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Equality Amongst Speakers of English: Distributive and Relational Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how egalitarians should characterise the complex and multifaceted inequalities associated with the ongoing global spread of English(es). We argue that global linguistic inequality today cannot be reduced to a single dimension, such as inequality of power or status. Instead, by drawing on distributive and relational approaches to egalitarian political theory, we disaggregate global linguistic inequality into nine dimensions: five related to the distribution of important goods (access to opportunities; linguistic resources, services and supports; language learning efforts; dignity/esteem; and expression) and four related to different aspects of how people relate to one another (morally; epistemically; socially; and aesthetically).

1 | Introduction

This article explores how egalitarians should characterise inequalities associated with the ongoing global spread of English(es). We argue that these should not be reduced to a single underlying dimension, such as inequality of power (see, e.g., Ives 2006, 2010; Phillipson 1992) or status (e.g., Tupas 2015, 2024), but instead that they are complex and multifaceted. To make this case, we draw on two strands of contemporary egalitarian political philosophy to generate an indicative (and non-exhaustive) list of global linguistic inequality's different dimensions. We offer this list as an invitation to other researchers, especially researchers from other disciplinary and methodological backgrounds, for suggestions, refinements, and additions.

By global linguistic inequality, we mean the many and varied inequalities associated with the ongoing global spread of English(es), including—but not limited to—inequalities between L1 English speakers and those who (had to) learn English as a supplementary language, as well as inequalities that arise due to prestige variety. The category of a global linguistic inequality is a novel one for linguistic justice scholarship within the field of political philosophy (though see Soler & Morales-Gálvez 2022), which has focused mostly on issues of domestic rather than global justice, and on questions of inter-linguistic rather than intra-linguistic justice (for an overview, see Shorten 2024). However, the category is implicit in

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many empirical studies of linguistic justice. For instance, economists have studied how the spread of English influences labour markets (see, e.g., Grin 2015) whilst sociolinguists have introduced the concept of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992) in order to explore the role of English for topics such as European integration and globalisation (Phillipson 2003, 2008, 2016).

Our approach here is fundamentally philosophical. It is also expressly egalitarian. Egalitarianism, as we understand it, involves more than a commitment to formal equality, civil rights, and anti-discrimination norms, though these things are important. It also demands that people enjoy substantive equality of condition and that any inequalities amongst them meet an exacting standard of justification. A commitment to equality of condition distinguishes egalitarianism as a political doctrine from other similar views associated with progressive or left-wing politics, such as sufficientarianism, which requires that everyone has enough (Frankfurt 1987; Shields 2016), prioritarianism, which recommends prioritising the well-being of the least well-off (Parfit 1997), and limitarianism, which recommends capping the wealth of the most well-off (Robeyns 2022). In recent history, egalitarian political theorists generally assumed that what fundamentally matters is that everyone enjoys equal shares of something important, such as money or well-being. This assumption is tied to what is sometimes referred to as a distributive paradigm in theories of social justice. Some egalitarians have recently challenged this paradigm, arguing that equality should instead be understood as a property of the kinds of relationships people should enjoy with one another. For these thinkers, equality is threatened not because some people have more of something than other people, though this may be important, but when people are unable to relate to one another as equals.

Our thesis is that both distributive and relational approaches to egalitarianism are useful for conceptualising global linguistic inequality, since each paradigm highlights different aspects. After describing and categorising the main varieties of global linguistic inequality motivating our inquiry, we provide a brief overview of distributive and relational egalitarianisms. Finally, drawing on these traditions, we develop a provisional list of global linguistic inequality's main dimensions.

2 | Global Linguistic Inequality

Global linguistic inequalities are one subset of a broader category of linguistic inequalities. Linguistic inequalities are inequalities that arise when social or linguistic circumstances differentially reward particular language skills and identities (Shorten 2017; De Schutter and Ypi 2012).¹ Global linguistic inequalities are linguistic inequalities connected to the global language system (De Swaan 2001), characterised recently by the spread of English. We are not the first to notice these inequalities. Inequalities amongst varieties of English are at the centre of a thriving 'unequal Englishes' research agenda in sociolinguistics (see, e.g., Tupas 2015, 2024) and inform critical discussions of 'native speakerism' in applied linguistics (see, e.g., Holliday 2017). Similarly, inequalities between English and other languages have featured in discussions of globalisation and its effects on language (see, e.g., Ives 2006, 2010; O'Regan 2021) as well as in studies of linguistic imperialism (see, e.g., Phillipson 1992). Our contribution is to bring this work into dialogue with contemporary egalitarian political theories.

The kind of close-grained analysis of global linguistic inequalities that we develop here has not been attempted previously in philosophical analyses of linguistic justice, which have traditionally focused on inequalities between different named languages within the same nation-state, such as when the languages of Indigenous peoples, national minorities, or immigrants are excluded from the education system or dismissed for being less 'useful' (see, e.g., May 2012). It is true that greater attention has recently been paid to inequalities amongst different varieties of the same language, especially in work on 'accentism' that we draw on later (see, e.g., Dryden et al. 2025). However, again, this has mostly focused on inequalities within the same country. In moving up a level, we hope to better understand a distinctive kind of linguistic inequality that will surely only become more important in the future. In doing so, however, we remain conscious of an important lesson of prior research on linguistic justice, which is that linguistic inequalities come in many different varieties, have complex causes—including historic and ongoing injustices—and are often tied to other inequalities of power, status and wealth, amongst other things. Furthermore, in focusing on inequalities amongst speakers of English, we do not intend to imply that these are the only kind of inequality connected to the spread of English globally, or indeed that they are the most important. As we note later, perhaps even more significant are the growing inequalities between speakers of English and other speakers of languages, as well as the impact of English on other languages themselves.

In the following, we assume that the central case of a global linguistic inequality is between, on the one hand, someone who speaks an Inner Circle variety of English as an L1, and, on the other hand, someone originally from an Outer or Expanding Circle context who learnt English as an L2 (for an explanation of these terms, see Kachru 1992). For example, consider the respective situations of someone working in the tech industry in the United States, speaking a high-prestige variety of English learnt as an L1, and someone from Latin America working in the same industry, competing for the

same jobs and attempting to join the same social circles, who learnt English later in life in order to expand their career opportunities.² Assuming that the first party to the comparison enjoys benefits or advantages denied to the second party, this is a global linguistic inequality since the two people are unequally rewarded by the global language system due to their different language skills and identities.

In fact, there are two equality-jeopardising mechanisms in this example, both of which are typical of the kind of global linguistic inequality in which we are interested. The first is related to the status or prestige of different varieties of English, whereby people who speak higher-status varieties are advantaged by comparison with speakers of lower-status varieties. The second has to do with whether someone speaks English as an L1 or as an additional language, whereby so-called 'native-speakers' benefit from perceived competence and investing less time in language learning. Often the two mechanisms are mutually reinforcing. However, since they do not always accompany one another, it is worth noting two important variations on the central case of a global linguistic inequality.

First is when one party to the comparison speaks an Inner Circle variety of English as an L1 and the other speaks a high-status variety of English as an L2. For example, consider two highly accomplished academics speaking at an international conference, one from England and the other from Denmark, both of whom are perceived as highly competent speakers of English, but only one of whom learned it as an additional language. This is a global linguistic inequality, since one speaker is free to use their own language whilst the other is not, something at least partially explained by the global language system. However, unlike the initial example, there is little or no inequality between them regarding the variety of English they speak, which—let us assume—is perceived by others as the same.

The second variation on the central case compares someone who speaks a higher prestige variety of English as an L1 with someone who speaks a lower prestige variety of English as an L1. For example, English speakers from Outer Circle settings such as Cameroon or India, who learnt English as an L1, may be disadvantaged in some settings by comparison with English speakers from Inner Circle countries, such as the United States or the United Kingdom. This too is a global linguistic inequality, but unlike the other cases discussed so far, the relevant disadvantage is not connected to someone using a second language, or having invested time and effort in supplementary language learning. Instead, it is tied to the varieties of English used combined with social perceptions about accents, mannerisms, and language skills.

Additionally, another kind of interesting case involves an inversion of the central case. Here, someone speaking a lower-status variety of English as an L1 is compared with someone speaking a higher-status variety of English as an L2. For example, consider the respective situations of a speaker of African American Vernacular English with a North European speaking English as an L2. Or compare a working-class Glaswegian speaking what is perceived as a heavily accented variety of English with the seemingly smooth communication produced by a speaker who benefited from an elite education in expensive international schools. Cases like these are global linguistic inequalities, since people enjoy unequal rewards due to their language skills and identities that can be partially attributed to the global language system. However, depending on the setting, the inequality might favour one or the other of the parties to the comparison. Disaggregating the different dimensions of global linguistic inequality, as we do in Section 4, makes these complexities visible.

Although we only focus on global linguistic inequalities amongst speakers of English, it is worth recalling that some of the most significant inequalities connected to the global language system are between people who speak English (whether as an L1 or an L2) and people with no or limited English skills. The global spread of English increasingly threatens to disempower people who cannot speak it, locking them out of important opportunities, especially for social and physical mobility, and exacerbating marginalisation, vulnerability, and oppression. A complete theory of global linguistic inequalities would need to give these inequalities their due. Furthermore, such a theory would also need to give more attention than we do to the effects of the global spread of English on the vitality and existence of other languages, an issue that surely qualifies amongst the greatest linguistic injustices of our time.

3 | Distributive and Relational Egalitarianisms

Egalitarians might conceptualise global linguistic inequalities primarily in distributive terms, as if what fundamentally matters is that some people get more out of the global language system than other people. Or, they might think about global linguistic inequalities primarily in relational terms, as if what fundamentally matters is that people from different linguistic backgrounds endure hierarchy, domination, or oppression. Both frameworks can be interpreted in different ways. For distributive egalitarians, equality means equal shares, but this still leaves the question of what it is that people are supposed to enjoy equal shares of. Meanwhile, for relational egalitarians, equality means that people should enjoy

egalitarian relationships, but a relationship might be equal or unequal across multiple dimensions. The rest of this section explores each egalitarian paradigm in greater detail and identifies some of the different dimensions across which egalitarians might compare individuals or groups when considering global linguistic inequalities.

The distributive ideal of equality boils down to the idea that people should enjoy equal shares of something. This is an intuitively powerful way of thinking about equality. For example, suppose that some live a life of opulence whilst others cannot meet their basic needs. Many people balk at the idea that the inequality between these ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ can be described as anything but bad or unjust. What makes this inequality wrongful is essentially distributive—some people enjoy something valuable, such as well-being or security, which other people lack.

By the end of the twentieth century, distributive egalitarianism was the dominant mode of egalitarian theorising. However, its defenders were divided about which good(s) should be distributed equally—in other words, about which distributive inequalities matter *fundamentally* (Cohen 1989). In a famous pair of articles, Ronald Dworkin (1981a, 1981b) identified two potential answers, equality of resources and equality of welfare. Later refinements added some further options, including access to advantage (Cohen 1989), opportunity for welfare (Arneson 1989), and capabilities (Sen 1992).

Recent linguistic justice theories have replicated these abstract philosophical debates by identifying a range of different goods whose distribution is both justice-relevant and influenced by language policies and practices. For instance, building on Alan Patten’s (2014) work, De Schutter (2022) has argued that the abilities to access opportunities and participate in democratic decision-making, as well as a person’s dignity and what he terms their life-world access, can be affected by their linguistic circumstances. Meanwhile, others have argued that language policies can affect a person’s capability to flourish (Brando and Morales-Gálvez 2023; Lewis 2017; Shorten 2017, 2022) or the extent to which their preferences are satisfied (Carey 2019).

The next sections draw on existing linguistic justice scholarship to identify five significant global linguistic distributive inequalities (i.e., intra-linguistic distributive inequalities explained by the global language system). These are (1) inequalities in the ability to access valuable opportunities, (2) inequalities in the availability of linguistic resources, supports, and services, (3) inequalities in the time and effort expended on supplementary language acquisition, (4) inequalities in dignity and/or esteem, and (5) expressive inequalities in a person’s ability to convey meaning and make sense of their own experiences in a variety of English. This constitutes the first part of our list of nine global linguistic inequalities.

The remaining items on our list are derived from relational egalitarian theories. Relational egalitarianism refers to a cluster of views, rediscovered in recent political theory as part of a sympathetic critique of mainstream (distributive) theorising. Relational egalitarians do not recommend abandoning distributive concerns. Rather, they argue that reconceiving egalitarianism along relational lines gives distributive concerns a rationale—the distribution of goods matters to the extent that it shapes and constrains social relationships.

A central ambivalence for relational theories has to do with the ways in which people are supposed to relate as equals. Some scholars stress the positive values of equal respect (e.g., Wolff 1998) and recognition (e.g., Honneth 1995; Taylor 1994), whilst others stress the negative values of hierarchy (Anderson 1999, 2012), domination (e.g., Garrau and Laborde 2015), and oppression (e.g., Young 1990, 2000).

Following the relational turn in egalitarianism more generally, some linguistic justice theorists have begun to express scepticism about the limitations of distributive approaches (see, e.g., Lewis 2017, 60; Peled 2015; Weinstock 2003, 259). Although a complete relational theory of linguistic justice has not yet been developed, occasional shoots of growth can be observed. For instance, some scholars have drawn on neo-republican theories to argue that speakers of minoritised languages in societies characterised by diglossia are vulnerable to a distinctive form of linguistic domination (Morales-Gálvez 2026a). Others have explored the importance of language attitudes and personal linguistic choices for linguistic justice (Shorten 2018; Song 2023). Finally, perhaps the best-known theory of linguistic justice (Van Parijs 2011) includes an essentially relational principle of parity of esteem, which is violated when unequal language status leads to the devaluation and marginalisation of minoritised languages. Interestingly, Van Parijs’s favoured example of this is also an example of global linguistic inequality, in which English-speaking monolinguals living in non-anglophone countries refuse to learn the local language and thereby convey an insulting message to its speakers (Van Parijs 2011, 133).

In the following section, we draw on a framework proposed by Lippert-Rasmussen (2018) to identify four significant global linguistic relational inequalities (i.e., intra-linguistic relational inequalities explained by the global language system). Continuing the list from the five distributive inequalities listed earlier, these are (6) moral equality in the sense of giving equal consideration to other people’s linguistic interests in one’s practical reasoning; (7) epistemic equality in the sense of not discounting other people’s views and perspectives due to the way in which they communicate; (8) social equality in the sense of ensuring that language differences are not reflected in social hierarchies; and (9) aesthetic

equality in the sense not appraising different languages, language varieties, or language forms according to their beauty or attractiveness.

4 | Dimensions of Global Linguistic Inequality

Global linguistic inequalities are inequalities explained, at least partially, by the global language system. This section discusses the nine categories identified in the previous section, focusing on inequalities amongst speakers of English, drawing on prior empirical and philosophical research on linguistic justice. Because our case has not been theorised extensively, we mostly proceed by applying theories originally intended to apply to inequalities amongst different named languages within states, both to identify the different dimensions of global linguistic inequality and to explore potential remedies. When presenting each category, we focus on its linguistic features. Notwithstanding this, a complete understanding of many of the listed inequalities will require getting to grips with additional and complex social processes related to non-linguistic social hierarchies, especially—but not only—hierarchies of race (see, e.g., Flores and Rosa 2015) and class (see, e.g., Block 2014).

4.1 | Access to Opportunities

An important distributive inequality already identified by many linguistic justice theorists is *access to opportunities* (see, e.g., De Schutter 2022; Patten 2014). Many activities that are important to people—including attending college, finding satisfactory employment, advancing a career, or forming meaningful relationships—depend on language skills. For instance, economists have produced evidence suggesting that immigrants without competence in the majority language are often disadvantaged in employment markets (for surveys, see Adserà and Pytliková 2016; Chiswick and Miller 2014) and similar effects have been observed for speakers of less prestigious language varieties, such as regional dialects or varieties associated with racialised minorities (Schulte et al. 2024).

Unequal access to opportunities is a central case of a global linguistic inequality. The spread of English has created inequalities not only between people who speak it and those who do not, but also between people for whom it is an L1 and people who speak English as an additional language, and between those who speak what Jan Blommaert (2010) calls high-mobility varieties and those who speak low-mobility varieties. Some of the mechanisms that produce or reinforce unequal opportunities amongst speakers of English involve explicit—albeit often lawful—forms of discrimination, as when jobs in language-related industries including English language schools or copywriting are reserved for ‘native speakers’ (Van Parijs (2011, 93–95). However, informal mechanisms can also play a role in (re-)producing these inequalities, such as when promotion procedures in multinational corporations reward apparent ‘native speakers’ for being perceived as more persuasive or impressive communicators.³

Linguistic justice scholars have suggested that equalising opportunities amongst speakers of different named languages will require some combination of supplementary language acquisition for the disadvantaged and modifications to social infrastructure, such as when a government commits to securing new employment or educational opportunities in a minority language or when it passes legislation to discourage linguistic discrimination. In principle, both mechanisms might also be employed to reduce inequalities amongst speakers of English. For instance, additional language training might reduce some of the informal benefits that accrue to ‘native speakers’, discrimination against ‘non-native speakers’ might be made illegal, additional opportunities might be made available in languages other than English, and a more ‘pluricentric’ understanding of English—accepting greater language variety—might be encouraged (see, e.g., De Schutter 2018; Oakes and Peled 2018).

4.2 | Linguistic Resources, Supports, and Services

Another distributive inequality often picked out by linguistic justice theorists is the unequal provision of linguistic resources, supports, and services (see, e.g., Patten 2014). These include the languages used in public information, or in providing public services like schooling and healthcare, or in which people can communicate with public officials. Similar inequalities are found at the global level between English speakers and everyone else. For instance, De Schutter (2022) identifies a category of ‘linguistically wealthy immigrants’—i.e., English speakers in non-anglophone countries who enjoy a greater share of resources, supports, and services than immigrants speaking other languages. For example, unlike speakers of other languages, English speakers can often send their children to

international schools that teach in their own language and use their own language when communicating with public officials.

To our knowledge, linguistic justice theorists have not systematically investigated inequalities in linguistic resources, supports, and services *amongst* speakers of English. These might come in two forms. First are inequalities between L1 English speakers, who enjoy access to supports and services in their first language, and those who learnt English as an additional language, who can only access supports and services in a second language. For example, consider De Schutter's 'linguistically wealthy immigrants'. Both those who speak English as an L1 and those who speak it as an additional language might enjoy privileged access to supports and services, but only the first group benefit from accessing these in their *own* language. Second are inequalities amongst language varieties. In a brief footnote, De Schutter (2022, fn 7) alludes to the possibility that amongst English-speaking migrants living in countries where English is not an official language, speakers of standardised varieties of English might still be advantaged over speakers of non-standardised varieties, citing the examples of African American Vernacular English and Appalachian English. This is because only the standardised version of English is used in the provision of supports and services, meaning that users of other varieties must code-switch to access them.

As was the case for access to opportunities, linguistic justice theorists have already developed theories about how to address domestic inter-linguistic inequalities (i.e., inequalities between speakers of different named languages from the same society). The most influential of these is Alan Patten's (2014) equal recognition model, which proposes extending supports to different languages according to how many speakers they have (see also De Schutter 2017; Morales-Gálvez and Stojanović 2018; Shorten 2022, 172–176). Instead of withholding support from all but the majority language, Patten recommends offering graduated levels of support to a range of officially recognised languages, allowing for differential service provision, including only modest supports for less-widely spoken languages.⁴ A similar model could be adopted to address inequalities amongst English-speaking immigrants, whereby supports and services could be provided in different language varieties or perhaps with a pluricentric ethos. Additionally, the specific disadvantages experienced by L2 English speakers could be addressed by extending state supports for minoritised languages, such as those spoken by immigrants. However, both policies are likely to be contentious if adopting them is perceived to be at the expense of local or national languages.

4.3 | Language Learning Efforts

A very different global distributive inequality that arises amongst English speakers, extensively discussed in writing on English as a lingua franca, concerns unequal language learning efforts, since if English is to function as a global lingua franca, then people will have to invest significant time and energy in learning it as an L2, efforts that are not required by L1 speakers. Philosophical discussions of this issue are often framed in terms of fairness rather than equality. For instance, Van Parijs (2011, 50–82) complains that L1 English speakers benefit from a good they have not contributed to, thereby free-riding on the efforts of speakers who learned English as an additional language, whose efforts enable L1 speakers to communicate spontaneously with strangers, collaborate with and learn from a wide variety of people, and enjoy near frictionless access to commercial and other services across the globe.

Some political theorists reject the claims that L1 English speakers take advantage of those who learn their language as an additional language (Robichaud 2015) or that doing so is wrongful (Harb 2021). Nonetheless, there is no disagreement about the spread of English having created new distributive inequalities. Additional language learning is a significant burden, involving considerable amounts of time (often estimated at approximately 10,000 hours), resources (including schools, books and teachers), and opportunity costs (since the time and effort spent on learning English could have been devoted to other pursuits). A related inequality, not noticed by linguistic justice scholars, is between L1 English speakers who use different varieties, such as speakers originally from Inner and Outer Circle contexts. In international fora or Inner Circle contexts, speakers originally from Outer Circle countries are expected to conform to Inner Circle norms, a pressure that is rarely felt in the opposite direction. Learning how to adapt one's speech and mannerisms is time-consuming and involves cognitive and other burdens of a similar kind—if not magnitude—to learning an additional language.

When it comes to addressing inequalities in language learning efforts, the main solution recommended in the literature (see, e.g., Van Parijs 2011) is for L1 English speakers to financially compensate people who learn English as an additional language. In other words, the costs borne by language learners are equalised by imposing equivalent costs on beneficiaries. However, this solution is unlikely to be appropriate for inequalities amongst L1 speakers, since it would add insult to injury to compensate people for speaking a variant perceived as deficient. For such cases it would be better to dismantle the relevant linguistic hierarchies, for instance by encouraging the adoption of a pluricentric ethos or greater tolerance of different varieties of English.

4.4 | Dignity/Esteem

Another distributive inequality often discussed in the linguistic justice literature is unequal *dignity* or *esteem*. For example, both Van Parijs (2011) and De Schutter (2023) have argued that a language regime granting preferential status to the majority language(s) can jeopardise the dignity of speakers of minoritised languages. People's dignity interests can be affected both by material factors, such as language policies defining which languages can be used when interacting with the state, and by symbolic measures, such as granting official status to certain languages.

Although appeals to a principle of equal dignity or parity of esteem have mostly been made within multilingual societies, the same principles can be applied to inequalities attributable to the global language system. For example, Stephen May argues that the adoption of English as a global lingua franca could cause L1 speakers of languages other than English to perceive their own languages negatively, as a consequence of English being 'continually constructed' as a language of 'wider communication' and other languages being 'viewed as (merely) carriers of "tradition" or "historical identity"' (May 2015, 139). These dynamics might be exacerbated by institutional practices privileging the English language, especially in countries where it is not an official language, such as when public institutions provide for its usage, either as official policy or informally as a matter of established practice. Additionally, a further global linguistic inequality is when particular varieties of English, such as those spoken in the Inner Circle, are socially privileged, thereby injuring the dignity of speakers of varieties perceived as less prestigious.

Reducing these inequalities will require addressing how recognition is distributed amongst different languages and language varieties. Some scholars (e.g., May 2015) believe that the spread of English is incompatible with equal recognition, since it inevitably constructs one language as superior to others. On this kind of view, the only way to equalise dignity and esteem will be to reverse whatever mechanisms are currently encouraging the dominance of English. Meanwhile, Van Parijs (2011, 130–132) argues that since the spread of English is not due to intrinsic superiority on the part of the English language or its speakers, the esteem of speakers of other languages might be bolstered by finding opportunities to symbolically affirm the value of all languages. The same proposal might also be applied to different varieties of English, whereby equal dignity could be promoted by publicly affirming their value, such as by teaching them in schools or using them in official settings.

4.5 | Expression

A final distributive inequality produced by the global language system has to do with whether a person can effectively convey meaning and make sense of their own experiences in a variety of English. Expressive inequalities typically arise between L1 English speakers and people who learn English as an additional language, since the latter group may have to expend greater efforts in speaking and writing, enduring both fatigue and frustration, and risk being misunderstood either due to having a more limited range of linguistic resources (for instance due to factors such as vocabulary size, familiarity with idioms and grammatical knowledge), or because they have imported unfamiliar expressive or rhetorical norms from their L1 (Catala 2022, 338). In addition, language ideologies or prejudices can cause listeners to disregard or dismiss the contributions of L2 English speakers, which might discourage people whose first language is not English from speaking in the first place. Expressive inequalities can also take an intimate form, compromising how a person is able to present themselves to other people and relate to the world, perhaps even inducing a distinctive form of alienation (Çimendereli 2023). If one's speech lacks nuance and only partially captures what one intends, then this may shape not only how one is perceived by others but also how one perceives oneself.

There are three ways to reduce expressive inequalities. First, people for whom English is an additional language can be offered relief from the burden of having to speak or write it, for instance by providing translation and interpretation services, or ensuring that people have adequate communicative opportunities in their own languages. Second, with time and practice some disadvantages faced by speakers of English as an additional language might become less pronounced, though feeling fully 'at home' in an L2 might be something that few can achieve. Third, communicative norms and language ideologies might be transformed so that listeners better appreciate and understand diverse varieties of English.

4.6 | Moral Equals

A common way to think about relational equality is as requiring mutual recognition of equal moral standing. A person who relates to others as their moral equal has a disposition to treat other people's interests on a par with their own

(see, e.g., Scheffler 2015, 25). Correspondingly, someone fails to recognise others as having equal moral standing by not adequately considering their interests in practical reasoning. One way in which egalitarian relationships, thus understood, might be compromised is when one party to the relationship suffers domination, since dominated people are vulnerable to having their interests disregarded. Consequently, some relational egalitarians have begun to incorporate a concern with domination into their theoretical projects (see, e.g., Anderson 2012; Garrau and Laborde 2015), drawing on Phillip Pettit's (1997, 2012) neo-republican definition of domination as being defencelessly susceptible to arbitrary interference.

Applied linguists and sociolinguists have identified various manifestations of what could be termed linguistic domination (see, e.g., Baugh 2011; Piller 2016; Soler and Rozenvalde 2024). Particularly influential has been Robert Phillipson's idea of linguistic imperialism, which refers to 'the dominance of English [being] asserted and maintained by establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages' (Phillipson 1992, 47). These developments have fed into the attempts of linguistic justice scholars to develop their own theories of linguistic domination, which have so far focused mainly on the relationships between different named languages within states (e.g., Morales-Gálvez 2026a, 2026b). Here we draw on this work to suggest two ways in which linguistic domination could be a feature of relationships amongst English speakers globally.

Linguistic domination can be experienced by both individuals and collectives. Individuals are linguistically dominated when another agent can exercise uncontrolled and deliberate interference over their linguistic practices at little cost (Morales-Gálvez 2026a). For example, speakers of a minoritised language who are routinely expected to switch to a dominant language when communicating with its speakers suffer linguistic domination if speakers of the dominant language can impose their linguistic will upon them and feel little pressure to learn the minority language themselves. Interpersonal domination like this is neither a natural phenomenon nor merely a consequence of demo-linguistic circumstances but requires suitable background conditions, including supporting social norms and socio-economic circumstances.

Interpersonal linguistic domination is routinely experienced by speakers of minoritised languages, such as Kurdish and Catalan vis-à-vis Turkish and Castilian. More interestingly from our point of view, it can also be experienced by speakers of majority as well as minoritised languages vis-à-vis English. For example, Dutch-speaking academics working in the Netherlands might find themselves having to use English when communicating with international colleagues, especially if the latter have little incentive to learn Dutch themselves. Furthermore, there might even be cases of linguistic domination amongst L1 speakers of English, such as when L1 English speakers from Inner Circle contexts are able to unilaterally impose linguistic terms on L1 English speakers from Outer or Expanding Circle contexts, for instance by requiring the adoption of standardised language varieties in employment settings. In such cases, Inner Circle speakers do not relate as moral equals to Outer or Expanding Circle speakers, since the former can control the terms on which communication occurs.

Meanwhile, collective-level linguistic domination occurs when one language group finds itself at the mercy of another language group in collective decision-making (Morales-Gálvez 2026b). A paradigmatic example of this are the experiences of durable linguistic minorities within a state—such as members of autochthonous linguistic minorities—who lack opportunities to interpret and advance their own language interests, if majoritarian procedures predictably result in their losing out in democratic decisions. Arguably, a broadly analogous form of collective domination occurs globally regarding English, despite the absence of a single decision-making body. There, speakers of languages other than English have little control over the ascent of English to a position of unrivalled prominence, and speakers of less prestigious varieties have few opportunities to contest language ideologies that reinforce the linguistic authority of 'native speakers' and standardised English.

Empowering people against linguistic domination will require altering the terms on which they relate to those who hold dominating power over them. One strategy is to make it more costly or difficult for dominators to exercise interference, for instance by requiring English speakers living in non-anglophone countries to learn local languages so that switching to English would no longer be the default option. Meanwhile, for collective-level linguistic domination, the grip of linguistic ideologies about 'proper' English could be loosened by promoting counter-ideological projects, or—alternatively—diverse voices might be empowered to influence how Englishes are spoken, e.g., by granting different language academies authority over how English is used in different places (see De Schutter 2018, 195–196). Meanwhile, another strategy for countering linguistic domination is to make people vulnerable to it less dependent on those holding power over them. For example, speakers of languages other than English might be given protected opportunities to use their own languages in employment, education, public life, or other high-status settings, thereby making them less reliant on communicative exchanges that require switching to English.

4.7 | Epistemic

Another way in which people can relate to one another as equals is epistemically, for instance, by ensuring that identity-prejudices do not distort a listener's perceptions of a speaker's intelligence or trustworthiness (Fricker 2007) or by ensuring that members of marginalised or oppressed groups have meaningful opportunities to speak frankly, without fear of being ignored or dismissed by listeners (Dotson 2011).

Accent bias is a crucial linguistic mechanism through which epistemic relational equality might be undermined. Although accent bias can result in a speaker's credibility being inflated, scholars more often focus on cases where a hearer discounts or dismisses a speaker's contributions due to their pronunciation, dialect, or use of a non-standardised language variety. For instance, sociolinguists have demonstrated how accent bias can result in discrimination (Lippi-Green 1997), including because of racial prejudice (Baker-Bell 2020), themes also studied in social psychology (Formanowicz and Suiter 2020). These ideas have informed the work of linguistic justice theorists. For instance, Yael Peled and Matteo Bonotti have argued that 'accent-based prejudices can seriously hinder the realisation of key democratic values', including—amongst others—inclusivity and reciprocity (Peled and Bonotti 2019, 411). Inclusivity can be threatened because accented speech can result in a person being discriminated against and marginalised, whilst reciprocity can be threatened because accent bias can make people into passive listeners rather than active participants in democratic debate.

Accent bias could explain an important range of global linguistic relational inequalities, since empirical work suggests that bias against foreign-accented speakers commonly results in them being perceived as less intelligent, less trustworthy, less educated and less competent (see, e.g., Roessel et al. 2019). Such analyses have been picked up by linguistic justice theorists. For example, Catala has explored how being perceived as a 'non-native' speaker can compromise a person's career opportunities due to being perceived 'as less competent, skilled, intelligent, and credible' (Catala 2022, 333). Focusing on the example of academic migrants working in English-speaking countries and speaking English as an additional language, Catala argues that L2 English speakers are often 'not even consulted (shortlisted, invited, published)' and in some cases 'do not even attempt to engage in a testimonial exchange because they anticipate a lack of uptake' (2022, 333–334). Arguably, some similar mechanisms could also apply to L1 English speakers stigmatised for not using a standardised variety. For instance, English speakers from Outer or Expanding Circle contexts, just like English speakers from socially disfavoured groups or regions in Inner Circle contexts, may find their contributions unfairly dismissed or hesitate before speaking in public contexts.

Accent bias might be challenged by adopting a pluricentric model of English or publicly insisting on the equal validity of different varieties. In addition, Peled and Bonotti (2016, 2019) recommend promoting 'metalinguistic awareness', so that people are able to understand and reflect upon the relationships between linguistic content and form. Underpinning their proposal is the idea that if people can think about language itself, as opposed to simply using it as a tool to communicate, then they might be moved to adopt a more reflective attitude when exposed to accented speech.

4.8 | Social Standing

People also relate to one another in terms of their social standings. For instance, Michael Walzer has claimed that the gradual adoption of a uniform mode of address in the United States, which he dubs the 'society of misters', marked an important move towards establishing egalitarian relations, drawing a line under old European hierarchies, with their tendencies towards snobbery and deference (Walzer 1983, 252; see also Miller 1998).⁵

Van Parijs has introduced into the linguistic justice literature a widely discussed example that captures this phenomenon of failing to relate to speakers of other languages as social equals. It involves an American executive living in Waterloo, a Brussels suburb in French-speaking Wallonia, irritated by his landlord's failure to learn English, despite having him as a tenant for three years (Van Parijs 2011, 133). In not learning French and expecting his landlord to use English, Van Parijs implies that the executive failed to relate to his landlord specifically, and perhaps Francophone Wallonians more generally, as equals. In our terms, the distinctively relational egalitarian wrong in this example is that the businessman related to the landlord as his social inferior. Dismissive of the linguistic interests of others, he took himself to be part of a globally privileged class or cohort, who can expect their own linguistic interests to be satisfied by others, unburdened by duties of reciprocity. What makes the businessman part of this privileged group is not simply being an English speaker, but also his own economic circumstances as well as America's position as a global hegemon (these features of Van Parijs's anecdote are also stressed by Milioni and Pappas 2022, 407; Stolz 2015, 183; and Goppel 2019, 68–69).

Inequalities in social standing require certain kinds of background conditions to support them, such as intersubjective social hierarchies making relations of superiority and inferiority habitual and normalised. For instance, implicit in Van

Parijs's example is the fact that the businessman could reasonably anticipate others to recognise his superior social status as an unremarkable and routine feature of their world of shared understandings. After all, expecting service providers to adapt to the linguistic preferences of their customers is not generally regarded as an outlandish expectation for English speakers in Belgium. The expectation of special treatment has been internalised both by English speakers and others.

Social hierarchies of the kind that nourish inegalitarian social relationships can also be observed between speakers of different varieties of English. For example, critics of 'native-speakerism' have drawn attention to the socially privileged status of certain L1 English speakers (Holliday 2005). The egalitarian wrong of 'native-speakerism' is not that one variety of the language is projected as superior, but that 'nonnative' speakers are socially constructed as socially inferior to 'native' speakers. This was reflected in a recent study of how Filipino ('nonnative') English teachers are represented in marketing materials, as 'lesser than "native" English speakers and thus relegated to the marginalized positions like the colonized' (Parba and Morikawa 2024, 131).

Many linguistic hierarchies, including intra-linguistic hierarchies, are part of a broader patchwork of intersecting social hierarchies sustained and bolstered by the historic and ongoing effects of colonialism as well as current North–South economic and political relations. Dismantling them will involve transforming social norms, for example by promoting critical projects of ideological demystification to disturb their underlying assumptions or by encouraging new—egalitarian—social norms such as a duty to learn the local language.

4.9 | Aesthetic

A final way in which people might relate to one another as equals is in terms of their aesthetic standing. For example, in her defence of relational equality, Anderson envisages an egalitarian social order in which norms of beauty are not oppressive but are instead flexible enough for everyone to be deemed an acceptable presence in society (Anderson 1999, 335). For her, relating as equals means that people must be liberated from the prevailing beauty norms that arrange people into hierarchical categories.

Like appearances, languages are also subject to oppressive and equality-undermining aesthetic norms. For instance, despite experts in linguistics insisting on 'the functional equality of all languages' (Hymes cited in Tupas and Rubby 2015, 1), in everyday talk stigmatising assumptions about the aesthetic qualities of different languages are commonplace, as when people declare one language to be more precise, more beautiful or more expressive than another. Similarly, despite its academic critics (e.g., Milroy and Milroy 1985), language prescriptivism continues to hold sway amongst the general public, who laud standardised languages for their superior beauty, clarity and rationality. Regarding different varieties of English, existing sociolinguistic research has focused mostly on differences amongst 'native' varieties. For instance, synthesising research on language attitudes in England over nearly half a century, Montgomery (2018, 134–135) shows how the dialects associated with Birmingham ('Brummie') and Liverpool ('Scouse') have consistently been perceived as less socially attractive than dialects used elsewhere. It seems reasonable to hypothesise that comparable language attitudes also track the different kinds of English spoken globally. Whilst attitudes about the aesthetic qualities of different language varieties often follow social class within England, globally they are influenced by colonialism, wealth disparities and racial ideologies.

In practice, relational aesthetic linguistic inequalities will often be difficult to disentangle from inequalities in social and epistemic standing. For instance, research on linguistic profiling suggests that, in the United States, exposure to features of African American Vernacular English can trigger implicit biases about the intelligence or trustworthiness of interlocutors (e.g., Purnell et al. 1999). Here there are likely to be multiple equality-undermining social norms at work—some connected to attitudes about 'proper' or attractive speech, some connected to racial hierarchies, and some connected to racialised assumptions about intelligence. Nonetheless, since it is possible for people who are social and epistemic equals to negatively evaluate one another's language use on aesthetic grounds, it is useful to preserve a distinctive category of aesthetic relational inequalities.

There are two significant aesthetic linguistic inequalities connected to the global language system. First are negative aesthetic judgements directed specifically against foreign accents, regardless of whether English is someone's L1. Second are aesthetic judgements about the prestige or attractiveness of particular varieties, such as the belief that Inner Circle varieties of English are more authoritative or expressive than other varieties. Both kinds of inequality are context-dependent. For example, British accents might be perceived as especially attractive in the United States, whilst American accents might have higher status in Expanding Circle contexts (for anecdotal evidence to this effect, see Peterson 2020, 8–11).

Since aesthetic linguistic inequalities are sustained by oppressive social norms, dismantling them will require broad and ambitious projects to transform dominant language ideologies. As a first step towards this, greater recognition of accent bias and its effects will be required. Within nation-states, and especially countries where English is widely used or an official language, working to tackle foreign accent bias could complement work to bolster pride in distinctive varieties of English, such as 'Singlish'. Meanwhile, at the global level, the difficulties of transforming attitudes towards different varieties should not be underestimated, since these are nourished by inequalities in wealth and power that show few signs of disappearing.

5 | Conclusion

Global linguistic inequality is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Disaggregating it into the nine different categories we have identified reveals how working towards greater linguistic equality, even in the rather limited case of equality amongst English speakers, will require a wide range of interventions and public policies. The measures we have identified include strengthening anti-discrimination laws, boosting opportunities to learn and use English, encouraging the dispersal of a pluricentric understanding of English, providing resources and supports in different varieties of English as well as translation and interpretation services for other languages, requiring L1 English speakers to learn additional languages, training listeners to better appreciate different language forms and varieties, cultivating a civic virtue of 'metalinguistic awareness', and promoting pride in local and non-standardised varieties of English. Strikingly, although some of these resemble familiar legislative and public policy measures, many of them target language attitudes and ideologies, reflecting how global linguistic inequality—like language inequalities more generally—is a property of ideologies as much as institutions.

For linguistic justice theorists especially, the kind of fine-grained analysis of language inequality we have attempted here suggests an important limitation of existing theories. Leading philosophical approaches to linguistic justice often adopt a 'proceduralist' orientation, associating linguistic justice with establishing fair background conditions for speakers of different languages (see, e.g., De Schutter 2008; Patten 2014; Réaume 1991). According to this, linguistic justice is not about promoting specific linguistic outcomes—such as language preservation or revitalisation—but is instead about establishing fair institutional rules and procedures, including by recognising a full set of language rights and an appropriate scheme of language recognition. In turn, a just language regime is one that confers legitimacy on whatever linguistic outcomes arise, so that even speakers of languages in decline cannot complain of injustice. Procedural theories treat language attitudes and ideologies as falling mostly beyond the scope of linguistic justice. Meanwhile, our analysis suggests that egalitarians have special reason to look beyond language rights and towards language attitudes and ideologies. This is an important lesson for linguistic justice more generally, not only for the special case of global English.

An important next step for egalitarian linguistic justice theorists will be to consider whether it is possible to justify public policy interventions tackling the different dimensions of global linguistic inequality we have identified. In particular, if egalitarian justice requires transforming language attitudes and ideologies, then one might worry that promoting equality will be too intrusive or even undermine freedom. Before such issues can be settled, however, a clearer understanding of what equality amongst speakers of English really requires of us is needed, and this article has been a first step towards opening up a conversation on this important topic.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare none.

Endnotes

¹Throughout the article, we use the term 'language' inclusively, so that linguistic inequalities could refer to, amongst other things, inequalities between different named languages, between different language varieties or dialects, including standardised and non-standardised varieties, and between different linguistic modalities (e.g., spoken, visual, and tactile).

²As we define them, global linguistic inequalities are inequalities between *people* rather than *languages*. Ives (2015) makes a case for prioritising the latter.

- ³L1 English speakers are not always advantaged in multinational corporations or international employment. Codo and Riera-Gil (2022) provide anecdotal evidence of cases where L1 English speakers are penalised for using idioms or for lacking local language skills.
- ⁴De Schutter (2017) recommends an alternative model offering the same linguistic resources, supports, and services in all official languages, regardless of how many speakers they have. This will sometimes require allocating less-widely spoken languages more supports that Patten's principle would recommend, for instance, because a per capita division of resources would mean that certain services could not be provided at all, such as a minority language television station or school, or because economies of scale mean that some minority language provisions are more expensive, such as school textbooks.
- ⁵For an instructive discussion of the differences between relating as social equals and as moral equals, see Scheffler (2005, 17–18).

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