

## Unsettling Capital and Language

*Dr. William Simpson*

*UCL Institute of Education /*

*Tokyo University of Science*

Capital is unsettling. As ‘value in motion’ (Harvey, 2015), it ceases to be, as soon as it settles. It is marked by a contradictory endless need for accumulation on the one hand, and seemingly inevitable crises on the other. As far back as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Marx described how global flows of capital simultaneously destroyed and created industries, jobs, divisions of labour, social relations, needs, wants, and ways of living. Capital’s propensity for unsettling continues apace today, in the increasing mobility and precarity of not only jobs, but entire industries. Discursively too, capital unsettles – *colonising* ways of doing and thinking about all manner of things in newly *marketized* or *commodified* ways (Fairclough, 1993), and recasting *economic man* as himself capital embodied - *human capital* (Foucault, 2008). Discourses on capital and capitalism, have themselves become unsettled too, where in the face of rank inequality and increasingly rapid and seemingly uncontrollable change, renewed appetites for alternatives emerge alongside capital’s hegemonies (Chun 2017). A good deal of recent sociolinguistic work has investigated the interrelation between language and an unsettling capital, focusing on processes of linguistic commodification, the valorisation of *linguistic capital*, and language as a *skill*, within new-, late- or neoliberal capitalism. What we offer in this panel is a discussion of how we might theorize capital – what it is, how it moves, and in whose interest it does so. Further, we aim to explore how capital relates to other, more rigorously theorised concepts such as *linguistic capital*, *human capital* and *commodified language*. We aim to start a conversation which centres on how capital – the incessant engine at the heart of the global political economic system (Harvey, 2015), unsettles, and is unsettled by, languages and their speakers.

**Keywords:** Political Economy / Neoliberalism / Capital / Commodification

## 1. Unsettling Capital and Assemblages of English in the Modern World-System

*Prof. John O'Regan*

*UCL Institute of Education, University College London*

The modern world-system is a capitalist world-system which has its origins in the sixteenth century (Frank, 1967; Sweezy, 1972; Wallerstein, 2011). The indispensable rationale and *sine qua non* of the capitalist world-system has been the endless accumulation of capital: 'the accumulation of capital in order to accumulate more capital' (Wallerstein: 2013: 10). As capital has spread, so English has also risen to become the default lingua franca of the world-system. It has achieved this position by acting as a symbiotic free rider upon capital (Olsen, 1965; Fontaine, 2014) and by secreting itself into the integuments of structural power in a US-dominated capitalist world-economy, both in its political and economic governance (e.g. US Treasury, UN, IMF, World Bank) and in its dominant mechanisms of knowledge production. These include global media organizations and regional centres for the production and reproduction of research for international publication. Simultaneous with the rise of normative models of English through the consecutive world-hegemonies of Britain and the United States has been the proliferation of diverse postcolonial Englishes. This has also been accompanied by a worldwide explosion in superdiverse, translingual and translanguaged realizations of English for communicative assemblage and display (Pennycook, 2017; Canagarajah, 2017; García & Li, 2014; Li 2018; Blommaert & Rampton, 2012; Kramsch, 2018; Lou & Jaworski, 2016). The global spread of capital appears to have had the effect of both unsettling English so as to produce a multiplicity of diverse local and trans-local assemblages and articulations of English, while also globally sedimenting English in its dominant normative form. Drawing upon Marx's (1973, 1976) description of the circulation and appearance of the commodity form in capitalism, this paper presents a theorization of postcolonial Englishes and of late modern translingual assemblages which locates these realizations in relation to the widely-fetishized dominant normative form (Simpson & O'Regan, 2018).

**Keywords:** world systems theory / political economy / language commodification

## 2 Unsettling capital in 'investment' and 'consumption'

*Dr. Kyoko Motobayashi*  
*Ochanomizu University*

This paper revisits two market-derived concepts that have advanced the field of applied linguistics in the past few decades: language learning as an investment (Norton Peirce 1995; Norton 2000; Darwin and Norton 2015) and consumption (Kubota 2011a). The former, which was proposed in the 1990s and has evolved into 'a comprehensive model' recently (Darvin and Norton 2015: 37), captures individuals' efforts to acquire language skills or appropriate a new linguistic repertoire as an investment in a better future or a more desirable form of identity. The notion of language learning as consumption, conceptualizes language learning as a form of leisurely consumption of the commodified form of language, cultural authenticity and cosmopolitanism, and socialization opportunities associated with language (Kubota 2011a). This paper starts with an overview of the emergence of the investment and consumption concepts in applied linguistics, then examines the ways in which the researchers have framed contrast and complementarity between investment and consumption, and considers how the notion of capital is conceptualized in these theoretical constructs. By doing this, this paper aims to contribute to the discussion to better clarify some confusions regarding the distinction, similarity and relationships between different market-informed terms that now proliferate in the analysis of linguistic practices, and builds upon those attempts made in sociolinguistics such as Kelly-Holmes (2016) for whom the notion of the market is classified in different ways in the variationist sociolinguistics of Labov, Bourdieusian sociology of language, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA), and Heller and Duchene's (2016) notion of the commodification of language, in an attempt to clarify different theoretical traditions behind the debate over commodification of language, introducing Marxist, economist, and political-rights-based perspectives that differ from Heller and Duchene's, who mainly draw on Bourdieusian notion of capital.

**Keywords:** Commodification of language; linguistic anthropology; political economy

### 3. 'Good money for someone. Not teachers': The Distribution of Value in Eikaiwa English Language Schools

*Dr. William Simpson*

*UCL Institute of Education / Tokyo University of Science*

The notion of capital as *value in motion* sees capital as continually flowing through multiple *moments* of production, realisation, and distribution. Such flow through distinct, though interrelated moments, contains within it the potential for disjuncture, struggle, and crisis. This paper asks what such flow looks like within contemporary *language industries* where language comes to the fore within commodity production, and what the points of disjuncture, struggle, and crisis therein might mean for those within production. In drawing on ethnographic work on corporate *eikaiwa* English schools in Japan, this paper seeks to give an account of how value is produced and distributed through the *production* and *realisation* (the sale) of the *eikaiwa* English lesson as commodity. In the accounts of *eikaiwa* teachers, discourses of an unjust distribution of value emerge, where a lack of control over both production and product is expressed. Teachers in *the role of labour*, often employed under precarious pay-per-lesson contracts, find themselves producing value-laden lessons at the intersection of often contradictory forces and interests including: institutionally prescribed Taylorised forms of production; the need to flexibly produce lessons that deliver 'satisfaction' to individual students; and a distribution of work within a *teacher-market* which often capitalises on students' *akogare* (desire) for 'foreigners'. While such contradictions are productive of various degrees of resistance, ambivalence, and acceptance of the form of *production*, many express a deep dissatisfaction with what they see as unjust distribution of value from the realisation of the *product* (i.e. from the sale of the lesson).

**Keywords:** Political economy / ELT industry / commodification / language work / teacher labour

#### 4. Talk is cheap? Ersatz economics and corporate speak

*Dr. Christian Chun*

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

McCloskey (1985) coined the term “ersatz economics” which she defined as “untutored economic experience” which is “a bad teacher of economics, just as the unaided eye is a bad teacher of astronomy...practically everything that you thought you knew about economics before studying it is wrong” (p. 3). By drawing the analogy with how we see gaseous spheres in distant galaxies with how we directly live, think, and *feel* the economics of the everyday – be it collection bills, overdue notices, rent increases, and minimum wage, McCloskey dismisses people’s experiential firsthand knowledge of it. Many might not know academic economic theories but they certainly know capital through its practices. Are the discourses and “the vocabulary of such ersatz economics, the economics of the man [*sic*] in the street” (ibid, p. 3) much different than the discourses of capital in corporate speak as presented in annual reports, CEO announcements, and mainstream economic publications?

In this paper, I first briefly outline the three main theories in economics (neoclassical, Keynesian, and Marxian) for how each differently frames circulations of capital. I then examine the so-called ersatz economic discourses of everyday economists (Chun, 2017) in their online comments responding to newspaper stories on the economy. For a comparative discourse analysis, I proceed to selected announcements, reports, and featured interviews by both corporate CEOs and mainstream economists for the ways in which they adhere to supposedly ‘scientific economic discourse’. What exactly constitutes ‘scientific economic discourse’? Is corporate speak based on specific economic theory claiming to be a science, and does it differ from ersatz economic theory and discourses?

**Keywords:** political economy / discourses of capitalism / ersatz economics

## 5. Neoliberal policies and the rise of discursive informality

*Dr. Karin Zotzmann*

*University of Southampton*

Neoliberals assume that markets should ideally be regulated by a timeless and universal market mechanism that supposedly produces natural equilibria between supply and demand. Neoliberal policies attempt to 'roll back' the state and to 'free' markets from government regulation, while at the same time, protecting private property. Neoliberal policies of deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation have unfortunately proven to be misguided and demonstrably inefficient as they give undue privilege to strong economic agents and in consequence create ideal conditions for monopolisation, racketeering and even kleptocracy. These negative consequences are however 'effectively rendered invisible' in mainstream economics (Hirschfeld 2015: 5) by being cast as market external forces that corrupt an otherwise virtuous system. In this paper, I draw upon Hirschfeld's work on how unregulated markets operate and develop. She focuses on the 'illegal' underworld economy that is in many ways 'the quintessential expression of the kind of private sector entrepreneurialism celebrated and encouraged by the neoliberal economic orthodoxy' (Andreas 1998: 125). Despite the fact that in the illegal realm violence is often a key strategy to eliminate competitors, in both the illegal and the legal realms deregulation tends to lead to the concentration of power and monopolisation. In such an environment, interpersonal relations and networks, as well as concomitant informal discursive practices become more important, as they allow well-connected and privileged agents enhanced access to economic resources and opportunities. The argument I put forth in this paper is hence that the advancement of neoliberal policies has brought about a concomitant rise in the use of informal discourse to facilitate capital accumulation. Bearing in mind that the relation between the state and the economy is complex, context specific and path dependent, I illustrate my argument with examples from the US under Donald Trump and from Russia during the pre- and post-market reform periods.

**Keywords:** deregulation, neoliberalism, monopolisation, informality