Is linguistic injustice a myth? A response to Hyland (2016)

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Hyland (2016) challenges the notion of linguistic injustice in academic publishing—i.e., the position that non-native speakers of English face substantial challenges relative to native speakers in the dissemination of scholarly work. Specifically, Hyland argues that there is little convincing evidence that a linguistic disadvantage exists, and that focusing on disadvantage has harmful consequences for both native and non-native English-speaking scholars. Given the huge numbers of non-native English speakers involved in academic publishing, and the pressures from university administrations to publish in English, this is an issue of great importance to the scientific community, and Hyland's call for empirical data rather than anecdotal evidence and introspection is valuable. However, we argue that Hyland underestimates the role that *linguistic privilege* (and its converse, *linguistic disadvantage* or *linguistic injustice*) plays in academia.

It is necessary first to define linguistic privilege. Privilege in general refers to social advantages conferred upon an individual or group not as a result of merit but as a result of fortuitous group membership (Kimmel, 2014; McIntosh, 1988). In the United States, some commonly discussed types of privilege include white privilege and male privilege:[1] all else being equal, whites and males often have easier access to many things (e.g., education, employment, and political representation) than their non-white or non-male counterparts. Importantly, privilege does *not* entail that everything is easy for a member of the privileged group, or that nothing a privileged individual accomplishes was earned. Rather, it refers to a social situation in which that person has enjoyed some benefits, or avoided some challenges, that she would not have enjoyed or avoided if she were not a member of the privileged group. Likewise, privilege does not mean that a person from an underprivileged group cannot achieve success in spite of her challenges. In the context of language, privilege means that a native speaker of a prestige language like Standard English enjoys certain societal benefits that she has not earned (given that her first language was not a choice on her part) and, conversely, that someone who is not a native speaker of a prestige language faces certain challenges (see, e.g., Vandrick, 2015, for a detailed list). This does not mean that everything is easy for a native Standard English speaker, only that many things will be easier for a native speaker than they would have been for a non-native speaker, all else being equal.

In society at large, linguistic privilege manifests in many ways, including easier access to political and social institutions (e.g., having legal processes available in one's native language), access to linguistic capital (e.g., job opportunities), and being perceived positively (e.g., as more educated) (Lippi-Green, 1997; Subtirelu, 2013; Vandrick, 2009, 2015). There are two main ways linguistic privilege or disadvantage may affect academic publishing: effort required to disseminate research, and publishing bias.

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[1] These are, of course, not the only societal privileges; non-disabled privilege, heterosexual privilege, cisgender privilege, and many others also exist, and may vary from society to society.

Privilege 1: Publishing may require less effort for native English speakers

If two hypothetical scholars working on the same topic have the same ability level and training, but one is a native speaker of English and the other a native speaker of, for instance, Korean, the latter scholar will presumably have to work harder to produce the same amount of output. Conversely, if these two scholars work the exact same amount, the native English-speaking one is likely to produce more output and thus have an advantage in securing job offers, grants, tenure, etc. Finally, lower confidence in her language ability may lead the non-native English speaker to submit fewer papers, or be less likely to revise rejected papers, than the native English speaker.

Hyland argues that it may not actually be the case that non-native English speakers struggle more than native English speakers do. He cites substantial evidence that even native English speakers face difficulties in writing and publishing. This evidence is, however, irrelevant: the fact that writing is difficult for native English-speaking scholars does not entail that it is not *even more* difficult for non-native English-speaking scholars.[2] One cannot disprove *X>Y* by only showing how large *Y* is. As noted above, language privilege does not mean that everything is easy for members of the privileged group; it simply means that many things are easier if one is a member of the privileged group than they would have been if one were not a member. Indeed, similar arguments are made regarding other privileges (e.g., some white individuals question the existence of white privilege because their own life has not been easy), and these arguments are unfounded.

As Hyland notes, a direct empirical comparison of the effort spent by native and non-native English speakers in academic publishing would be valuable. Such data could come in the form of self-reported subjective feelings of effort or number of hours spent on writing[3]—although, as Hyland notes, there are many confounding variables that must be

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[2] The fact that the *Journal of Second Language Writing* has been in publication for almost 25 years serves as a reminder that non-native writing involves many challenges above and beyond those faced by the native writer. In addition to the challenges posed by both the procedural and linguistic aspects of writing in a second language (for a thorough review see Silva, 1993), racial and cultural barriers may further discourage non-native English-speaking scholars from participating in academic discussions (e.g. Liu & Tannacito, 2013; Morita, 2004). Even if we limit our discussion to "experienced" scholars (cf. Swales, 2004) who are thoroughly integrated into their field and may not struggle with English writing in the same way that students or junior scholars might, we must still consider how much time and effort it took those scholars over the course of their careers to reach that level in the first place. This is time and effort that native English-speaking scholars were free to invest in other scholarly activities.

[3] Note that writing is not the only stage of the publication process where linguistic disadvantage may come into play; non-native English proficiency may also influence a scholar's ability to follow the relevant literature (both published papers and, for instance, more colloquial blog or dis-list discussions, which in some fields represent the cutting edge of inquiry), which in turn may affect the quality of the research she is able to perform and, ultimately, her chances of publication. This potential source of linguistic disadvantage is not measured by directly observing publication outcomes. Note that we are not suggesting here that non-

accounted for in such a comparison. Currently, however, this is an open question. There is little direct evidence for Hyland's claim that academic publishing is just as difficult for native speakers as it is for non-native speakers: lack of evidence for a difference does not constitute evidence against a difference (Altman & Bland, 1995), especially if this difference has never been directly tested for (the series of studies Hyland cites, p. 60, do not appear to have made between-group comparisons). And evidence that native speakers struggle is certainly not evidence that non-native speakers don't struggle even more.

Another argument Hyland makes is that "native" and "non-native" speakers are not monolithic groups, and that other non-linguistic factors (including institutional factors such as funding and connectedness, as well as individual factors such as seniority and training) have a larger effect on scholars' ability to produce quality research and writing. He argues that differences within native and non-native speakers—e.g., whether a speaker grew up speaking a prestige register or not—may matter just as much, or more, than differences between native and non-native speakers, and thus nativeness is a "crude instrument" for predicting publishing success (63). Indeed, all of these factors are important and worthy of discussion; some or all of them may well exert a greater influence than nativeness. But one factor is not disproved by the presence of moderating factors, and an argument that group differences cannot exist when the groups are heterogeneous is fallacious.[4] The point of research into language privilege should be to identify and measure its role, not to argue that it is the only factor influencing publishing; in the real world, many factors will of course influence academic publishing, but this does not mean that language privilege cannot be one of them. For comparison, imagine a scientist finds that a sample of men is significantly taller than a sample of women. Another scientist could respond that the height difference between children and adults is much bigger than that between women and men, and furthermore that women vary in height based on nutrition, gene expression, and ethnicity. This would not entail, however, that aggregate sex differences do not exist. Nonetheless, Hyland's point is well taken that there are great differences between institutions and locations regarding the training that scholars receive and the linguistic capital that they are born with; identifying an effect of language privilege on academic publishing above and beyond these non-language effects may be challenging, but is a valuable topic for future inquiry.

Privilege 2: Publishing may be biased in favor of native-like English

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native speakers always do lower-quality research, but rather that they may need to expend greater effort than a native English speaker to perform at the same level.

[4] Even if we were to consider the heterogeneity of non-native speakers a relevant argument on this point, all that would mean is that some non-native speakers do not experience linguistic disadvantage while others do; this is not the same as assuming that linguistic disadvantage is a myth.

Another way in which linguistic privilege could manifest in academic publishing is through publication bias, with reviewers and editors being less likely to accept for publication a paper with "poor" English than a paper with standard English, all else being equal. Here we are referring mainly to hypothetical situations where the level of English writing biases reviewers or editors to look poorly on the quality of the scientific research; while it may be legitimate and unavoidable (albeit disadvantaging to non-native speakers of English) to reject some papers which would require substantial language work to be reviewable, influence of linguistic attitude on perceived quality of research would be a separate, and perhaps more pernicious, contributor to linguistic disadvantage. Hyland argues that publication bias is not a concern because 1) papers authored by non-native English speakers *are* getting published, and 2) reviewers and editors are not biased. We believe the dismissal of concerns about bias is unwarranted.

Hyland points out that "many [non-native English-speaking authors] successfully publish their papers" (60) and that "the fact that [several studies of English usage in academic writing] were conducted using published papers suggests that the problems found were not terminal" (61), implying that concerns about publication bias are overblown because papers by non-native speakers can still get published. This is not evidence against linguistic disadvantage: only a straw-man conception of linguistic injustice would predict that papers by non-native speakers are rarely published. (Indeed, to recapitulate the parallel with white privilege discussions drawn above, the argument that publication bias is not a concern because non-native speakers' papers can be published seems comparable to the argument that racism is not a concern in United States society because the country has a Black president; that argument is fallacious because one or several examples of success do not invalidate a broad pattern of disadvantage.) The fact that many papers do get published does not invalidate concerns that these papers may face disproportionate difficulty in getting published (as discussed above), may tend to be published in lower-impact journals, or may be published (or cited) in disproportionate amounts relative to the overall number of non-native English-speaking scholars. Nor does it invalidate concerns that the papers which did *not* get published got rejected for language-based reasons, either by reviewers or by editors who elected not to send them out for review. Any of these questions is worth investigating (although, as Hyland notes, these questions may be deceptively challenging to answer, given the difficulty of identifying authors' native language based solely on name and affiliation), and any such investigation would be more valuable than tacitly assuming linguistic disadvantage does not exist.

Secondly, Hyland argues that publication is not biased and that accept/reject decisions are largely made on the basis of content rather than language: "…reviewers do not typically take the non-Native speaker status of authors in account in making decisions and the quality of the language is rarely a decisive factor in rejection" (65). Such an argument is overly optimistic. Human beings are notoriously poor at identifying their own

unconscious biases, and even the most well-meaning of people often harbor implicit biases that can sometimes be revealed only with sensitive tasks (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015: Appendix A). Gender biases, for example, are known to be a concern in publishing (Logan, 2016). Implicit racial bias is a well-known societal concern, and was famously shown by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) to affect [United States] hiring practices: identical resumes with either white-sounding names (e.g., Emily) or Black-sounding names (e.g., Lakisha) were sent to employers, and the ones associated with white-sounding names were more likely to be called back. This effect has been observed in many social phenomena, such as racial bias in apartment letting (Carpusor & Loges, 2006), gender bias in academic hiring (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Williams & Ceci, 2015), teaching evaluations (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015), and, most relevant, in *academic reviewing* (Knobloch-Westerwick, Glynn, & Huge, 2013). Most individuals rejecting Black or female applicants surely would not explicitly say (and are not explicitly aware) that they were doing so because of the applicant's ethnic or gender identity. Rather, implicit biases caused people in the aggregate to be less likely to accept such applicants. In short, if reviewers and editors of academic article submissions practice language bias and implicitly consider papers with "poor" English to be of lower scientific quality and less deserving of publication, then these reviewers and editors may be unable to acknowledge or even recognize this bias.

The possibility of reviewing bias is, perhaps more than any of the others discussed above, in need of—and amenable to—empirical investigation. The most direct piece of evidence cited by Hyland comes from Coniam (2012), which found that manuscripts with more standard English were not significantly more likely to be accepted than those with less standard English (2/50 more standard accepted, 7/72 less standard). These data are inadequate for making such an argument, however, not the least because of the limited dataset: the data come from only one reviewer, making it impossible to make generalizations.[5] Furthermore, the data come not from an experiment but from natural peer reviews, meaning that the comparison between native and non-native English submissions may be confounded by any number of other factors that were not observed.

To test for the presence of language-related bias in reviewing and publication (as opposed to classroom evaluation), the ideal course of action is obvious: to conduct a randomized, double-blind, pre-registered study with controlled materials, as done by Knobloch-Westerwick and colleagues (2013) and Moss-Racusin and colleagues (2012).[6] This could

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[5] The distribution of the data also makes inferences based on the chi-squared test reported in that paper questionable. Analyzing the same contingency table using Fisher's exact test rather than chi-squared also yields a non-significant test, $p=.306$, but the point remains that with such a small number of observations it is difficult to identify general trends.

[6] Huang and Foote (2010) and Rubin and Williams-James (1997) do something conceptually similar to what we have in mind, but in both these studies the reviewers followed rating rubrics that explicitly emphasized aspects of writing quality (e.g., grammatical accuracy and stylistic conventions), and in both

straightforwardly be done by, for example, taking several real texts (e.g., abstracts prepared for submission to academic conferences), from several academic disciplines, written in nonstandard English, and creating for each a copyedited Standard English version while keeping content identical. Soliciting blind reviews (from both native and non-native English speakers) for such texts would provide an empirical way to test for language bias in the same way the studies outlined above tested for racial and gender bias. Outside of an academic context, non-native-accented speech has been shown to be judged as less credible-sounding than native-accented speech in experimental settings (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010) and, anecdotally, in legal proceedings (McWhorter, 2013); it is not unreasonable to expect this unconscious bias to extend to written academic text as well.

Conclusions

The dominance of the English language in academic publishing certainly has benefits: the existence of a worldwide lingua franca for many areas of scholarly inquiry has likely fostered great scientific progress and unprecedented international collaboration. Indeed, it is possible that the scientific benefits of English dominance outweigh the drawbacks. Nonetheless, that does not mean that linguistic disadvantage or injustice does not exist in scholarly publishing. More importantly, the benefits of English-language academic publishing do not make awareness of linguistic disadvantage, or discussion of how to mitigate its effects, less valuable. It should be possible to increase awareness of linguistic biases and issues related to linguistic privilege without losing sight of either the value of having a single major international language of science and scholarship, or the other very serious non-linguistic issues facing non-native English-speaking scholars that Hyland rightly draws attention to, such as institutional access to funding and scholarly literature.

We applaud Hyland's call for a broad, holistic view of challenges facing scholars who are not based in relatively privileged institutions (i.e., the "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic" societies, Henrich et al., 2010), and his demand for empirical evidence regarding linguistic injustice; we feel, however, that premature dismissal of concerns about linguistic injustice does more harm than good. While we agree with Hyland that the notion of language privilege should not be used to discourage non-native English speakers from academic publishing or to trivialize the real challenges faced by native

cases focused on student writing evaluations. (Interestingly, these studies had apparently contradictory results—Huang and Foote [2010] found lower ratings assigned to non-native English writing, whereas Rubin and Williams-James [1997] found some scores to be higher for putatively Thai authors than putatitively American. This discrepancy may be due in part to methodological differences: Huang and Foote presented participants with writing samples that actually did differ linguistically, whereas Rubin and Williams-James presented participants with identical writing samples but led participants to believe that these samples were written by authors of different nationalities.) Our primary interest, on the other hand, is whether judgments of *scientific* quality would be affected by language, even when reviewers are not necessarily meant to be evaluating language.

English speakers, we nonetheless recognize the importance of acknowledging the role language privilege may play in academia. By acknowledging that there may be linguistic privileges and disadvantages we do not mean to suggest that non-native English-speaking scholars are in any way inferior to their native English-speaking counterparts; one can recognize the talent and great writing ability of many non-native scholars without belittling the challenges that many of them face.

Hyland is correct to draw attention to the fact that direct evidence *for* language injustice is, at best, lacking, but the evidence he raises *against* language injustice is also lacking. Faced with the dearth of direct evidence for language injustice in academic publishing, we believe the reasonable interim conclusion is not that language injustice does not exist, but that further study is needed. We hope that, rather than ignoring the possibility of language injustice because it is not easily observable, more researchers will be motivated by this discussion to conduct empirical investigations of its consequences, just as increasing awareness of other societal privileges has driven increases in empirical study on those. In the domain of spoken language, it has been demonstrated that interventions can reduce various biases against non-native speakers (Derwing, Rossiter, & Munro, 2002; Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015); similar interventions could prove useful for increasing the equity of academic publishing, but these cannot be done unless the nature and scope of linguistic disadvantage in publishing is measured and acknowledged. Above we have outlined two avenues of research that would be valuable: estimating the difference in effort (if any) that native versus non-native English speakers spend on academic publishing, and estimating the magnitude of implicit bias (if any) in reviewing.

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