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Language skills as human capital? Challenging the neoliberal frame

Marnie Holborow 

SALIS, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Languages and language skills are commonly tagged as a marketable asset, or ‘human capital’. The article analyses the implications and social effects of Human Capital Theory. I show that the possession of language skills does not necessarily increase employment prospects, and certainly not in the way envisaged by neoliberal policy-makers in the European Union. Wider, systemic social inequalities come into play. Taking the Irish context as an example, and amid dwindling public funding for education, I argue that human capital theory functions ideologically as a strategy of displacement to shift responsibility for employment outcomes from the social to the individual.

Les langues et les compétences linguistiques sont communément étiquetées comme un actif commercialisable, ou ‘capital humain’. L’article analyse les implications et les effets sociaux de la théorie néolibérale du capital humain. Je montre que la possession de compétences linguistiques n’augmente pas nécessairement les perspectives d’emploi, et certainement pas de la manière envisagée par les responsables politiques dans l’Union européenne. Des inégalités sociales plus larges et systémiques entrent en jeu. Prenant le contexte irlandais comme exemple, prenant en considération la diminution du financement public pour l’éducation, je soutiens que la théorie du capital humain fonctionne idéologiquement comme une stratégie de déplacement pour changer la responsabilité des résultats de l’emploi du social à l’individu.

KEYWORDS

Language skills; human capital; neoliberal education policy; graduate employment; social inequality; ruling ideology

Introduction

There are these two, young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, guys, how’s the water?’ And the two, young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’

David Foster Wallace’s story recounted by the writer on neoliberalism, Mirowski (2016), makes a simple point: that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see. Our world is bathed in neoliberal ideology and, as Harvey (2005) observed over a decade ago, this most dominant of ideologies has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become the common-sense way many of us understand the world. In effect, neoliberalism has become like ‘an iron fact’ with a givenness which confronts us as an external reality (Gramsci, 1971, p. 441; Crehan, 2016).

Human capital stands for the abilities and qualities of people that make them productive, viewed in terms of their value or cost to an individual, organisation or country. It is a term from classical economists dating back to Adam Smith, who believed that the free market would make people use their skill and effort in such a way to give each of them the best possible return. Spread across an economy, the effort of all these individuals acted as a giant invisible hand, pushing economic resources towards their most productive use (OECD, 2007). Gary Becker is the Chicago School economist who popularised the term and developed it into a full-fledged theory that could be applied to any number of issues previously seen as outside the realm of economics, from marriage to fertility (Becker, 1962, 2002). Half a century on it has soared in popularity and become public discourse at least, the most common lens for measuring the worth of education. It is a tag that has been extended to all human capacities, including language, with these now often rated in terms of how they fit with the economic priorities of governments (Brown, Cheung, & Lauder, 2015; Piller & Cho, 2013).

In the opinion of Marxist geographer, David Harvey, human capital is 'one of the weirdest widely accepted economic ideas that could ever be imagined' (Harvey, 2014, p. 185). This article, takes this claim as a starting point. It investigates how human capital has become the prism through which knowledge and skills are seen and challenges the ideological assumptions therein. I make the case that human capital has achieved its privileged position because it assumes, like all ruling ideologies, that we accept its explanatory power as natural. The human capital thesis as applied to language skills are examined here from four different aspects: 1) the obstacles to the exact measurement of language(s) as an economic asset; 2) the inability of language skills to secure absolute earning premia for all multilingual speakers; 3) the existence of structural social inequalities which prevent language skills being rewarded fairly in earnings; and 4) the negative impact of recession on the claimed benefits of language as human capital. Human capital plays a pivotal ideological function in neoliberal policy regimes and I show how this has been the case in post-crash Ireland.

Neoliberal hegemony has been shaken in recent times, albeit in politically diverse forms. In the long wake of recession, it has been revealed as a policy regime that speaks on behalf of the wealthy one per cent, and representative, in Gramsci's words, of 'the ensemble of social relations and the various exclusions they produce and re-produce' (Gramsci, quoted in Green & Ives, 2009, p. 23). Challenging the neoliberal frame of human capital is therefore timely.

Human capital, education policy and language

Few would doubt that human capital has come to occupy a pivotal place in education policy. The current higher education settlement in many countries is premised on human capital theory and the assumption that if universities have failed it is because they have failed to successfully expand their students' human capital (Collini, 2017; Holborow & O'Sullivan, 2017; McGettigan, 2015; Ward, 2012).

In Ireland, in the early 2000s, human capital, usually without explanation or elaboration, began to appear in Irish education official documents, Ireland's National Development Plan 2007–2013, human capital and human capital investment constituted the main thrust of policy and accepted as fundamental to Ireland's economic success. Ireland's 'excellent track record in human capital investment' was judged to the basis of Ireland's 'regional competitiveness'. Providing human capital to meet skills requirements would drive higher education funding and the structural reform deemed necessary to achieve this end (Department of the Taoiseach, 2007, p. 45).

Human capital began to be applied also to language skills in terms of language education policy. For example, in 2006, Ireland's Language Education Policy Profile spoke of

economic or employment opportunities for the individual and the development of human capital in a society depend in part on language education policy: individual mobility for economic purposes is facilitated by plurilingualism; the plurilingualism of a workforce is a crucial part of human capital in a multilingual marketplace, and a condition for the free circulation of goods, information and knowledge. (LPD-DES, 2006, p. 36)

As with many such policy documents, authorship is shared between an EU institution (here the European Council) and an Irish department of government. This highlights the tight overlap between EU and member state institutions in the making of national policies, a top-down process from which local amendment and accountability is often excluded (Holborow, 2013, 2015). This interaction and reproduction, via EU and local websites, creates a streamlined, super-uniform message and ideological monoculture of which repetition of words such as human capital is a constituent part.

Official European Union policy documents treat multilingualism as part of human capital. Languages are business and the promotion of a multilingual language policy a means towards the realisation of single marketisation, employability, and mobility within the labour force. One report, commissioned by EU Parliament in 2016, entitled *Benefits and Costs of the European Strategy of Multilingualism*, gives a flavour of the tone:

English has an undisputed economic usefulness in the European labour market, but it is not the only linguistic asset worth investing in; in some contexts, skills in other languages may be better rewarded than English. Language skills are ... a type of ability that contributes to economic prosperity, an asset that increases the competitiveness of European companies, and a form of human capital that can positively affect citizens' employability. (Gazzola, 2016)

Language, in this case English, is slotted unproblematically into the measurable economic asset category, and is convertible into economic returns for those who 'invest' in it (Gazzola, 2016). Human capital as applied to knowledge of languages constitutes an important theme of the relatively new discipline of *Language Economics*. The human capital dimension represents a large part of the new discipline, as is explained in an edited volume on the subject by Gazzola and Wickström (2016). Grin (2003) while expressing some reserves about languages contributing in all situations to wage premia, examines the ways in which 'linguistic and economic processes influence one another' and appears to correlate knowledge of languages to higher incomes at an individual and at a state level through reference to a country's GNP. His cautionary remark about the value of a human capital approach to language skills concerns not measurability but whether investment in language skills is 'voluntary' or a result of circumstance (Grin, 2003, p. 20). As Block (2017, p. 2) points out, the field of Language Economics, while embracing multidisciplinary, also carries a 'general conformity to mainstream economics and some of its standard staples, such as rational choice theory, human capital theory, an obsession with quantification and modelling and an overall acceptance of the current dominant version of capitalism, neoliberalism.'

Reports and policy papers from the institutions of the European Union institutions, have adopted a Language Economics framework. Multilingualism is seen as a skill required by the linguistic market. A badge of Europeanness, it is claimed, is the ability to create functional and marketable 'added value' for things like languages. Following the Euro-crisis, according to Zappettini (2014, p. 384) it is the promotion of 'Enterprise Europe' over Social Europe that has gained ground and the view of languages as market commodities fits in with this priority. However, the assumption that knowledge of a language, or investment in language learning, reaps economic returns for the individual rests on ideological belief not, as we shall see, on actual outcomes for multilingual speakers in the labour market.

Human capital and the Chicago school

Human capital is not a value-free term. Its origins lie in the Chicago School of Economics in the 1960s. Frederick Hayek, founder of the Mont Pèlerin Society, a neoliberal think tank of the post war period, played a pivotal role in founding the Chicago School. Crucial to the thinking of these early neoliberals was that the free market had to be constructed through influence at government level and through policy (Van Horn & Mirowski, 2009). Theodore Schultz, Chairman of the Chicago School, was one of the first to put forward the argument that investment in human capital paid off for

the individual, for industrial productivity and for society. Interestingly, Schultz was cautious about using the term human capital because the values and beliefs of society ‘inhibit us on looking on humans as capital goods, except in slavery and this we abhor’. (Schultz, 1961, p. 2).

Fellow Mont Pèlerin Society member, Gary Becker, had no such reservations and went on to develop Human Capital Theory laying out a perspective which could be applied to other social issues, such as marriage and fertility trends, urban crime and family life, but whose core proposition was that investment in higher educational attainment benefitted individuals by securing higher earnings (Becker, 1962). The theory held that a significant element of economic growth could be accounted for by education and the rise of technology would require more educated workers to service the economy. These educated workers using advanced technology would be more productive than those with only basic education. It followed that employers would hire these more educated workers as increased productivity would increase profits. In the fusion of education and economics, higher education would aim to instil (not enquiry, enlightenment or notions of citizenship) but ‘specific marketable skills or human capital which served direct economic purposes which can then be “cashed in” by the individual for higher wages in the market place’ (Ward, 2012, p. 164). In sum, the motto of human capital theory was ‘learning equals earning’ and, as technology developed, this would come ever more relevant in what Becker predicted being the ‘the age of human capital’ (Becker, 2002).

The theory assumed that employers reaping the benefits of greater productivity would reward their educated workers proportionately. It also took for granted that market supply and demand would play out and allow more skilled, educated workers to receive higher wages for their productive potential. Human capital assumes the rational choices individuals make from self-interest allow them to realise, in an environment of competitive, ‘free’ markets, upward social mobility (Brown et al., 2015).

Language skills as human capital follows a similar reasoning. According to one account, for individuals, language acquisition or improvement is only about investment and returns and therefore the decision about which language to choose rests on prudent time management. ‘Given a limited amount of time for language study, what should lead some speakers of language X to learn language Y rather than language Z?’ For companies, so the argument goes, the choice of language(s) is a simple matter of ‘given a certain advertising budget and the freedom to use any language, in what language(s) should a company market its products to maximize profits?’ (Grin & Vaillancourt, 2012, p. 1). Both reduce decisions about language choice and use to functional or material gain considerations.

The linguistic reality is rather more motley. Questions around mother tongue, geography, social context, degrees of bilingualism restrict choices about which language we speak. There is no denying that students make choices about what to learn for their employment prospects and, of course, some languages may seem to fit their needs more than others. Equally, the way languages are taught should be influenced by an assessment of the prospective uses of those languages in the real world. But the relationship between education and employment is rather more complex than human capital theory suggests mainly because what you can do with languages is influenced by factors external to the student or potential employee. Employment and earnings potential are not the result only, or even primarily, of individual choices. Employment rates go up and overall earnings fall because of developments in the economy which impact on the labour market, irrespective of what skills potential workers are gaining. When it comes to languages, as we shall see, there is no simple correlation between multilingualism and higher earnings.

The exclusion of broader social factors in Grin and Vaillancourt’s model of ‘language economics’ presupposes, in accordance with their stated commitment to the paradigm of mainstream economics, that rational choice determines material outcomes. The free market is presented as the final and neutral adjudicator about how investment in human capital pays off for individuals (Grin, 2003; Grin & Vaillancourt, 2012).

Language as a measurable economic asset?

Becker's 'economic way of looking at life' (Becker, 1962) which identifies a positive correlation between education and salaries assumes that skills always have market value. Indeed, language economists, for whom the question of human capital represents a core question, seek to identify what the precise market value of languages is (Gazzola & Wickström, 2016). In these studies, quantitative data and econometric tools are extensively drawn upon to profile linguistic value.

One such study in the Montreal labour market, under the rubric of Language as Human Capital in an edited collection of economy of language articles, explores the use of different languages – English, French and 'Other' – in the workplace, drawing on data from the census for Canada (Grenier & Nadeau, 2016). The authors conclude that native speakers of French gain significantly from using English, English speaker gains for using French are low, that the returns of using one Canadian official language (either English or French) is positive and high and that speakers of other languages (a category which contains 32 other languages among which Filipino, Mandarin, Eastern European, Arabic, Turkish and 'African languages') do not become integrated into Francophone culture. Thus, English is necessary to be successful in the labour market whereas French an additional but not indispensable asset.

The study is instructive regarding the thinking behind language as human capital. The choice of language in a workplace is seen as an outcome of rational decisions made by 'economic agents'. The languages that people use are judged to depend on supply and demand in a labour market abstracted from the social forces that shape it. On the supply side are the languages available either the mother tongue or those languages learnt or acquired; on the demand side are the employers who hire on the basis of their own mother tongue, the mother tongue of the workforce, or the *lingua franca* used to communicate with the wider world.

The study makes no mention of the difficulties of an exclusively quantitative approach in questions concerning how much any language is used. Census reports can be an unreliable source for establishing facts surrounding languages in any one community, partly because they rely on subjects self-reporting on their language use. In the Montreal study, the census reports that English is used 30% of time, French 69% time, and other languages, even though this is those speakers mother tongue, only 1% of time. Figures relating to what is referred to (somewhat disparagingly) as 'other languages' are likely to be an underestimation of actual use of the mother tongue, particularly for first generation immigrants, for reasons of stigma attached to the languages or due to the fact that, given the social status of recently arrived immigrants, the language is used at home, within their communities or discretely or secretly at work, on the 'edges' of society (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; King & Carson, 2016). Secondly, ascribing greater utility value to one language rather than another sets up an implicit hierarchy of languages. In the Montreal study, the description of use of 'other' for languages not French and English risks falling into this trap: Filipino Mandarin, Greek, Ukrainian, German, Russian, Eastern European and African languages, languages spoken by immigrants, are rated communicatively below the assumed *lingua franca* status of English and the recognised official language of French. However, it is now well established that the situated contexts in which English is widely used complicate considerably the idea that English is a simple *lingua franca* which acts as a gateway to upward social mobility (May, 2016; Park & Wee, 2012; Ricento, 2015). Valuing languages according to their supposed role in the economy or their official status tends to sustain dubious beliefs about the automatic economic benefits of dominant languages.

Language skills valued?

Human Capital Theory may attribute a precise value in the labour market to language skills, but there is little evidence, as McGill (2013) points out, that employers have any interest in detailed measurement of these skills when hiring new employees. They assume that potential employees

possess their declared language skills rather than their linguistic proficiency being tested in any precise way. In many call centres, confirmed by Woodcock (2017), adverts for jobs contain few details, other than pay or hours, and job applications involve only a rudimentary screening for languages. The applicant must ring a voicemail number and instructions to leave a message with their name and number and saying why they would be good at the job (2017, p. 34). While some applicants might well fail to leave a convincing message, this hardly constitutes a full and adequate assessment of a person's language skills.

Furthermore, on specific labour markets, additional languages would appear to bring no extra benefits for their speakers. Duchêne (2009) gives the example of Swiss call centres who need not only German, French, English, and Italian speakers but also Spanish and Dutch which are largely spoken by migrants. Only a small number of Dutch speakers are required for the call centre and, according to management's Taylorized scheme of call routing, they are used to field calls in English and German (2009, p. 42). His study shows that Dutch speakers do not gain anything for their additional linguistic competences. Languages may be converted into a selling point by employers but any financial advantage in the recruitment of multilingual employees lies with the companies 'as it is cheaper and more profitable to have employees who are able to answer phone calls in more than one language' (2009, p. 30).

In a study of Indian call centres in Bangalore, Delhi, and Pune, Mirchandani has documented how already-acquired language skills are not valued at all. She shows how Indian call-centre employers go to considerable lengths to try to expunge any trace of the Indian English that employees speak and provide training to replace it with what is considered standard English (Mirchandani, 2012). She also highlights that, in the Indian context, the local call centre showcases the work it offers as 'desirable and highly skilled' (Mirchandani, 2004, p. 367). However, her informants, nearly all graduates, describe their jobs, while being paid above other local ones, as low status with no career path on offer. Work in these 'communication factories' is poorly paid and dead-end because employers can draw from a larger pool of low-skill employment on the international labour market. Indian call centre workers are part of 'a global auction' which drives wages down, not up (Brown & Lauder, 2012).

Human capital and structural social inequalities

Human capital theory, with its focus on the individual, leaves out of its calculations wider structural social inequalities – of gender, race and class – a presence which disproves any simple correlation of possession of skills with earnings.

For women, for example, good language skills do not secure for them higher earnings. In Ireland, those with language degrees – overwhelmingly women – do not secure well paid jobs even though the points required for the courses are relatively high. At Trinity College, Dublin, a top-ranking university, language graduates who end up working in translation have lower earnings than graduates in other subjects (McGuire, 2015; Reddan, 2016). In the US, where women are also more likely to study languages, the gender pay gap between college-educated men and women while often small at the start of their careers widens considerably over time, sometimes by as much as 55 per cent once both sets of graduates reach their early forties (Barth, Goldin, Pekkala Kerr, & Claudia, 2017). More generally, in Ireland and the UK, female graduates outnumber men and yet the gender pay gap for graduate earnings has widened over last five years. The current Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in these member countries in 2015, is 16 per cent even in situations where women are more qualified (Hilliard, 2017). In other words, linguistic human capital is not paying off for women for reasons entirely beyond the quality of their skills *per se*.¹

Discrimination against people of colour and some ethnic groups also undermines the ability of individuals to make their skills pay. Even getting a job in the first place may be skewed against them. One study in the Canadian context found that the call-back rate for applicants with English

sounding names was 40% higher than for those with Chinese, Indian or Pakistani names, even those born and educated in Canada (Oreopolous, 2009). Subtirelu (2017) provides evidence through his analysis of job advertisements, that Spanish-English bilingualism is racialized and results in linguistic work performed by US Latinxs receiving a lower wage.² Alarcón and Heyman, in their study of language in bilingual call centres in El Paso, Texas, found that Spanish was ‘not being valued as a technical competency’ (2013, p. 1) by US call centre managers, despite managerial assertions to the contrary. The call centres in their study rely on the socially-provided language skills in Spanish, which are freely available as a ‘heritage language’ along the US- Mexico border. These bilingual workers are highly skilled, being able to deal with English calls and calls involving Spanish or code-switching. But their language skills here are undervalued to such an extent that they are in effect, as the authors note, ‘linguistic markers of exploitability’.

These cases indicate that it is not possible to talk about skills, knowledge and capabilities as realisable and valuable assets for everyone. Rather, the existence of social stratification on the labour market severs absolute ties between skills, jobs and incomes. In the El Paso case, as Alarcón and Heyman note there is a marked hierarchy even among Spanish speakers. The relatively few higher paid Spanish speaking employees who occupy positions as language professionals in the call centres are young people with high educational levels, largely with a university degree or credential from the United States. Language becomes part of the hierarchy, with those top position deemed the only ‘legitimate’ Spanish speakers. Furthermore, there are lower pay rates for bilingual Hispanic workers on the Mexican border or in Puerto Rico than monolingual workers in call centres elsewhere in the US. This shows that possession of an additional languages may actually move an employee *down* the pay structure. These studies provide valuable information for understanding of the hierarchy of value of language(s) in the so called ‘information economy’.

Moreover, despite an overall increase in the skills that people have, the trend is towards greater income disparity. Technological change may create skills-biased demand, but new skills become the new normal and what employees are expected to have. The across-the-board claim that highly-skilled people are being rewarded with earnings premia ignores the considerable (re)stratification of knowledge work over recent times. Brown et al. (2015) demonstrate how this has taken the form of a three-tiered hierarchy, as demonstrate: those defined as ‘talented’ are fast tracked into senior management positions and given ‘permission to think’; those below are ‘developers’ who execute the strategies of the talented; the many more further below are those that operate digitalised routines. This stratification of the division of labour is reflected in the earnings disparity for graduate work.

Recession, labour competition and earnings

Viewing the world through the lens of individual human capital leaves out, as we have seen, wider contextual factors. Block (2017) notes that in the literature of language economics there is little or no mention of the current economic crisis, now entering its second decade. Yet, across the EU the story of the longest and deepest recession since the 1930s, precisely highlights how human capital has not only been downgraded as competition for jobs has increased but also in some places lies idle or is left to waste.

On the current intensely competitive labour market, the mix of the ‘bundle of skills’ (Urciuoli, 2008) that a worker can present to a potential employer can seem crucial. In many parts of the world this means a frenzied rush towards acquiring English. Park’s article (2016) entitled ‘Language as Pure Potential’ captures how human capital notions dominate in Korean work situations and how their ideological and exploitative aspects intertwine. The linguistic capital of English is judged by rules set by the large corporations. For the South Korean worker, the pursuit of enhancement of human capital through the acquisition of language skills – the English ‘frenzy’ – constantly runs up against the contradiction that English language skills not only seldom secure career advancement but become for many the most intolerable and frustrating aspect of their work. The huge multi-

business conglomerates (*jaebols*) such as Samsung, having laid down the level of English required, then proceed to set the bar higher periodically, through the shrewd use of international tests. Employees are left chasing ever more distant goals in language proficiency, usually at their own cost. The only winners are the corporations as they get more and more highly skilled workers (Park, 2011, p. 452). Piller and Cho (2013) also point out that in South Korean the emphasis on the quality of an individual's human capital coincided with the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997/1998. This became the catalyst for a set of socioeconomic transformations that led to the imposition of competitiveness as a core value, with human capital a key component.

The Korean experience of the ideological use of the human capital thesis is highly relevant to Ireland. Perhaps nowhere, apart from Greece, have the social effects of the crisis been as deeply felt. Ireland went almost overnight from boom to bust. Its government signed up to one of the most spectacular and expensive bank bailouts in world history (Burke-Kennedy, 2011). During this time, for Irish young people their skills and university degrees languished on dole queues or they were forced to take them elsewhere, most commonly during the recession to Australia or Canada. Nearly half a million people (of all ages) left Ireland over the period April 2008 – April 2014 (480,000 is the estimated figure from the Central Statistics Office). Most of this cohort of young people are still away. Forced emigration for a new Generation Emigration, as it referred to in the Irish media, is a stark reminder that English as a mother tongue does not necessarily equip you for employment in your home country. Many young Irish people have found that their English merely determines the places – usually far flung from Irish shores – to which you can go to look for a job (Healy, 2015).

The effects of one of the deepest recessions in recent times brings to the fore the flaws of human capital theory. It is premised on social mobility and rising earnings, yet today widening inequality and income disparity, not social mobility, are the defining characteristics of our times. The serious effects of the cuts to incomes and conditions for the working people of Ireland are permanent (Allen & O'Boyle, 2013; Coulter & Nagle, 2015). The figures for Ireland for income inequality mirror what has been happening worldwide. While the top 1% has increased its share of wealth, earnings for the vast majority of people have declined; half a billion people in 25 of the west's richest countries suffered from flat or falling pay packets from 2005 to 2014. Today's younger generation at risk of ending up poorer than their parents (Elliot, 2016; Nugent, 2017). Wage decline for 25 year-olds in the US, Italy, France, Spain, Germany and Canada – underway even before financial crisis but it made it worse (Barr & Malik, 2016; Brown et al., 2015). Additionally, there has been a decline in wages for those young people with jobs mainly because 20% of jobs for younger workers are temporary contracts in the gig economy making Generation X in the main poorer than previous generations.

In the 1960s, in the middle of the post war boom, Schultz and Becker's proposition that more skilled you were the more you would earn might possibly have seemed more plausible. Today it grates amid the harsh legacies of austerity and the greatest inequality gap for several decades. The overall trend today is precisely the inverse of that of human capital theory – towards high-skilled but lower waged economies. The recession and restructuring of the labour market, according to labour market experts Brown, Cheung & Lauder, involves 'a global auction for jobs', in which skills bear little relation to earnings. Most graduates are over-skilled for the jobs they do and university degrees becoming increasingly devalued. Their conclusion is that human capital theory, which has for decades dominated thinking about the relationship between education and the labour market for orthodox economist policy makers and parents, has reached a crisis of legitimacy (Brown et al., 2015).

Austerity and the function of human capital ideology

Foucault (2008) presciently understood human capital to be at the centre of the neoliberal order of things. Human capital is about the switch from the social to the individual and encapsulates the neoliberal mantra that individual is solely responsible for all her outcomes. The neoliberal worker has

only herself to blame if she is not working or if she is underpaid as these are signs that she has not sufficiently upgraded herself as a ‘bundle of skills’ (Urciuoli, 2008).

Political economist Peck (2014) notes how following the economic crash of 2008, austerity policies have been enacted via a ‘strategy of displacement’ on behalf of neoliberal elites and devised as a means of deflecting the social impact of the crisis. Austerity has transferred the actual costs of the banking crisis onto first, the branches of government and then, through resulting budget cuts to the subordinate classes, thereby effecting social *redistribution* in favour of the already wealthy. Austerity dumped the responsibility from excessive banking speculation onto the individual citizen.

In Ireland, a similar strategy of displacement was deployed. The private bank crisis which became the most expensive bank bailout in history caused Irish debt to rise to 118% per cent of GDP. The result was hefty reductions in state spending. Despite Ireland having the youngest population in Europe, Ireland reduced its spending on education. Now government expenditure on education as a proportion of total government expenditure is the ninth lowest in Europe (Social Justice Ireland, 2016, p. 2).

This crisis of public funding coincided with the promotion of human capital as the main plank of Irish education policy. Policy documents in the period from 2010 heralded human capital as ‘the single most important enabler’ of national economic strategy (DES-HEA, 2015). In a recent report on funding for education ‘the upgrading of human capital’ is necessary as ‘a first lever of growth’ (Cassells, 2016, p. 16). The decline in state spending per student, by 25% between 2008 and 2015, led directly to a dramatic rise in individual student contributions – a direct cost transfer from state to the individual student. From 2006 to 2014, the real value of public expenditure per student in higher education fell sharply from just over €11,000 to just over €8,000 and what was once a ‘registration’ charge of €150 per individual student has ballooned into a €3,000 fee in 2016 (Mercille, 2015).

Human capital theory re-narrates education as job potential thereby transferring the responsibility from the social to the individual. It holds out the promise of higher incomes for greater skills while at the same time reducing public funding (Freeman & Bailey, 2011; Holmwood & Bhambra, 2012). As Ehrenreich noted, when describing how people were encouraged to cope with unemployment after the bursting of the do.com bubble in 2001, ‘you must recognise that whatever your world looks like right now, *you alone* have caused it to look that way. It’s never about the external world – it’s always between you and you’ (Ehrenreich, 2006, pp. 81–82). Human capital manages to encapsulate this mind-set and, in the current socio-economic context, comes to exhibit the elements of a fully-fledged ideological product.

Conclusions

In 2004, a panel of German linguists deemed *Humankapital* the most offensive word of the year (Wengler, 2015). To present speaking a language as a means of economic profit amounts to a strangely crude appreciation of the complex and multifaceted nature of language. This begs the question as to how human capital has come to be used so widely in connection to language why is it is challenged relatively little?

One way that the word human capital has been able to gain acceptance is via claimed conceptual antecedents – one of which is the use of capital in Bourdieu. For example, Williams (2010), previously a strong advocate of the need to critique normative sociolinguistics, readily adopts the human capital term and, citing Bourdieu in justification, sees no reason to use it more advisedly. Certainly, Bourdieu introduced the capital concept for culture and language, but his framework was very different to the version emanating from mainstream economics and neoliberalism, of which he was a tireless critic. Bourdieu (1986) distinguished three types of capital: economic capital or money resources, cultural capital in terms of knowledge of ‘legitimate’ culture or ‘High Culture’, ‘linguistic capital’ or speaking ‘properly’ and social capital social networks or knowing influential people. Bourdieu highlighted that successful actors, with copious amounts of the right sort of capital, pass that

capital onto their children whereas unsuccessful actors pass onto their children large amounts of socially undervalued capital. Bourdieu saw these capitals not as a means but as blocks to social mobility. Indeed, Bourdieu's overall conclusion was that the very basis of human capital theory – social mobility – is a myth. His use of cultural capitals was intended as a strident critique of the competitive market-driven laws of neoliberalism. The fact that he avoided using the term *human capital* is significant.³

Secondly, human capital applied to language amongst other skills has become widely used because it is promoted from high places. As I have shown, official policy documents have incorporated the term with little question and have created an ideological conformity which simply smothered dissenting voices. Heller (2018) sees commodification methods applied to language as deriving from the interests of capital and the neoliberal state. Her remarks recall Marx's observation, 'even more obvious' today than when he was writing: 'a ruling class rules also as thinkers, as producers of ideas and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age' (Marx & Engels, 1974, p. 64). The across the board adoption of human capital is a contemporary illustration of how ruling elites have the means to mobilise meaning behind language and to make ideology stick (Thompson, 1984). The Russian Marxist, Voloshinov, explained this process as a ruling class attempting to give a 'supra-class and eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgements' and thus impart a 'uniaccentual' or 'immutable' quality to word meaning, and hence to perceived reality (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 23). Human capital is one such of these 'uniaccentual words'.

Language as human capital rests on assumptions which, I have attempted to show here, clash with social and economic realities of the contemporary labour market, the exploitation of bilingual skills in work situations equally and, existing social barriers of discrimination which prevent the skills potential of young workers being realised and, finally, the current effects of the long recession, which have altered radically the employment outcomes for everyone. The inadequacies and inconsistencies of human capital as applied to language skills also specifically require the elaboration of alternative ways of describing language. Future lines of enquiry could usefully extend to revisiting and updating socially-embedded models of language to provide a considerably fuller account than the impoverished neoliberal version.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note that in the 1980's Gary Becker explained lower pay for married women in terms of the 'intrinsic' sexual division of labour. His claim was that the demands of child care and housework led married women to spend less effort in paid work than men. 'Hence, married women have lower hourly earnings than married men with the same market human capital, and they economize on the effort expended on market work by seeking less demanding jobs' (Becker 1985, p. 33). Such circular logic converts discrimination into an optimal approach that maximises efficiency – and the discrimination remains in place.
2. The 'x' is a way of representing males and females in this group.
3. For a comprehensive critique of the extensive use of capital and its 'twixt Becker and Bourdieu' ambiguity, see Fine (2002).

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Notes on contributor

Marnie Holborow Associate Faculty at Dublin City University, has written widely on politics and language. She has written on the politics of English, ideology and language, neoliberal keywords in the university, austerity in higher education in Ireland, and the legacy of Raymond Williams. She contributed the first entry for *Neoliberalism* in *The Wiley Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* and she is the author of *Language and Neoliberalism* (Routledge 2015). She is currently writing on the commodification of language in work situations.

ORCID

Marnie Holborow  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8422-1545>

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