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Abstract

The notion of language as a fetish imagines languages such as English as bearing all kinds of extra-linguistic properties: as a product or service, as a commodity or resource which speakers exchange, as a mythical 'thing' which does this or that *to* people, and even as a cause of social suffering. In this chapter we offer a critical engagement with the notion of fetishism as it relates to a larger current body of work on language, language policy, and political economy, in respect of language alienated and fetishized in standard forms; the recasting of language not as a *social* product, but as a form of legal property, owned and traded by individuals; and the *necessity* of fetishized forms of language in the functioning of the 'free' market. We present the notion of fetishism as consisting in illusions which exist not in theory but *in practice* and call for greater attention to be given to the fetishism of languages *in the practice of the market*. We further argue that calls for policy to develop critical reflexive awareness in speakers, while certainly important, are not in themselves sufficient for confronting fetishistic notions of language.

Introduction

The notion of fetishism, in the most general interpretation of the term, is one in which an object is afforded extra-natural properties or is animated and brought to life as an agentive 'thing'. In this sense, the notion of language as a fetish (Simpson & O'Regan, 2018; Simpson, 2018) imagines languages such as English as bearing all kinds of extra-linguistic properties: as a product or service (Singh & Han, 2008), as a commodity or resource which speakers exchange (Heller, 2016), as a mythical 'thing' which does this or that *to* people (Pennycook, 2007), and even as a cause of social suffering (Piller & Cho, 2013; Piller, Takahashi, & Watanabe, 2010). What we offer in this chapter, is a critical engagement with the notion of fetishism as it relates to a larger body of work on language, language policy, and political economy, in respect of language alienated and fetishized in standard forms; the recasting of language not as a *social* product, but as a form of legal property, owned and traded by individuals; and the *necessity* of fetishized forms of language in the functioning of the 'free' market. We conclude by underscoring the notion of fetishism as consisting in illusions which exist not in theory, but *in practice*, and with a call for future research to examine the fetishism of languages *in the practice of the market*. We therefore argue that calls for policy to develop critical reflexive awareness in speakers, while certainly important, are not in themselves sufficient for moving beyond fetishistic notions of language.

Fetishism

For Žižek (2008, 2012b, 2012a, 2019), drawing on Hegel, Marx, and figures from psycho-analysis such as Freud and Lacan, fetishism consists in structural effects being misrecognized as properties inherent to individual elements of structures in-themselves. He illustrates this with the Hegelian example of the relation between a King and his subjects involving:

a certain misrecognition which concerns the relation between a structured network and one of its elements: what is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of the elements, *as if the property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements*.[...] Being a 'king' is an effect of the network of social relations between a 'king' and his 'subjects'; but – and here is the fetishistic misrecognition – to the participants of this social bond, the relationship appears necessarily in an inverse form: they think that they are subjects giving the king royal treatment because the king is already in himself, *outside the relationship*

to his subjects, a king; as if the determination of 'being a king' were a 'natural' property of the person of a king. (2012, pp. 308–309, emphasis added)

However, what Marx's notion of fetishism, illustrated most famously in his notion of the *fetishism of the commodity* (Marx, 1990) adds to such an analysis, is the additional question of how fetishistic beliefs exist not only in the ideational realm of thought and belief, but are also *necessarily* reproduced through practice – *necessary* in the sense that they are a functioning part of how a system itself works and reproduces itself. To turn to the example of the commodity, rather than the value of a commodity understood as the result of a complex social organization of production, commodities seem to embody value in and of themselves – they appear to us mysteriously as being tautologically worth what they are worth. Their prices seem to fluctuate up and down independent of the actions and desires of their human creators – in other words outside of social relations, and they do so *even as we are well aware* that they are the products of human, and not divine, work. Capital similarly seems imbued with a mystical quality, appearing to us as it does, as value which magically breeds more value. The point of fetishism which Marx emphasises however, is that such fetishism is not simply a distortion or illusory belief which can be rent asunder through critical introspection, or with a better or 'correct' understanding of how things 'really are'. Rather, it is about the beliefs or illusions which we follow, *even as we know better*, as it were. As Žižek puts it: "we are fetishists in practice, not in theory" (2012a, p. 315). Just as recognising that money in the form of paper, plastic, or digital numbers on a screen, are all tokens and do not themselves hold any value in some sort of animistic sense, this does not prevent one from buying or selling in the market or making a fetish out of money. It is not necessary for people to believe this or that about markets, commodities, or money, rather "*the things themselves believe for them*" (ibid, p. 317, emphasis in original). Fetishism in this sense *works*. For example, though we do not believe in an inherent mystical property of money (whether metal, paper, or digitized representations thereof) to grow as if it were alive, the money in our savings accounts really does 'grow'. It is fetishism in this sense of an illusion or erroneous belief that is spontaneously reproduced *in practice*, but which simultaneously *works* nevertheless, that we wish to use in order to extend upon work which has dealt with the commodification of language and its implications for language policy.

The Fetishism of language in standard forms

For Park & Wee, in their critique of English as a global language, English has undergone a certain reifying *mystification*, whereby "we come to see English as an entity, a thing with a boundary and fixed content that is identifiable and definable in a regular fashion" (J. S.-Y. Park & Wee, 2012, p. 103). In tracing the emergence of ideologised 'standard' English accents such as Received Pronunciation, and later Estuary English, their analysis explores how various forms of codification and prescriptive policymaking abstract away from language as a constantly shifting and emergent *process*, and lead to a construction of language as a finite and static *object* or 'thing'. At points, their discussion runs along very similar lines to Marx's notion of fetishism, in for example their concern to penetrate through a "mystification that leads us to believe in the autonomous nature of language" (ibid, p.104). Here, language as an 'autonomous' fetish is "no longer seen as part of the speaker's practice but a thing that has its own internal rules and structure, which in turn is imbued with values such as 'correctness', [and where] the speaker is in a sense alienated from her own language" (ibid, p.109). Similarly, Ricento describes the notion of a fixed standard as a "myth", which has led to the paradox whereby "students must go to school to 'learn' their native language" (2006, p. 20). In the terms of fetishism outlined above then, language as a structural effect – the composite social product of ongoing human activity – comes to exist outside of the social relations which produce it, as an alienated thing-in-itself, with its own 'King-like' qualities (of normative grammar or correctness for example) appearing not as man-made, but as natural and inherent to language as a thing-in-itself.

Fetishism and language ownership

This notion of language as a fetishized thing-in-itself alienated away from its speakers, is taken up in much work on language commodification, as Da Silva, McLaughlin & Richards summarise: “[L]anguage, as a commodity, is no longer an inherent quality of certain individuals or something that individuals own, but something that is separate and external to their personhood” (2007, p. 185). What is of note here, in relation to processes of standardisation, are two distinct yet overlapping senses of alienated fetishized forms of language. Firstly, there are the efforts of nation-states to standardise languages as a means of instituting gatekeeping controls upon rights of citizenship – efforts which have often been directed at masking or appearing to resolve contradictions within liberal nation states between democratic egalitarian ideals and unequal social realities (Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Secondly, there is language commodification as a process which is seen as ‘emblematic’ of the new economy (Boutet, 2012), where the *extension* and *intensification* of the processes of capitalism more historically (i.e. enclosure of the commons, accumulation, commodification, etc.) has taken place, not within an entirely ‘new’ historical political-economic period, but rather as part of capitalism’s latest evolving variegated form (Block, 2018). This is often referred to as neoliberalism or late capitalism.

There is, however, a key distinction we wish to make between, on the one hand, the abstraction of language away from speakers into a standard form which they must then attain for the state’s purposes of establishing a citizenry and nation, and the notion of fetishizing language as an alienable thing or ‘commodity’ to be traded on the market, in terms of ownership. On the one hand, the learning of language as a means of maintaining nation states – of creating a citizenry which speaks an idealised form of language – presupposes language as a shared or communal ‘thing’ which, though alienated away from its speakers, nevertheless, at least on the face of it, *belongs* to the nation, and to the constituted citizenry itself. This is even when it serves to obscure wider social inequality, as when class elites consolidate their own privileged position by promoting their own variety of language as the basis for the standard form. On the other hand, language in its ‘commodified’ form comes to be seen in terms which harmonise with the notion of *individual* liberal property rights, that is, as a ‘thing’ over which the possessor, as a juridical individual, has the rights of ownership, and the right to sell or exchange as she sees fit. Here, the notion of language as a *skill* – i.e. as part of the composite *bundle of skills* (Urciuoli, 2008) which commodified labour in the market trades for wages – comes to the fore. Indeed, some have described in detail the manner in which shifts from, and contradictions between, notions of language as a form of collective ethno-national identity on the one hand, and language as a thing individuals trade in the expectation of various forms of ‘profit’ in the market on the other, occur (Duchêne & Heller, 2012). As Ricento has pointed out in reference to language and language policy more broadly, there is a fundamental mismatch between the notion of “language as a *social* phenomenon, spoken and written by communities of people, and the core of liberal political philosophy [...] the essentialness of individual liberty and rights to satisfy the supposedly unquenchable acquisitive desires of *individual* human beings” (2015, p. 34), a notion which has become turbocharged under neoliberal regimes which view human development through the lens of individual competition within the market (Foucault, 2008).

So far as the notion of language as a skill is concerned, there is an alienation of language into a fetishized form in a double sense. Firstly, in the abstraction of language outside of the social relations of humans themselves as an autonomous thing-in-itself. And secondly, once such forms of language have been learnt, language takes on a second fetishized form, often in the guise of a credentialed qualification over which an individual can then claim a right of ownership, and fetishistically trade in the market as a commodified skill. Here, like money and its fetish value, the credential itself is treated as if it were the skill. It embodies the language which has been alienated away from speakers as a standard ‘thing’, so

making it possible to ‘own’ language as a competence and trade it on the market. However, while it is certainly possible for communally ‘owned’ language to function in a wholly non-commodified manner (i.e. when understood as a property in common, rather than as something an individual may own and exchange with another), the forms of ownership discussed above – communal and individual – seldom exist as either/or categories, but rather co-exist. Proficiency in a standard linguistic code or ‘national language’ often serves as a means of sorting and disaggregating *individual* speakers through what Bourdieu refers to as the *profit of distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984). This is the distinction accorded to those who *can* utilise the standard linguistic code proficiently, which distinguishes them from those who cannot. In the same vein, notions of global English as a supposedly *neutral* competence which is capable of acting as a great democratic leveller are deeply problematic (Bruthiaux, 2008; O’Regan, 2021; J. S.-Y. Park & Wee, 2012; Pennycook, 2007, 2017), since ‘global English’ is *in practice* widely utilised as a *normative competence* (Ives, 2010) which is the preserve of transnational cosmopolitan elites in the capitalist world-economy, against which any sense of ‘ownership’ in common is amongst the more grotesque of fetish illusions, since most people in the world, if they have any competence in English, do not utilise it in a ‘proficient’ normative form, but very often in highly situated and localised ways. In addition, the greater part of this imagined community does not ‘possess’ either the alienated competence associated with the fetish normative form or the credential that stands in for it, such that what competence they do have is often rendered ‘worthless’ and unsaleable. As Bourdieu puts it, “a language is worth what those who speak it are worth” (1977, p. 652), which is another way of saying that the fetish ‘value’ and exceptionalism of a particular elite form of language lies in the *inability* of those who are socially and economically marginalised to speak it.

Language as property

The exchange of fetishized representations of language on the market however, is more complicated than has thus far been suggested. Language carries with it considerable baggage in terms of identity, culture, politics, histories etc., which other forms of credentialed representations of skills or abilities might not. It is for example, more common for claims of ownership of language to be made along ethno-national lines, than it would be for say the ownership of competences in maths or physics. It is also not uncommon for this in practice to translate into the circumvention of credentialed forms of language competence. For example, nationality and/or native speaker status often function as ‘proof’ of proficiency in a language, which would otherwise need to be represented by some form of academic credential. With nationality, the credential can be provided by, for example, a birth certificate, a passport, or even certificated proof of schooling in the ‘native’ context. The native-speaker credential may be accepted as following from these proofs. This credential can also be represented as well as reinforced in other ways, such as through observed habitus, ethnic appearance, and voice. There are then, distinct, overlapping, and often competing *regimes of value* within overlapping *linguistic markets* wherein speakers and their languages are simultaneously valued and devalued (Bourdieu, 1991; Kelly-Holmes, 2016; J. S.-Y. Park & Wee, 2012). One’s linguistic ‘worth’, is potentially measured by multiple, often contradictory, yardsticks. For example, where job advertisements state proficiency in English as a prerequisite, it is often the case that one can meet this condition either by being observed to *be* a native speaker of English, and therefore more or less unquestioningly accepted as one, or by *having* through a fetish credential a ‘native-like’ or ‘native-level’ competence in the language. While the first of these has more to do with *who one is*, or *appears to be*, often in terms of ethno-national identity, the second is more a case of *what one has achieved*, or better still, what one *appears to have achieved* – and relies on standardised representations of language proficiency in the form of credentials.

There is something of a distinction, blurred though it may become in practice, between fetishized forms of language seen as part of one's identity constructed along ethno-national-native-speakerist lines on the one hand, and those which are embodied in credentialed qualifications on the other. While the former, at least in principle, speaks to a certain level of exclusivity, and arguably hierarchy, in terms of native and non-native speakers as two mutually exclusive groups, the credentialed qualification is often constructed upon a foundation of apparent egalitarian meritocracy. While it is quite true that speakers may 'pass' in and out of native speaker status (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009) across linguistic markets, there nevertheless remains an underlying assumption that one is, or is not, a native speaker of a language rather than that one has become one, which by definition excludes others who have had to learn the language from legitimately claiming such status. Language fetishized in this sense, is seen as a *property* of the speaker, in the sense that say being green, or the ability to photosynthesise are the properties of a leaf. Here, then, the notion of *property* refers to an imagined characteristic or trait of the speaker in-themselves – i.e. as *a part of their nature*. By way of contrast, credentialed qualifications are not seen as properties of speakers in the sense of their own inherent characteristics or nature, but rather *as the property of the speaker in the legal sense* - that is to say language as an external, alienable, objectified 'thing' which a speaker comes to possess in the same manner as they might own real estate property, commodities, or money, and it is language fetishized as a property in this sense, which we focus on here. This is not to say that native-speaker status is not commodified or 'cashed in on' in some sense – it often is. Our point is rather to focus on how in the credentialed form, language appears (and we stress 'appears') as an objective measurement of ability, expended effort, or achievement etc. of an individual. Such notions of fetishized language as an ownable property appear as universal and meritocratic, in the sense that they are imagined as being open to anyone (in contrast to native speaker status) and as such provide a neutral and objective way of differentiating individuals from one another, not least of all in the job market. However, as Bourdieu was often keen to point out, such forms of credentialed qualification are *misrecognised* (1991) as universal and meritocratic, in so far as certain quantities of cultural, social, symbolic, and financial capital, are always necessary in order to gain access to the attainment of such qualifications in the first place, and that such educational distinctions are properties of the imagination rather than essential properties in themselves. Here the apparent egalitarianism of education functions as a *disguise* for the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This is the misrecognition of *social* inequality, and its uneven *structural* distribution of symbolic and material resources, as *individual* achievements or merits. Indeed, in relation to English, some have noted how social inequalities which always precede the attainment of linguistic skills and/or credentials, have resulted in an increasing *English divide* (Terasawa, 2016), where proficiency in English serves as a terrain on which class-based inequality is often constructed, and even exacerbated (Block, 2018). In the sense of structural and social effects appearing as the inherent qualities of individual elements (the merits or worth of individual people), there is much synergy between Bourdieu's notion of *misrecognition*, Hegel's relation of a King to his subjects, and Marx's notion of commodity fetishism.

There is of course an appearance of contradiction between value construed in terms of identity and community membership, and value construed by means of institutional practices such as the conferring of credentials. But these competing fetish conceptions of value are precisely what legitimate and obscure the *real* capitalist exploitation of human beings in labour markets that are referenced to language. In this sense, the apparent contradiction is not meant to be resolvable since within diverse but related labour contexts of language they are 'the surface process, beneath which, in the depths entirely different processes go on' (Marx, 1973: 247). On the one hand, they make possible the *profit of distinction* which is socially ascribed to native speakers globally while also simultaneously facilitating the processes of social hierarchisation which exist within the societies to which such speakers belong. On the other, they enable through the fetishistic universalism of neoliberal meritocracy the legitimation of credentialed

competence in the normative form when native-speaker authentication is absent. In both processes, the worth of the language is still realised according to fetish perceptions of the worth of the speaker, in which there is the double fetish of the speaker as member of a community or national polity, and the speaker as being the most ‘qualified’ to speak by having become credentialed in the normative form. In this sense, native speakers can simultaneously be community members but, by lacking sufficient capitals or credentials, also not qualified to speak. Even though non-native speakers cannot become members of a formal native-speaker citizenry, they can do the next best thing by becoming ‘authenticated’ as proficient users. But as with having membership, it is possible to have credentials, but still not be qualified to speak, since the acceptance of an individual non-native speaker’s authenticity will be determined by the level of the credential. Those without any credentials are likely to be automatically discounted. But even for those with them, there are no guarantees, since their credential may be deemed not to be at a sufficiently advanced level to qualify them for recognition, and what eventual level is achieved will also be determined by the cultural, social, symbolic and financial capital which they can bring with them. It therefore does not follow that having membership as a native speaker or having credentials as a non-native speaker equates with an entitlement to speak. The loudest silence in the world is the silence which issues from the mouths of those who have no voice. The practices which legitimate this silencing are those which apply to the capitalist process of exchange, where what appears on the surface as a free exchange is in reality an opposite process, which by being other, “stands directly opposite exchange” (Marx, 1973: 275). In other words, it is a process of exploitation which *masquerades* as one of exchange, and it is this which enables the maintenance of the capitalist contradiction between language as a communal thing and language as an individual skill.

It is this contradiction which explains how it is, for example, that native speaking language teachers are hired based on little more than their ascribed native-speaker status, while non-native speaker teachers with credentialed qualifications in English and English language teaching are devalued (Canagarajah, 1999; Moussu & Llurda, 2008). They may each belong to the same ‘community of employees’, but their ‘credentials’ are *in practice* fetishistically ‘valued’ in different ways. Here, the credential of being a native speaker, which is conferred by means of the panoply of identity markers identified earlier – e.g. birth certificate, passport, school and university certificates, habitus, appearance, voice etc. – is socially accorded more value than the language proficiency and language teaching credentials of the non-native speaker teacher. This is an arbitrary and fictitious value. But it is then economised as a real value in respect of the payment each teacher receives for their labour time.

Although the native speaker teacher can often attract higher wages, there are areas of English language teaching in which such native speaking status acts as the sole pre-requisite for employment, and as such deskills the practice of language teaching in “an industry that expects docile and inexperienced bodies,[...where] nativeness enables quick access to jobs, but only to unskilled and temporary ones.” (Codó, 2018, p. 448). However, it is important to keep in mind that in the labour market all valuations are reduced to the same homogenous measure – money. As this example illustrates, qualitative issues of value are ultimately subsumed by a universal monetary quantitative measure, which is determined by the ultimate worth of an individual’s labour. This is not a straightforward calculation because, as Holborow (2015, 2018b) points out, the monetary value an individual receives in exchange for their labour power, is never reducible to the simple valuation of that individual’s capital or skills (linguistic or otherwise). Rather, it involves all manner of structural issues which affect the value of labour, including the position of strength or weakness labour as a class finds itself in (e.g. unionisation rights, a statutory minimum wage, welfare benefits, etc.), the supply and demand of labour, and the state of the economy more broadly. As we have pointed out however, the incredible complexity of the market, involving as it does the composite actions of billions of actors across the globe, makes grasping the structural effects upon an individual’s worth impossible to process as a whole. The notion of ‘skill’ and meritocratic achievement

here function as a ‘gap-filling fetish’, that is, as a means by which it is possible to make sense of the valuation of an individual’s labour power without ever being able to grasp the deep processual reality of that valuation in its entirety. Just as language is not the real world, but represents it, so concepts such as skill, fetish and meritocracy stand in for complex processes which would otherwise be extremely difficult to describe, if not entirely indescribable. We are fetishists *in practice*, not *in theory*, because our daily comprehension of the world is a *practical* matter, not a theoretical one. If it were a theoretical one, we might spend enormous quantities of our time trying to work out how, for example, the tin of beans we are holding in our hand (i.e. the tin, label, ink for the label, and all of the tin’s contents) came to be, through all the hundreds and maybe even thousands of supply chains which put it there.

Fetishism and the freedom of the market

Nevertheless, as we have emphasised, although fetishism, as a form of mystification or myth, is not a false consciousness, it is an essential self-submitting ideational misapprehension, or cognising ‘fantasy’, which is a functioning part of reality (Žižek, 2012a). The point we wish to make here, is that it is necessary to go beyond the surface realm of thought and belief, beyond the necessary wilful misapprehension, to the *material*, and to the processes which exist *in action*, in the practices of everyday life. For many scholars of English as a global language the ‘value’ of English often involves an ideologically loaded ‘promise’ of pecuniary benefits to its would-be learners-cum-possessors, for whom it exists in perpetuity as a mirage-like holy grail (J. S. Y. Park, 2011; Piller et al., 2010). This is not to say that those who argue that language learning in many circumstances does indeed ‘pay’ are wrong *per se*, but rather that its promises are often overstated, and more often than not work more to the advantage of capital, corporations, or other interests, than they do to the learner-workers who supposedly ‘own’ such skills themselves (Holborow, 2015, 2018a; J. S. Y. Park, 2011). What would extend such ideological critiques is a greater understanding of how language as a fetishized autonomous force is placed outside of the real social relations of its human producers. Fetishism here does not imply a deluded misapprehension or ideological trickery, but rather emerges in market societies in the practice of everyday life. The point we re-emphasise here, is that even if one can see through the fetishism of the market, money, or fetishized forms of language, these nevertheless *really do* control us, at least to an extent. We cannot simply will away money, the prices of commodities, standardised forms of language, or the regimes of value in various linguistic markets, and this remains true even if at a conscious level we understand them as structural effects of human activity rather than as autonomous things-in-themselves. Languages then, are not ‘falsely’ imagined as bounded agentivised *things*, but “appear as what they are” (Marx, 1990, p. 166), as necessary illusions which are beyond our immediate control.

In relation to labour skilled in particular languages for example, it has long been the case that the value of languages has waxed and waned out of the control of their possessors, with very real effects. In his notes on the commercial proletariat for example, Marx discusses the learning and teaching of languages, and the fluctuation of their value, in relation to the expansion of capitalism and education to the general population:

[B]asic skills, knowledge of commerce and languages, etc., are produced ever more quickly, easily, generally and cheaply, the more the capitalist mode of production adapts teaching methods etc. to practical purposes. [...] This also increases supply, and with it, competition. With a few exceptions, therefore, the labour-power of these people is devalued with the advance of capitalist production; their wages fall, whereas their working ability increases. (1991, p. 415)

In a footnote at this point, Frederick Engels mentions Marx's supplementary materials detailing how such workers see the value of their languages, and hence their labour-power, fluctuate independently of their will. He describes "German clerks skilled in all commercial operations and in three or four languages, who are offering their services in vain in the City of London for a weekly wage of 25 shillings – well below the wage of a skilled mechanic" (ibid, p.415). The point this raises, is that while it may be the case that ideological constructions of languages such as English serve the interests of some far more than others, and while speakers within all manner of linguistic markets come to value language in different ways, there nevertheless remains a *phantom objectivity* (Marx, 1990) to the value of languages, in the sense that large scale structural developments such as the extension of education to the mass population, or the teaching of English as a *de facto* foreign or global language in much of the world, has an effect on the value of language skills in general through the supply and demand of labour-power skilled in particular ways, though perhaps in more nuanced and diverse and indeterminate ways than the law-like manner it is phrased in Marx's notes above.

There is need for some nuance to be added to the notion of ownership provided by Da Silva et. al. in relation to commodified language, where language in the form of a thing "separate" and "external" to speakers, "is no longer [...] something that individuals own" (2007, p. 185) – in the sense of commodified labour enjoying the liberal juridical rights of the individual in the market – that is to say that individuals claim the sole right to keep, trade, or do whatever they like with their 'property', fictitious or otherwise – speakers *really do* 'own' these fetishized credentialed forms of language, and cannot be coerced – other than at the point of a gun – into selling their labour (of which their linguistic capacities or 'skills' are a composite part) to another. In a capitalist market, one cannot appropriate the credentialed forms of language, or any other form of credentialed education for that matter, which others own, nor can people in such a market be forced to work in a manner akin to slavery (which does not mean that bondage conditions akin to slavery do not exist within capitalist society). Whether or not one accepts such credentialed tokens of language as unproblematically representative of what language really is, or should be, the ownership and exchange of such tokens on the labour market *works in practice as if it really does*, independent of one's beliefs about language, education or the market. However, at the same time as this, and as Marx (1990) was wont to point out, the market is not an arena free of coercion, but rather encompasses 'freedom' in an ironic sense. While it is perfectly true to say that workers as embodiments of labour-power within the market are free to select to whom they wish to sell their labour, or even *if* they wish to sell their labour at all, they are at the same time also 'free' of that which they need in order to sustain themselves (e.g. food, shelter, clothing), and are only able to acquire these necessities of life by selling their labour in return for wages – in short, they must work in order to live. To return to the notion of fetishism, it is in Marx's second ironic sense of 'freedom' in the market by which language fetishized as a credentialed qualification functions not as an *incorrect* illusion or mystification, but for the reasons already given as a *necessary* illusion – as part of the functioning of the market system itself *in practice*. One can refuse to sell one's labour on the market, and one can reject the learning of, or use of a normative form, or of a supposedly global language such as English; yet, unless one has access to significant independent means, the consequences of fully expressing one's freedom in such a way could have serious consequences for one's wellbeing or life prospects.

Fetishism in practice

What a view of language as fetish highlights, is not simply that reified objectifications of language proficiency, such as standardised tests like TOEIC, TOEFL, or IELTS, are themselves fetishized representations of language and/or linguistic proficiency, but rather that *despite this*, and despite the relatively common knowledge of a wide gap existing between credentialed qualifications and well-

documented and theorised perceptions of language as a *social* product, such objectifications nevertheless function as the measure and representation of language(s), and of the language ability of individuals, and by extension also of the *value* of their possessors as commodified labour. Indeed, one does not need to have any particular degree of faith in such objectifications of language as adequately reflecting ‘real’ language in order for the linguistic fetish to function *in practice*. For example, one finds, contradictorily, the coexistence of a widespread scepticism about the need for the English language in the day-to-day life of workers in South Korea with a linguistic rat-race or ‘frenzy’ for English in a state of hyper-competition where no one dares to be left behind (J. Park, 2009; J. S. Y. Park, 2011; Piller & Cho, 2013; Piller et al., 2010). Moreover, that such credentialed tokens are only ever stand-ins rather than the real thing (i.e. they are not in and of themselves language) becomes explicit and transparent in many instances. For example, employers and employees alike often come to see the attainment of TOEIC scores not as representations of linguistic ability, but as a measure of one’s effort to learn or skill oneself, one’s intellectual ability, or one’s commitment to an employer (Kubota, 2011). Nevertheless, within such contexts, the drive for standardised proficiency tests such as TOEIC, continues apace, *often in the full knowledge* that proficiency in English is not always necessary for performing workplace functions (J. S. Y. Park, 2011).

Elsewhere, Piller & Cho’s critique of the spread of English as a medium of instruction (hereafter MOI) in South Korean universities describes the nexus of private profit driven interests and educational and social policies enacted by the state, which recast educational activity in terms of competition at both the individual and the institutional level. Here, English becomes institutionalised as “a testable entity that is easy to quantify” (2013, p. 39), and which with regard to “mass-mediated university rankings [...] is a highly cost-effective way to improve institutional standing because ‘English’ is [...] used as a quantifiable index of ‘globalization’” (ibid, p.39). While Piller & Cho convincingly conclude that such “competition on the terrain of English is naturalised through the ideologies of neoliberal free-market fundamentalism” (ibid, p.39), what we might add to such conclusions, is that in addition to this ideological naturalisation, is the fetishistic mystification which emerges out of practice. What we draw attention to here, then, is the manner in which the adoption of English MOI ‘works’, in so far as the adoption of English MOI in these institutions has had a very real effect on the institutions themselves, both for those that were successfully able to distinguish themselves as ‘better’ through the virtue of implementing English MOI, and by implication for those which ‘lost out’ by not effectively being able to ‘globalise’ relative to their competitors. Competition here, is not in any sense illusory, but very much a reality which is lived out, quite independently of subscription or resistance to a naturalised notion of humanity as a conglomerate of self-interested competing individuals.

Fetishism and the politics of recognition

We think of our turn to the concept of fetishism as a development of, and engagement with, much of the work which we have discussed above. Amongst this work we view Park & Wee’s *Markets of English: Linguistic Capital and Language Policy in a Globalizing World* (2012) as a significant and insightful contribution to this debate given its explicit focus on core notions such as capital, commodification, and especially value, in relation to language and language policy. Taking their cue from Pennycook, the task at hand for Park & Wee is to move beyond an understanding of “this ‘thing’ English that does or does not do things to and for people [and towards] the multiple investments that people bring to their acts, desires and performances in ‘English’” (Pennycook 2007: 73, quoted in Park & Wee 2012: 106-107). In other words, to see the status, prestige, resistance to, desire for etc., English not as *King-like* properties of English in-itself, but as structural effects of the complex and often largely unconscious interrelations between a range of actors and structures. Their proposal for demystifying English as a global language in policy steers a course between what they term an *accommodation-oriented* policy which succumbs to dominant

norms and interests and a *reconfiguration-oriented* policy. In doing so, they call for language policy “to provide for ways through which members of society may more openly engage in critically questioning the indexical processes by which standards come to be seen as valuable” (Park & Wee, 2012, p.171). This is a sentiment that we share, while also having a number of reservations regarding its efficacy and practicality.

While Park & Wee repeatedly acknowledge the importance of macro-structural forces – they make it clear for example, that inequality involves far more than just linguistic matters – the thrust of their work is mainly oriented to discursive rather than material matters. For example, in their discussion of Honey’s (1997) notion of a standard variety as that which is used by ‘educated’ users of a language, they rightly point out the elitism within such a view, and how such conceptions serve to reproduce social inequality by advancing *misrecognition*. However, their proposed solution to this is not to call for a redistribution of the resources which have given elites privileged access to educational capital, but rather “to encourage and open up critical discussion about how standards come into being and how they come to be associated with particular images and values in society” (Park & Wee, 2012, p.172). As Block (2014, 2018) has described in relation to socio- and applied linguistic work more broadly, such calls, while undoubtedly of importance, appear more readily to address a *politics of recognition* than a *politics of distribution* (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), when what is properly needed is both. Park & Wee conclude by emphasising the transformative potential which lies in the recognition of the value of global English as constructed not by spectral fetishistic forces beyond human control, but in the real practices of human hands:

[G]lobal English is not just a result of the confluence of macro forces, *but is shaped and built through our own practice*. And this point is important, because *if it is our practice that constructs global English, it means that we have the power to transform it as well*. [...O]ur critique of global English allows us to see through the monstrous complexity of global English and find a *theoretical basis for transforming that market*. (2012, p. 185)

However, the question which fetishism poses, is one which asks where the logical endpoint of such proposals, at least in isolation, will take us. If, as we have suggested earlier, we are fetishists in practice and not in theory, then how transformative might a “theoretical basis for transforming the market” really be? Sophisticated and thorough though their attempt to “see through the monstrous complexity” of global English and the market is, there are practical human limits to how far it is possible to go. What fetishism does *in practice* is to construct bridges across the spaces of our incomplete understanding in the face of a depthless reality which can never be grasped in full. We may attempt with all sincerity to trace back from any commodity all of the possibly thousands of networks involved in bringing it to our hands, and all of the forces at play in determining the price at which it is labelled, yet the complexity of such a task makes it a humanly impossible one to complete. Moreover, the capitalist marketplace as one which is reliant on the human activity of exchange, could not tolerate an unfetishized market. So much time would be expended on pondering reality’s true extent, that exchange would cease, circulation would grind to a halt, and capitalist human existence would come to an end. The fetish form may be a necessary illusion, but it is one which also too easily slides into the belief that the fetish reality *is the real*. It is an inescapable aspect of the capitalist human condition that in everything we do, we participate in the fetishization of the world, even when we know we are fetishizing. The greatest challenge we face is *not* breaking the circuit of fetishistic practice and of blithely fetishizing ourselves and the world into oblivion, for example through systemic debt, nuclear conflict, economic nationalism, or the total destruction of the natural world. These are not unmentionable or unknown taboos. They are already mainstream. But while there is greater consciousness, for the advocates of capital, and for many in the great exploited mass of humanity, our

fetishistic beliefs in practice continue apace, as we proceed along a trajectory we know to be untenable, not least in the ecological sense (Žižek, 2017).

In respect of global English, Park & Wee are right, that it is our practice which constructs it. But the solution to the problem which we face is not to *find* a theoretical basis for transforming the market, because it is not as if such a basis does not already exist. What is Marxism, after all, but precisely this? Even if Marxism does not appeal, there is still no shortage of theory, particularly of theory which is critical of the market, as any perusal of Bourdieu, Polanyi, Marcuse, Habermas, Bhaskar, or even Galbraith demonstrates. Deconstructing global English is nevertheless worthwhile. It is worthwhile for creating ideological and intellectual solidarity against the system, and for the necessary activity of recognition. But so long as the world-system and market is capitalist, recognition and the demystification of global English are likely to have a limited impact on fetishized understandings in a market in which all the members of that market are fetishizing, and therefore also a limited impact on language policy. In the circumstances of our collective fetishism, an apocalyptic end to capitalism seems far easier to imagine than a peaceful and rational transition to an alternative form of socio-economic global organisation. But herein may lie our hope. For the multiple global crises we now face must at some near-term juncture force a collective focusing of minds, and of the minds towards meaningful change. Many have convincingly argued that a global bifurcation point is arriving in which the choice for the world and the peoples in it will either be a regressive anti-democratic authoritarianism or a progressive democratic humanitarianism (Wallerstein, 2011; Harvey, 2015). As we write, the forces of the former appear to be in the ideological ascendancy. But the reason they are there is because it is becoming ever more apparent that the capitalist world-system is becoming more systemically unstable – a topic which is unfortunately beyond the remit of this paper (but see Arrighi, 2010; Wallerstein, Collins, Mann, Derlugian & Calhoun, 2013; Bhaskar, 2016, for indicative accounts). Due to this reality, it is also becoming more difficult for capitalism's advocates to sustain the fetish illusion that it *works*, except by ever wilder and more aggressive appeals to the fetishisms of racism, nationalism and masculinist misogyny. Fetishized language is also in this mix, since as any reader of this chapter will know, language has historically played a significant role in the promotion and maintenance of these bigotries. But inasmuch as language and English continue to be enmeshed with these bigotries, and with the capitalist market, so will the fetish constructions of language and of English also be sustained, and no amount of *knowing* that it is our practice which constructs them will lead to their transformation. What is required, is more than recognition, more than good arguments, more than appeals to reason, and more than individuated resistances to the hegemony of standard forms. It *will* require theory. It will require *action* too. Collective, purposeful, and theoretically-organised action against the capitalist market and the fetishism of value.

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