of economics is that to be rigorous, simplifying assumptions must be made that constrain the analysis and narrow the focus of the researcher. It is for this reason that the broader-thinking sociologists, anthropologists and perhaps psychologists may be better at identifying issues, but worse at providing answers. (2000: 103)

It is noteworthy that he does not mention linguists. In any case, the success of economists in the political decision-making arena has greatly benefited from modern democracies’ fetishism of big numbers and of rational formalism that bureaucracy embraces (Porter 1995). They speak the language that policy makers understand and provide the “evidence” they believe in. As stated by Grin (2003: 1), “[t]he ‘economics of language’, or ‘language economics’, as a field of research plays a marginal role in academia, but an increasingly important one in practice.” Unlike linguists, economists have a blueprint, which makes them reader to provide answers and suggest specific solutions when they are approached by decision makers.

In the same vein, we believe that a sustained dialogue with economists may prompt linguists to reassess some of their ideological stances regarding language vitality. They may want to reassess sometimes whether what they propose as plans to revitalize endangered languages may not wind up being a disservice to the populations they intend to help, especially if the revitalization plans do not also involve empowering the languages economically (Mufwene 2010, 2016a, 2017). As observed in Mufwene (2010: 921), when it comes to poverty, “language is often only an epiphenomenon of a problem that is fundamentally non-linguistic.” We believe that, by educating each other, linguists and economists will provide more informative, if not more accurate, assessments of the relationship between economy and language. Thus, the proposed bridge between linguistics and economics may lead both parties to propose empirically more realistic responses for the relevant populations that are disadvantaged by their respective socioeconomic structures. We view such a cross-disciplinary dialogue as a pragmatic turn to better understand the socioeconomic world in which the speakers evolve and, for too many, in which they struggle daily.

1 Note that the practice of economic imperialism is claimed by the Nobel Prize laureate Gary Becker himself when he states, “‘Economic imperialism’ is probably a good description of what I do” (1990: 39).
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Grin et al. (2010: 4) explain the lack of cross-pollination between economics and linguistics as follows:

[T]he analytical categories with which linguists study language use at work, or the way in which some arguments in applied linguistics unfold, may sometimes strike economists as markedly different from what they are used to. It is therefore unsurprising that for the most part, economists’ writings about language make little reference, if any, to the contributions of linguists, except in the most general terms.

This ignorance of the relevant scholarship in the other academic field, which also applies to linguists toward economics, is worth elaborating here. The bridges fostered by interdisciplinarity reflect efforts by some scholars to overcome the intellectual isolationism that came along with the traditional allocation of particular subject matters to specific academic disciplines. This isolationism obtains both in the Foucauldian sense of regimentation and as the division of disciplines. It reflects the dominant liberal ideology of the nineteenth century according to which modernity was defined by a distinction between three different spheres – the market, the State, and the civil society – and thus between scholarly disciplines associated with them, respectively, economics, political sciences, and sociology (Wallerstein 2004). These different spheres were expected to operate according to different research methods or paradigms and were therefore conceived of ideally as separate from each other. It is because in reality neither the political nor the linguistic nor the economic “can be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society” (Mouffe 1993: 3) that some scholars now feel the need to cross the artificial disciplinary boundaries (Hearn 2003). As Halliday and Martin (1993: 11) aptly sum up, “Human history is as much a history of semiotic activity as it is of socio-economic activity.”

1.2 Language Economics

The scholarship of economists on language must be situated in the broader context of disciplinary boundary-crossing in which their discipline has engaged since the 1960s, under the leadership of University of Chicago economist, sociologist, and Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker. Topics such as social interactions, choice of life partners, religious affiliations, addiction, and discriminations against particular groups, which had traditionally been in the domains of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, have since been taken up by economists, who have extended their theoretical and methodological tool kits to explain social behavior.

Before becoming the name of a sub-field of economics, the term language economics was used first by economist Jacob Marschak as the title of a 1965
paper, in which he justified his economics approach to language. He therein also apologized both to economists, for taking communication as a relevant issue for economics rather than sticking to the “production and distribution of marketable goods,” and to linguists, for his ignorance of linguistics and simplistic view of language.

Marschak (1965) was interested in how, from an evolutionary point of view, (features of) a “communication system” may prevail over other alternatives. His language evolution model is informed by the Darwinian theory of the “survival of the best fitted traits to an environment” (138). Social ecological factors are taken into account under the notion of scale of values, which, according to him, is determined by the “socially dominant group” (139). Inspired by both Zipf’s law and Mandelbrot’s work, he argues that effort and cost are two major factors that explain, for instance, the evolutionary shift from long words (e.g. automobile or motocar) to short ones (viz. car). According to him, the shorter alternative “saves one’s breath” (139), although he concedes that “the benefit of greater precision achieved by frequent use of some long words outweighs the disadvantages of effort and delay” (140). As shown later, the cost-and-benefit approach to language has informed economists’ analyses of speakers’ language choices during the acquisition process and in multilingual settings, as well as their recommendations to governments to promote particular languages over others in their respective polities.

Zhang & Grenier (2013) distinguish two strands of economics approaches to language: (1) the game theory approach adopted by economists such as Rubinstein (2000) and (2) the economics of language alternative, which emerged in the 1970s, led in particular by the Québécois economist François Vaillancourt. In his book *Economics and Language*, Rubinstein (2000) explains that his approach differs from the economics of language alternative in that he treats language not as a variable but as a system in which optimal mechanisms operate under various constraints that generate complexity. In his own words, he applies “‘economic-like’ analyses to address linguistic issues” (2000: 4).

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2 In this chapter, we use *language economics* and *economics of language* interchangeably, like Grin (2003).

3 Note that Marschak’s Zipfian glottometric approach to language is reminiscent of the French linguist André Martinet’s (1949, 1955) principle of economy in language. According to him, linguistic behavior is shaped by a combination of the satisfaction of communication needs and the minimization of effort. In his book *Économie des changements phonétiques*, Martinet (1955: 94) acknowledges Zipf’s “principle of least effort” (1949) in shaping his theory on economy in language. The principle had actually been articulated earlier by the French philosopher Guillaume Ferrero in a (1894) article titled “L’inertie mentale et la loi du moindre effort.” Zipf just popularized it. An even earlier precursor of the invocation of this principle can also be attributed to an article titled “The Principle of Economy as a Phonetic Force” (1877), in which William Dwight Whitney discusses the cost of change “for the convenience of use,” which must be balanced by some conservative pressure for adequate communication.
This strand of research is marginal to the perspectives developed by the contributors of this book. So, we focus the rest of our discussion on topics usually associated with language economics, which Grin (1996) defines as follows:

[T]he paradigm of mainstream theoretical economics [which] uses the concepts and tools of economics in the study of relationships featuring linguistic variables; it focuses principally, but not exclusively, on those relationships in which economic variables also play a part. (1996: 18)

This body of work includes a vast array of topics, including language policy; costs and benefits of multilingualism at the micro scale of the workplace (Grin et al. 2010), of the nation-state, or of the European Union; and language skills and production. It also covers language and ethnic diversity, migrants’ language-based differential access to the job market, the economic effects of language maintenance by immigrants (and their children), migrants’ language proficiency and their economic adjustment to their host society, and the costs of translation. Gazzola et al.’s (2016) twenty-six-page bibliography provides an up-to-date overview of this strand of research, which complements the study by Grin (1996). (See also Ginsburgh & Weber 2016.) Because of space limitations, we discuss only a subset of these topics that are related to the chapters of this book.

The work on language undertaken by Québécois economists in the 1970s aimed at accounting for the economic disadvantages long experienced by the Francophone Québécois relative to the advantages of their Anglophone counterparts. This research was inscribed in the broader political context of the Révolution tranquille (“quiet revolution”) era (1960–1966), which put into power a liberal government engaged in economic and sociocultural reforms aimed at redressing the socioeconomic disparities between the two language communities.

In his overview of the work conducted by Québécois economists during the 1970s and 1980s, Vaillancourt (1985) explains how language was examined first and foremost as an attribute of ethnicity, which accounted for wage differences between Anglophones and Francophones. Likewise, Raynauld & Marion (1972) show how the combination of segregation with discrimination had a direct impact on earning differences between the two ethnolinguistic groups. For the year 1961, they report that the

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4 Porter’s (1965) highly influential sociological study on social class in Canada highlights the overlap of ethnolinguistic (English-French) categories with socioeconomic classes.

5 For them, SEGREGATION explains the fact that on the Québécois labor market, Francophones and Anglophones tend to be employed mostly by employers of their respective ethnolinguistic groups, whereas DISCRIMINATION accounts for differences in earnings.
wages of Francophone males in the Montreal region were 20% lower than those of their Anglophone counterparts, with the same level of education. Vaillancourt (1980) confirms these inequities, showing wage disparities of 4% in Québec City and 6% in Montreal in favor of monolingual Anglophones. The disparities were also correlated with differences in levels of education and types of occupation. In addition, he demonstrates that French-English bilingualism brings monetary returns only to Francophones at the scale of 10% in Québec and 6% in Montreal. Several earlier studies had highlighted the significant decrease of earning disparities between Anglophones and Francophones for the 1961–81 period. (See Vaillancourt 1980, 1996, for references.)

In subsequent studies, economists shifted from interpreting language as indexing ethnicity to invoking it as a means of communication, although more recent studies combine both approaches. For example, in the context of international trade, Carr (1985) argues that English, which he characterizes as the “language of Americans,” has become the accepted lingua franca, similar to the dollar, which functions as “the currency of all currencies” (our translation) in some trade blocs. He applies a cost-and-benefit analysis according to which sharing the same language reduces the transaction costs associated with communication. He further argues that although both language and money qualified as “elements of wealth,” they differ strikingly, because the overuse of money leads to its depreciation whereas (non-indigenous) languages depreciate when they are underused. (We return later to this remark, on which the chapter by Abram de Swaan sheds more light.)

On the basis of the fact that English is the dominant language both in Canada and on the international trade market, Carr (1985) recommends the development of bilingualism only for French Canadians. He argues that while facilitating communication between the two communities, this policy (which is contrary to the current requirement for Canadian civil servants to be bilingual in English and French) would reduce the costs of training bilinguals and relieve the Anglophone public servants of the (unnecessary) burden of having to learn a minority language, viz. French. He reasons that if the Francophone public servants speak English, their Anglophone counterparts will slowly lose their motivation to speak French simply because it is underused. This process should cause French to depreciate and make it less investment worthy. Needless to say that the proposed policy is antithetical to what the Francophone Québécois have been fighting against, viz. discrimination against their language and culture and the fact that English has made them less competitive on the job market, thus bearing negatively on their standard of living. The reduction of monetary costs to the State does not necessarily improve the welfare of the concerned population.
1.3 Language as a Human Capital

According to Vaillancourt (1985) and Grin & Vaillancourt (1997a), the analysis of language as a human capital was a major shift in economists’ invocation of language in their scholarship. We argue later that this shift enabled economists to discuss language as an asset that individuals or governments can invest in and therefore as an important factor that must be taken into account in the development of some policies. For instance, should a particular language, rather than another or others, be promoted as the language of the formal economy and the medium of formal education? And what would be the costs and benefits of implementing such a policy? (Victor Ginsburgh & Shlomo Weber return to this in Chapter 2; see also Ginsburgh & Weber 2011, Chapter 5.)

A human capital differs from its non-human counterpart (e.g. machines, tools, and land) by its embodied nature. As Schultz (1961: 48) puts it, 

\[ \text{The distinctive mark of human capital is that it is a part of man. It is human because it is embodied in man, and capital because it is a source of future satisfactions, or of future earnings, or of both.}\]

Its embodied character is the outcome either of acquisition, for instance, through education or apprenticeship, or of inheritance, viz. genetic transmission.\(^6\) (On genetics as human capital, see Foucault 1979/2004.) Analyzing language as a capital has led economists to treat it as an independent variable comparable with education and a worker’s on-the-job experience.

Regarding language, the distinction articulated by economists between “acquired” and “inherited” abilities corresponds to, respectively, that of “first” or “home” language versus “second” or “foreign” language.\(^7\) While both are considered as capitals, a speaker’s first language is generally taken as indexing his or her ethnic identity (thus as inherited), unlike other languages, whose learning is believed to be a matter of decision and “technical” competence. Although most economists calculate the costs of developing this competence in relation to formal education, Grin (2003: 20) correctly points out that a language can also be acquired naturalistically, for instance, by residing in a “foreign” place and making an effort to interact with its speakers or marrying a speaker of a different first language and thereby learning it.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Health is generally included as one of the components of human capital (see, e.g. Schultz 1961). Treating it either as inherited (viz. having “good” genes or a “preexisting health condition”) or as the outcome of acquisition (e.g. through eating well or exercising) can have very concrete socioeconomic consequences for people, as they can be denied health care coverage or pay a higher insurance premium. Part of the current health care debates in the United States is about this issue. Regarding language, we return to this in the main text.

\(^7\) On the problematic use of the notion home language, see Blommaert (2017).

\(^8\) Note that, unlike in many data sets used by economists, the Swiss survey cited in Grin (2003) contains a question regarding naturalistic language learning: “non-school channels of L2 acquisition.”
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The distinction between “inherited” and “acquired” capitals is not just theoretical; it can have very concrete socioeconomic implications for the workplace as shown by Alarcón & Heyman (2013). In their sociolinguistic study of bilingual call centers in El Paso, Texas, they explain that American employers justify their practice of generally not awarding a premium to their bilingual Spanish English employees by framing Mexican Americans’ proficiency in Spanish as “inherited,” thus not costly, rather than as “acquired.” This practice can, of course, be characterized as economic exploitation, since these employees were initially recruited also because of their bilingual skills, which enable the companies to make profits in additionally attracting a Spanish-speaking clientele.

Notwithstanding the fact that a speaker can have more than one “mother tongue” (like one of the editors, who acquired both Kiyansi and Kituba as a child), the claim that one’s first language *ipso facto* indexes their ethnic or national identity is disputable. It rests essentially on the Western European one-nation-one-language ideology since the nineteenth century, according to which every language or dialect is associated with a particular polity or region, overlooking cases where languages or dialects straddle political boundaries. As discussed in Vigouroux & Mufwene (2016a), in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, it is not uncommon for a speaker to claim ethnic membership in a particular group without speaking its language. By the same token, people speaking an African vehicular language as (their only) mother tongue need not trace their ancestry in the region where the language originated, nor need they pledge some ethnic allegiance to it.

One should bear in mind that the ideologically loaded entanglement of language, identity, and territory helps shape epistemic categorizations such as in Grin et al. (2010), in which the category IMMIGRANTS’ LANGUAGES is conflated with that of IMMIGRANT. According to the commonly made distinction between the biological and the sociocultural, a self-declared Polish native speaker in France, who is of Polish descent, is likely to be put into a distinct statistical category from a French native speaker, although both individuals may well have been socialized in French in similar ways and have developed similar competences in it. Noteworthy is also the reified distinction between native and non-native speakers, which economists often invoke in their analyses of language data and therefore shape their conclusions. For instance, Chiswick & Miller (2007) use data from the 2000 US census to model immigrants’ language skills. In it, language-related questions are articulated around a location identified as “home,” which is correlated with the distinction between English and other language(s), as in the question “Does this person speak a language other than English at home?”

If the answer to the question is “No,” the interviewee goes directly to a question regarding his or her place of birth. In case the answer is positive, he or she must indicate the language spoken at home (responding to the question
“What is this language?”) and rate his or her oral competence in English (in response to “How well does this person speak English?”) according to four units of proficiency: “very well,” “well,” “not well,” or “not at all.” The very fact that a self-declared native speaker of English is not asked to rate his or her own competence in English rests on the assumption that at most he or she speaks English “perfectly.” Alternatively, the question is considered irrelevant, a position that economists seem to embrace (Gazzola et al. 2020), although a number of linguists have called attention to the ideologically loaded notion of native speaker (e.g. Singh 1998; Davies 2003; Doerr 2009). Some native speakers are better speakers than others, who may be characterized as poor or sloppy speakers, among other ways. These differences may be socially consequential for the speakers; for instance, a person may be denied a job because of his or her poor communication skills.

This ideological difference highlights radically different ways of conceptualizing language, viz. strictly denotational for economists and both denotational and indexical for linguists. While economists and linguists share an understanding of language as a means of communication (and consequently an identity marker for its speakers, relative to, for instance, nationhood, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class), they differ radically in the ways they operationalize it. For economists, a language is typically an abstract, asocial, ahistorical, and statistically measurable entity, whereas for socially oriented linguists, it is a practice grounded in its sociohistorical ecology. It consists of more than one register, is associated with particular ideologies, and is endowed with social, cultural, and economic values shaped by the history of its speakers. Treating a language as a human capital also rests on the assumption that a language can be conceived of as a separate resource whose economic consequences for an individual or a society can be derived from its intrinsic nature.

According to economists, benefits derived from the accumulation of human capitals need not be exclusively monetary. As Schultz (1961: 75) puts it, [S]ome of [the investment in the human capital] is for future well being in forms that are not captured in the earnings stream of the individual in whom the investments are made.

Thus, the rewards may also be social, such as when the ability to speak a language enables an individual to expand his or her social network. Yet, the non-monetary value of a social agent’s language proficiency or multilingualism is harder to model than its monetary counterpart commonly assessed by economists on the basis of wage premium, provided that other variables such as education, professional experience, economic sector, and place or region of residence are held constant. For instance, Saiz & Zoido (2005) show that multilingual American graduate students working in management and business services earn more than their English monolingual counterparts holding