

# FROM AFRICA TO CATALONIA: NOTES ON A SOCIOLOGICAL AND LINGUISTICS OF YOUTH, MIGRATION AND ENGLISH

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This article focuses on the possibilities of mobilisation of English by a group of young African migrants residing in Spain. From a critical ethnographic sociolinguistic perspective, I discuss the functionality, meanings and values of this code for its users as situated in a specific local normativity regime, and contrast them with the widely-acknowledged status of English as a faceless global linguistic commodity. Drawing on a corpus of in-depth semi-structured interviews, I argue that English is a lingua franca resource for global circulation and mobility, but not for local relocation to Spain where in fact, may get constructed as a barrier to Spanish language learning. Along similar lines, I argue that it has little economic value for labour market incorporation but performs key symbolic functions in young identity construction processes.

*Keywords:* English as a lingua franca, global commodity, African migration, legitimate speaker, critical ethnographic sociolinguistics.

## 1. Introduction

In today's collective imagery, English is the language of economic prosperity, global citizenship, and (better) job opportunities. The folk rhetoric on the high exchange value of English in the global marketplace has saturated our imaginations. Practically, it translates into deep anxieties to learn the language at whatever cost for individuals and families.

Interestingly, academic research has somehow paralleled popular globalist discourse on English. Whether viewed from a positive/inevitable perspective (e.g. Crystal 1998) or from a negative standpoint (e.g. Phillipson 1992), discussions on the current spread of English have often adopted a broad and rather simplistic perspective. This is what Niño-Murcia (2003: 139) calls "the overgeneralized globalist analysis" which "projects the world English phenomenon as if it were a unitary universal, audible from one speaking position". Pennycook (2007) argues that what is needed, instead, is a perspective which foregrounds its complexities through the examination of the uptake of the language, its reaccenting, remoulding and refashioning in specific local contexts. Similarly, Blommaert (2010) speaking for and within a sociolinguistics of mobility argues for *spatialising* accounts which localise language use, that is, apprehend language practices on the ground; understand the local indexicalities of resources and their accompanying ideologies; and acknowledge the constitutive nature of space in enabling the functionality of the code. Niño-Murcia (2003), in turn, views the value of thinking spatially about English as a way of foregrounding the social inequalities linked to the embracing of English in specific national contexts.

In this paper, I follow the critical positions outlined above. Using in-depth ethnographic interviews, I investigate the perceptions that a group of highly

multilingual individuals coming from different countries in Africa have about the value of English in/for their processes of mobility, re-location and labour market incorporation in the Barcelona metropolitan area.

## 2. Framing theoretical ideas

My approach to the study of English as a *global semiotic resource* (Blommaert 2010) is framed within the critical sociolinguistics tradition (see Heller 2011, for a presentation of its research programme). Critical sociolinguistics places social processes at the centre of linguistic analysis. The goal is to examine how discourse (understood in a broad sense as representation, ideology and practice) effects social stratification, that is, is at the root of processes of social inequality, inclusion and exclusion. This research programme is premised on the central role accorded to ethnography in sociolinguistic research. Without ethnography it is impossible to capture the complexities of the social world, the multiplicity of actors' positions and interests, and the tensions and contradictions that emerge in daily life.

A second theoretical assumption of this article is that any analyses of English in the world today must proceed within a multilingual perspective. By this, I mean locating English as part of individual multilingual repertoires which are in constant change and which comprise unequal and fragmented competences in each of the codes spoken (whether language, varieties, registers or styles) and a high degree of mixing and hybridisation. Secondly, researching English from a multilingual vantage point also entails understanding the position of the language in specific sociolinguistic regimes, that is, in normative orders which hierarchise linguistic resources, their values and social indexicalities, and in so doing, empower and disempower speakers. This idea takes us to Bourdieu (1991) and his economic analysis of the value of linguistic resources. One key idea in Bourdieu's thinking about language is that of the *legitimate speaker*. Besides speaking a legitimate language, for one's linguistic practice to gain full (social) appreciation, one has to be recognised by others as being a legitimate speaker of that language within a particular normativity regime. For me, this is a fundamental idea when it comes to understanding the value of English today. Rather than speaking in the abstract about English as capital and its global purchase we need to examine in detail whether or not English is a mobilisable type of resource for whom and under which circumstances. In fact, I claim that we need to problematise the global affordances of English, which, in line with Blommaert (2010), I view not as global but in fact as rather niched.

## 3. Data and method

The corpus of data I analyse consists of eight semi-structured interviews with a group of young Africans whom our research team got to know in the course of a three-year sociolinguistic ethnography of multilingualism undertaken at a non-profit organisation (2007-2010).<sup>1</sup> This NGO provides different services for migrant populations in a city located in the Barcelona province. The personal trajectories of all interviewees crossed the institutional space mentioned above at some point during our ethnographic fieldwork; more specifically, the majority participated in two shelter projects and attended Spanish and Catalan classes taught by volunteers at the NGO.

Interviewees come from a variety of African countries (mostly western and northern Africa), both states where English is an official (or a de facto official) language (like The Gambia [three interviewees] or Cameroon [one interviewee]) and states where it does not have official recognition (like Morocco [one interviewee], Senegal [one interviewee], Ivory Coast [one interviewee] and Mauritania [one interviewee]). They are

all male, aged between 20 and 30. Five of them have post-secondary education degrees, two of them completed their secondary education and one attended primary school only. They have varied levels of competence in English. Pseudonyms are used here to preserve their anonymity.

I draw on interview data for two reasons: firstly, to understand migrants' experiences, understandings and expectations in relation to English (a type of data rarely analysed), and secondly, to get a broader picture of the functionality of the code in present-day Catalonia/Spain.

#### 4. Data analysis

In the data, we identified five main themes linked to the uses and values of English, which we shall spell out in the following sections. They are the following: English and mobility; English and re-location; English as a barrier for Spanish language learning; English and labour market incorporation and English as a global youth identity marker.

##### 4.1. *English and mobility*

One goal of this paper is to understand when and how English is perceived to be a resource by these migrants in connection with their trajectories of mobility, whether current or previous. From the interviews, it emerges that English is a code associated to processes of mobility, whether one's own or others'. In general, it is seen to facilitate geographical circulation, although in different ways and with different affordances for different individuals.

Some interviewees, like Ebrima, from Gambia, have intensively drawn on English throughout their lives. This is no doubt connected to the fact that he learnt English through schooling, is highly proficient in the language, and was therefore able to apply for a student visa to the UK where he graduated before coming to Spain.<sup>2</sup> For other individuals, like Duwa, access to English is linked not to his own but to other people's mobilities, as his competency comes from his informal work experiences with British tourists in Gambia. Still others, like Cissé, from Mauritania, capitalise on English for work-related opportunities in a foreign country, as we shall see later. Finally, for Kalilu, also from Gambia, English enables him to make his migration to Spain possible.

His case is interesting, as he draws on English throughout his migration process not only for communication purposes, as would be expected, but as a key resource to claim Gambian citizenship (see [1] below). This way, he avoids being deported by the Spanish authorities if caught arriving illegally in the Canary Islands.

(1) "Im from Gambia I speak with them in English"

\*RES: ahm what did they ask you for [/] to get on that boat -? was there any kind of requirement?

\*KAL: those people?

\*RES: yes.

\*KAL: ah sí where are you from -? I'm from Gambia I speak with them in English someone there they don't speak English someone speak in English so:: someone speak in frans someone speak i:n like in Guinea Bissau language.

\*RES: uhu.

\*KAL: yes because everybody can prove yourself from this country so that these people they will know because they think like of everybody is from Senegal you know because Senegalese people when they think you're from Senegal they will deport you, yeah that is the problem inside the camp.

In sum, the picture that emerges is one in which English is largely viewed as a capital for people in motion, which serves multiple purposes at home and abroad, is acquired in a variety of contexts and results in heterogeneous proficiency levels.

#### 4.2. *English and relocation*

One of my key questions in this article is what opportunities this much coveted resource open (if any) in Spain. When interviewees are asked to describe their relocation to Barcelona and how they managed linguistically, a fairly consistent picture emerges. They present English as a transient capital, a resource they can draw on temporarily in the absence of competency in the local languages. English is, thus, a language for circulation, not for relocation or reterritorialization in Spain.

Although there is some variation as to the appreciation of the functionality of English for lingua franca communication with the local population (from “no use” to “some use”), by and large, interviewees describe proficiency in English as highly distributed socially and rather fragmented individually. What is noticeable is that, in their view, there does not seem to exist major differences in terms of English proficiency levels between the general population and service providers in institutional contexts. English proficiency is presented as haphazard, and finding competent speakers as a matter of good luck, not only in the streets, but more surprisingly, in migration-related service settings (as found in Codó 2008 and Codó and Garrido 2010). Interestingly, this does not seem to have been a foregone conclusion for most migrants. Duwa in (2) reveals that his expectations were that people would speak English in ‘Europe’.

(2) “Siempre todo el mundo entiendo inglés”

\*RES: y tú pensabas que hablaban inglés o no?  
*and did you think they spoke English or not?*

\*DDA: sí yo pensado porque la mayoría en Europa porque en inglés este la lengua de inglés es muy forte siempre todo el mundo entiendo inglés para mi opinion.  
*yes I thought so because the majority in Europe because English this the English language is very strong always everyone understands English in my opinion.*

#### 4.3. *English as a barrier for Spanish language learning*

One interesting observation is that, contrary to generalised expectations about English as a highly valued global resource, some interviewees construct speaking English as a problem for their relocation to Spain. Those who do, also construct the interview as a language learning event, ask the interviewer to carry out the interview in Spanish, and strive hard not to code-switch into English when they experience difficulties with self-expression. This is no doubt connected to the fact that the interviewer had conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Spanish language classes, where she got in touch with most of them. She is constructed as yet another language teacher and expectations about her teaching role transpire in some of the interviews. However, more significant than actual practices are the discourses that interviewees produce, as when Kalilu asks the researcher to give him a tape where only Spanish is spoken. “I want sólo castellano”, he says. Or in the following interaction, where Duwa views his Spanish as deficient, even though he has been speaking to the researcher in fairly fluent Spanish for almost three hours.

(3) "Yo no hablo como inglés castellano, me gusta hablar castellano más de inglés"

- \*RES: tú qué consideras qué tienes de nivel de castellano -? # en tu opinión cuál es tu nivel de castellano hablas castellano:: cómo?  
*what do you think your level of Spanish is -? # in your opinion what is your level of Spanish do you speak Spanish:: like?*
- \*DDA: +^muy mal.  
*very bad.*
- \*RES: por qué? [=laughs].  
*why?*
- \*DDA: no yo muy mal.  
*no I very bad.*
- \*RES: muy mal?  
*very bad?*
- \*DDA: sí yo no hablo bien tu sabi.  
*yes I don't speak well you know.*
- \*RES: bueno llevamos como dos horas o tres juntos eh?  
*well, we've been together for two or three hours right?*
- \*DDA: no -. yo habla is very bad.  
*no -. I speak is very bad.*
- \*RES: vale [=laughs].  
*ok.*
- \*DDA: yo no hablo como inglés castellano me gusta hablar castellano más de ingles.  
*I don't speak Spanish like English I like to speak better Spanish than English*
- \*RES: prefieres el castellano-? por qué?  
*you prefer Spanish -? why?*
- \*DDA: porque ahora yo vive en España.  
*because now I live in Spain.*

Duwa assesses his proficiency in Spanish with reference to his English proficiency and somehow sets the two languages in competition (although phrased in terms of individual preference) where facility for self-expression (in English) must yield to opportunities for language learning (of Spanish) even if it entails more personal effort. For Duwa, the reason is clear: he is in Spain. I want to claim that, besides being an effect of his personal (frustrating) experience with English, the internalisation of the anxiety to learn Spanish may be an effect of these migrants' contact with settlement agencies, where the discourse of English-speaking newcomers not making enough effort to learn Spanish circulates amply, and ideologies of integration through language learning are hegemonic. They constitute a useful way of legitimising neoliberal self-responsibility (and blame) in, for example, job search processes, and useful technologies for policing the self (see Garrido 2010).

#### 4.4. English and labour market incorporation

Late modernity is characterised by the emergence of a new service and knowledge-based economy which places language at the centre of economic processes. English being the key linguistic asset of our times, the question arises of the extent to which English is a capital African newcomers can mobilise for their labour market incorporation.

The majority of interviewees do not construct English as a commodity that may open up work opportunities or that may add value to their professional skills. To be more precise, the only individuals who, seemingly, are able to draw on their fluency in English for job-related purposes are Cissé and Agbor, from Mauritania and Cameroon

respectively, both with university degrees in law. Interestingly, they both work, at different moments, as weekend social educators for the residential project of which they were former participants. Thus, the only work sphere where they can capitalise on their proficiency in English is migration-related jobs. This is in line with findings by Allan (2010) in Toronto, where the multilingual competency of highly skilled foreign professionals becomes an 'added value' only in the highly precarious settlement sector.

Undoubtedly, the patterns of entry into the country (either illegally or by overstaying tourist visas) constrain the types of jobs African migrants may access. However, even those with legal status and university qualifications like Jah from Ivory Coast, with a BSc in Computer Science, do not view their fluency in English (or French for that matter) as added value human capital for accessing a post in the new economy. Again, this may be the effect of the discourse of many NGO and trade union advisors who, through job orientation services, may have explicitly transmitted that idea (Jah, for example, explains how he was told that he needed Catalan for a job in his field, which was probably true; however, discourses which emphasise what skills migrants "lack" have the side effect of also hiding the capitals they already possess). Such agencies may be the actual agents of the under- or devaluing of migrants' linguistic repertoires, although such claims are still tentative and would require further investigation.

#### 4.5. English as global youth identity marker

The case of Jah, just mentioned, epitomises many of the complexities surrounding the 'value' of English for these young Africans. While he does not conceive of English as having economic value, he constructs its value in terms of identity building processes. Thus, in the interview, he chooses to answer a question about his proficiency in the language by 'performing' in English a particular type of global youth identity, as can be seen below.

(4) "I can explain myself yeah if I wanna mean some things you know"

\*RES: nada # y hablas bien inglés ahora?

*ok # and do you speak good English now?*

\*JAH: pero: # puedo decir I just explain myself yeah just for talking you know # I can explain myself yeah.

*but: # I can say I just explain myself yeah just for talking you know # I can explain myself yeah.*

\*RES: aham.

\*LAM: if I wanna mean some things you know.

\*RES: aham.

\*LAM: I can.

\*RES: yea:h.

Jah's grammar, discourse markers, prosody and intonation evoke a globalised reggae/hip-hop youth culture which he not only identifies with but enacts. This also relates to another idea that surfaces constantly in the interviews: English is the language of young people. Even when local competency is dismissed, the younger generation is construed as way more proficient than previous generations, which is partly true but partly also an ideological simplification of a highly complex reality. Finally, the social media is another space where English is used by these migrants with highly symbolic meanings (that I associate with young people's identities) beyond its instrumental capabilities, as English occurs in multiple combinations with other languages (such as Wolof and French). Ibrahima, a Senegalese 19-year-old, is a case in point. He claims to

be learning English through his use of social media to connect, surprisingly, not to an international audience but to other Senegalese youth living in Spain. Also interestingly, he uses his Gambian friends as his private teachers of English for social media interactions. English appears to be a sort of “gift” skill that circulates in the African networks described here.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The data analysis presented, although brief and necessarily selective, has foregrounded some of the main issues concerning the value of English for highly multilingual young Africans living in Barcelona today. One of the findings is that English seems to have little instrumental usefulness for intergroup communication with the local citizenry. A more surprising insight is that English has no economic value in the Catalan/Spanish marketplace for local work insertion, even for university graduates. The only exception seems to be the settlement sector, where some of them end up working either formally or as volunteers. The devaluing of English in a service economy where multilingualism is viewed as added value and widely celebrated and where English is the code that epitomises such multilingual orientation is puzzling. More data and a more in-depth analysis would be needed to disentangle this puzzle, but some hypotheses may be put forward.

There seem to be a number of factors compounding the situation. A key one is migrants' lack of proper authorisation to reside in the country, an effect of the highly restrictive channels for legal entry, which constrains their access to the regular economy. Linked to this is the need to resort to social networks for employment, which may have the effect of orienting them towards manual, low-skilled occupations. But beyond material factors there are ideological constraints, as revealed by our fieldwork with NGOs and trade unions, like the way these citizens are systematically imagined as unskilled workers and their backgrounds rarely constructed as mobilisable capital. Instead, they are always constructed as lacking (in language and other professional skills), which forces them to enrol in an infinite number of courses which, in the majority of cases, lead nowhere. Contrary to mainstream discourse, this piece of research shows that speaking English is, in itself, not a form of capital if one is not (or imagined to be) middle class, skilled, native or white (or some combination of them). It also shows that, while there is little value for English in contact with mainstream Catalan/Spanish society, there is high value for it as a marker of global youth membership.

### Transcription conventions

[/]	retracing one's speech
+^	latching
:	lengthening of vowel
#	short pause

### Notes

1. This ethnography was conducted as part of the funded research project “La gestión del multilingüismo en el ámbito institucional” (HUM2007-61864/FILO). M. Rosa Garrido collected the data reported on here.
2. Ismaila's training took place within a Commonwealth-supported education cooperation programme between The Gambia and the UK, which attests to the importance of the (post)colonial ties in facilitating African's mobilities and channelling them in particular

directions. It also foregrounds the importance of proficiency in English as facilitator and an end product of those mobilities.

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