Bridging Linguistics and Economics

Linguistics has had a significant and evident impact on economics, and vice versa. However, this mutually beneficial relationship has so far remained under-exploited. This rich volume brings together an international range of scholars, to bridge the gap between these two distinct but increasingly interrelated disciplines. It covers areas such as the role of economic factors in the maintenance or loss of languages, the relationship between speakers’ language choices and economic practices, the relevance of economic development to the spread of modern communication technology, and the role of language in economic development. It represents a critical call to arms for researchers and students in both fields to engage in better-informed ways with the work of the other. By sharing both linguistic and economic ideas, the editors and the other contributors foster a clear dialogue between the two disciplines, which will inform the rapidly emerging field of “language economics”.

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Bridging Linguistics and Economics

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Preface

The ultimate beginnings of this book lie in the interest that we the editors have expressed in the role that socioeconomic structures have played in determining the varying language choices speakers make in situations of language contact and multilingualism. Contrary to the received doctrine in the scholarship on language endangerment and loss, we have argued that globalization, especially as discussed by economists, accounts only partly for the spread of English as the foremost lingua franca of business, diplomacy, and science and technology around the world. It plays a negligible role in the general demise of indigenous languages and the death of non-dominant European languages in former European settlement colonies, which is contrary to the fate of the vast majority of indigenous languages in the former exploitation colonies of Africa and Asia, where large numbers of small populations, typically rural, have maintained their ethnic vernaculars.

The idea of the book also arose from our frequent invocations of the role of informal economy and of the underdevelopment of modern economies in former European exploitation colonies in sustaining both most of the indigenous languages, small and major ones, and the strong position of indigenous lingua francas next to that of the European (co-)official languages. Some of the lingua francas, such as Lingala in Kinshasa and Swahili in Nairobi and Dar es Salam, have actually been encroaching upon some of the elite domains of some of the European languages. They are now accepted in parliamentary transactions. We have argued that informal economy has not only helped several migrants within Africa and elsewhere survive in their host countries but also contributed to the spread of some of the home countries' lingua francas as their primary languages of socialization in their new places of residence. To be sure, patterns of interaction, more frequently among themselves than with citizens of the host country, have played an important role in fostering this form of language shift. One can observe this, for instance, among the DRC Congolese in South Africa and Belgium, most of whom have embraced Lingala as their lingua franca even if they had not spoken it at home. It is also true among Nigerians in the United States and in the United Kingdom, who claim Nigerian Pidgin English as their national language, and among Senegalese in Little Senegal in Harlem, New York,
who socialize in Urban Wolof, regardless of the heritage ethnic languages they had spoken in Senegal.

It is this realization of the relevance of socioeconomic structures and economic practices to language maintenance and loss that led us to the discovery of “language economics” as an academic discipline. This is practiced especially by economists but also by some sociologists who, among other things, have invoked multilingualism to account for poor economic development and for difficulties faced by schools in most countries of the Global South. We were led to wonder why linguists, especially those practicing applied linguistics, had expressed little interest in this research area or if they knew about it at all. The field can be traced as far back as 1965, with the pioneering article by Jacob Marschak, “Economics of Language,” published in *Behavioral Science* 10: 135–40. In the process, we also noted the fact that economic notions such as market, market value, symbolic capital, resource, profit, and commodification have been in common currency for the past two decades or so in linguistic anthropology and qualitative sociolinguistics, thanks especially to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist who saw languages as resources or commodities. However, those who have been influenced by Bourdieu have generally neither developed an interest in language economics nor questioned whether he had interpreted the terms as they are used in economics. Yet, orthodox economists have generally been critical of his (metaphoric) interpretations of core economic notions.

So, in 2014, we hosted a workshop at the University of Chicago Center in Paris, jointly sponsored by the Collegium de Lyon (the Institute for Advanced Study), the Center in Paris, and the Neubauer Collegium and the Humanities Institute of the University of Chicago. Linguists, economists, and sociologists were invited to exchange ideas about either ways in which economists’ approaches could be applied in linguistics or how conceptions of language in linguistics could inform economists’ invocations of language in their scholarship. We were even reminded of the fact that, independent of the above, linguists had often invoked principles of parsimony in analyses of linguistic structures, showing preference (since Ferdinand de Saussure, André Martinet, and Noam Chomsky) for analyses that were more economic(al), in the sense of capturing “significant generalizations” with the fewest rules or constraints that applied. The end result was an invitation extended to some of the participants in the workshop to contribute to the present book.

The chapters in this volume show more breadth and complexity in the subject matter than we had anticipated regarding how linguistics and economics can be bridged productively to account for various topics. Examples include language vitality, linguistic survival strategies among the migrants, languages as capitals or linguistic features as resources that can be managed (in cases of plurilingualism), language policies in multilingual nations, language in
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education (especially in multilingual polities), language and economic development, economic affluence and language practice on the Internet, and mobility and investment in linguistic skills. There are a host of other topics that we discuss in Chapter 1.

The fact that languages are social phenomena underscores the reality that some aspects of their functions and positions in society cannot be addressed from purely linguistic perspectives no more than economists, political scientists and politicians, and sociologists talk about languages apparently without paying much attention to how (socially oriented) linguists theorize about them. We thought it would be helpful to produce this volume in which economists, sociologists, and linguists discuss side by side common topics of our societies in which languages play a central role. The chapters alternate between those written by linguists and those by non-linguists. In Chapter 1, we highlight various ways in which the reader can engage with them, to realize how vexed some of the topics and issues are and why the chapters are primarily prompts to think harder over them. We hope that the reader will find this indirect dialogue helpful toward bridging especially economics and linguistics in matters of language in society, political integration, economic development, maintenance of cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and so forth.

We are grateful to our sponsors, mentioned earlier, to Alain Peyraube, the then director of the Collegium de Lyon, for all the financial and moral support he gave to our scholarly ventures, and to Sebastien Greppo, the administrative director of the University of Chicago Center in Paris, for single-handedly attending to the logistics that made our workshop so productive. We also thank all the contributors for their cooperation and patience during the long time it took us to edit their chapters and produce this book. We also appreciate their cooperation in responding to the comments of the external reviewers, to whom we are indebted, as their meticulous and critical reading of the original draft helped improve the quality of this book. We hope the authors agree with us that the end product is worth the wait and reflects our common engagement with the intersection of economics and linguistics, as well as our openness to issues raised by scholars in either discipline about how the others are dealing with language or economy in society. We present here the willingness we shared at the 2014 workshop to build this bridge between our traditional trainings toward a common interdisciplinary area, regardless of whether it should be identified as “language economics,” “the economics of language,” or by any other name.