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**Linguistic Capital and Inequality in Aid Relations**

**Abstract**

Globalisation processes and the spread of English as a Lingua Franca are closely related. I consider language skills as symbolic capital and focus on the hegemony of English as Lingua Franca in international aid organisations. I argue that more attention must be paid to the role of language and linguistic capital when analysing global inequality and post-colonial power relations. Humanitarian and development organisations have so far received less sociological attention than other aspects of globalisation processes, whereas in the context of development studies, attention to language usually focuses on the ‘discourse of development’ rather than on the role of linguistic capital in multi-lingual settings. Aid work, which includes the transfer of skills and resources, simultaneously addresses and perpetuates global inequalities. Language structures power relations and inequality within aid organisations, in particular between national and international staff. My article is based on qualitative interviews with multi-lingual and mono-lingual aid workers from a wide variety of aid organisations. My article is innovative by demonstrating how linguistic capital intersects with other aspects of inequality in the global context of aid organisations. It makes an important contribution to the understanding of globalisation processes and to post-colonial sociology.

## ****Key Words****

Aid Work, Development, Global Inequality, Humanitarianism, Intercultural Communication, Linguistic Capital, Multilingualism, Translation

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## ****Introduction****

The growing interest in globalisation in sociology in the 1990s coincided with transformations of aid relations which included shifts from governmental aid organisations to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and from development and social justice to a ‘state of emergency’ (Calhoun, 2010) and humanitarian reason (Fassin, 2012). One might expect that ‘aid’1) relationships would be of central interest for the sociology of globalisation processes. However, compared to transnational migration or global social movements, aid relations and aid organisations have received far less sociological attention (Viterna and Robertson, 2015; Swiss, 2016). Aid relationships constitute the nexus and an interface (Long, 2001) of changing North/South encounters, which are inextricably intertwined. My article addresses what happens at this interface between ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’2) through an analysis of the role of language in the interaction of aid personnel from and in different regions of the world. I apply a postcolonial lens (Fortier, 2017) to the hegemony of English, a Western language, in the context of global and unequal relations. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with national and international staff from a wide range of aid organisations, I analyse how language skills and linguistic capital matter in aid organisations with respect to access to jobs and promotion and how they shape the unequal relationships between national and international staff. An analysis of linguistic capital in the aid system illuminates an ‘ecology of knowledge’ in which some forms of knowledge are privileged while others are ignored (Santos, 2012; Connell et al., 2017). My article is structured as follows: First, I outline the theoretical framework, next I review the literature on linguistic capital in transnational encounters. Then I describe aid organisations as multi-cultural and multi-lingual spaces. This is followed by the description of data and methods. My findings demonstrate that linguistic capital, in particular the command of English, plays a crucial role for access to aid work. However, the value of language skills and linguistic capital varies depending on ethnonational status (Lee, 2013) and position within aid organisations. Linguistic capital intersects with other aspects of inequality and signifies hierarchies within aid encounters. My exploration of the hegemonic position of English in aid encounters makes an important contribution to the analysis of globalisation processes and post-colonial relations.

## Colonial Legacies and the Importance of English as World Language

International and transnational interactions inevitable require language skills and translation processes in multi-lingual settings. Problems of translation are not new to globalisation processes in the 20th and 21st centuries, but matter since the Roman Empire and the crusades (Rosendo and Persaud, 2016). Colonialism resulted in the spread of English, French, Spanish and Portuguese and contributed to linguistic underdevelopment in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Dhaouadi, 1988). After independence, in the vast majority of the former colonies the language of the coloniser remained the official language. In addition to Western Imperialism, the existence of multiple languages and dialects, which often exist only in oral form, contributed to the widespread use of English and French in Sub-Sahara Africa (Dhaouadi, 1988). Moreover, the command of Western Languages represents symbolic power in the form of symbolic or linguistic capital. In particular English is associated with ‘linguistic imperialism’ (Phillipson, 1992) which ‘interlocks with a *structure of imperialism* [emphasis in original] in culture, education, the media communication, the economy, politics, and war’ (Phillipson & Skutnapp-Kangas, 2017: 314).

Language and symbolic power are inextricably intertwined, dominant and legitimate languages are the result of historical processes and conflicts (Bourdieu, 1991). The command of the ‘official’ or idealized language requires more than knowledge of the correct grammar and vocabulary. It also demands the mastering of context-specific expressions and linguistic strategies which are associated with power and authority. This means that those who lack language skills and linguistic capital are excluded or silenced. Non-western languages are ‘othered’ and ‘orientalised’ (Said, 1978). In the context of language requirements for immigrants, Fortier (2017) refers to linguistic racism. Immigrants are expected to learn the language of the host society just as colonised peoples develop bilingual skills in order to survive. Consequently, the bi- or multi-linguism of migrants and colonised peoples tends to be a source of ‘othering’ rather than being admired (Fortier, 2017). Aid workers represent an intriguing case to study linguistic capital in a global context since they are migrants (though usually referred to as ‘expatriates’). However, in contrast to migrants from the Global South, aid workers from the Global North are not to the same extent expected to learn the vernacular language of their host country and some aid workers who are native speakers of English do not speak a second language.

Mono-linguism can be a mark of privilege and dominance (Harrison, 2009). In particular, native speakers of English are in a privileged position compared to those who speak English as a second language. The former enjoy greater status, credibility and communicative advantages than the latter (see for example Phillipson, 1992). Because native speakers of English do not need to learn another language, they can avoid experiencing the limitations of being unable to understand and express themselves with subtlety and without an accent. They thus become ‘legitimate speakers’ (Bourdieu, 1991) in environments that privilege English. Consequently, non-native speakers of English can feel disempowered vis-à-vis native speakers of English. However, non-native speakers of English have the cultural and intercultural awareness, which is necessary for intercultural communication (Baker, 2011). In contrast, due to their privileged position monolingual native speakers of English may lack accommodation skills and ‘the ability to reflect on the role of language in constructing worldviews’ (Harrison, 2009: 1097). This is important because different languages enable and constrain certain ideas to be expressed (Santos, 2007).

Gerhards and Hans (2013) consider foreign language competence, in particular fluency in English as ‘transnational human capital’ which is not only required in highly skilled positions, but also in middle and even low-skilled occupations. English is ‘fluid, flexible, contingent, hybrid and intercultural’ and widely used in business, higher education, school settings and tourism (Jenkins et al., 2011). Although not ‘culturally neutral’ (Baker, 2011), it can be used by global professional elites, counter-hegemonic movements and citizens of developing countries. It is important for transnational social and human rights activism as well as personal and economic success (Guilherme, 2007; Park, 2011). Of course, French is highly valuable in francophone regions and Portuguese in Lusophone countries. However, the significance of English as global language, which is actively promoted by UK and US institutions like the British Council and the Ford Foundation since the 1930s (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 2008) cannot be overestimated. Language skills thus are important resource and form of symbolic or linguistic capital, which structures unequal global relations.

## Linguistic Capital and Globalisation

The spread of English as a Lingua Franca and globalisation are closely interrelated (Jenkins, 2017). Globalisation processes rely on the exchange and interaction of actors who are able to communicate across different cultures and languages. The dominant language and the requirement to speak it express power relations and linguistic racism (Fortier, 2017). The hegemony of English as lingua franca in the aid system is expressed in the fact that monolingual English speakers can rely on bi- or multi-lingual colleagues (Méndez García and Pérez Cañado, 2005) who can use their language skills as ‘bridging capital’ (Heugh, 2013). At the same time, the language skills of national staff, in particular the knowledge of other vernacular languages is essentialized, taken for granted and made invisible (Peters, 2016). In the racialized and stratified context of aid organisations and despite being a crucial resource, bi- and multilingualism can be a source of othering (Fortier, 2017). As I demonstrate below, although in the context of aid organisations, speaking more than one language, - in particular English as a Second Language (ESL) - creates job opportunities, the inequality between national and international staff persists. It matters who speaks which language (or languages) and how language skills are related to being positioned as national or international staff. The dominance of Western donors and staff is thus articulated through linguistic regimes.

The role of language and linguistic capital has been investigated in a wide range of contexts including education (Gerhards, 2014), academia (Ljosland, 2011; Baker, 2016), business and management (Peltokorpi, 2010; Lauring and Selmer, 2012; Tietze and Dick, 2013), transnational political organisations and diplomacy (Ammon, 2006; Wodak et al., 2012), language rights (Pupavac, 2012), migration (Creese, 2010; Heugh, 2013) and the military (C Baker, 2010; M Baker, 2010; Baker, 2014; Federici, 2016). In the context of development aid, language has been primarily considered in terms of English language teaching (ELT) (Appleby et al., 2002; Appleby, 2016; Taylor-Leech, 2009). This means that ELT understood as development aid and associated with modernization processes (Pennycook, 1994), thus contributing to the spread of English associated with globalisation processes. Given that wealthy nations tended to be monolingual, a link was made between multilingualism and poverty (Lo Bianco, 2002: 5).3) Of course, language teaching is far from neutral but it associated with ‘the promotion of particular forms of culture and knowledge’ (Pennycook 1994: 152) and associated with Orientalism, power and hegemony. The US Peace Corps dispatched thousands of volunteers to make sure English was taught in the developing World (Geidel, 2015). The role that language and translation play within aid organisations has only recently found scholarly attention.4) Drawing on archival data, Footitt (2017) provides an overview over Oxfam GB’s strategies to deal with multilingualism and ‘linguistic hospitality’ or intercultural openness. Her account focuses primarily on the translation of reports. Similarly Schaeffner et al. (2014) and Tesseur (2017) examine the translation of written documents of NGOs such as Amnesty International. Listening projects (Abu-Sada, 2012) seek to understand how beneficiaries perceive international aid organisations, but hardly address what role language plays in the encounters between international and national staff. I argue that an analysis of the role of linguistic capital enables a better understanding of power relations and inequality of aid organisations and perpetuation of the dominance of Western staff who rely on indigenous brokers (Swidler and Watkins, 2017).

## The Aid system as multi-lingual and multi-cultural space

International aid organisations5) are multi-national, multi-lingual and multi-cultural bringing together staff and beneficiaries from different countries, regions, religions and strata of society. Aid work is carried out in Head Offices, Regional Offices and Field Offices (Roth, 2015; Swidler and Watkins, 2017). While staff in field offices has the closest contact with local stakeholders and local populations, desk officers based in head offices in the Global North make field visits during which they interact with staff in regional and local offices, stakeholders and beneficiaries. It is estimated that about 90% of those working for international aid organisations are national staff, although Western expatriates are still overrepresented in leadership positions (Knox Clarke, 2014). Not all expatriates originate from the Global North and expatriate experiences differ widely with respect to access to resources, cultural and regional familiarity and language skills (Crewe and Fernando, 2006). I argue that the analysis of linguistic capital in the aid system illuminates the inequality and power relations between white and non-white, European and and non-European staff.

Although language skills (or lack thereof) of international staff are mentioned in several studies (White, 2002; Jackson, 2005; Shevchenko and Fox, 2008; Nowicka and Kaweh, 2009; de Jong 2017), the role that language and linguistic capital plays in unequal aid encounters is rarely addressed. Instead, translation is primarily discussed with respect to process of transferring and negotiating concepts and practices (Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Cornwall and Eade, 2010). Studies of aid personnel have so far mostly focused on ‘expatriates’ (Fechter and Hindman, 2011; Harrison, 2013) and neglected national aid personnel (Kamruzzaman, 2017). Peters (2016) analyses how national staff display and hide language skills strategically, while Grammig (2002) studied language barriers in aid projects and processes. Paying attention to language and linguistic capital is crucial for understanding aid relationships and the perpetuation of inequalities within Aidland. After introducing my data and methods in the next section, I investigate how power and inequality are articulated through linguistic capital. First I address the relationship between language and technical skills, then I turn to the competition between English, French and other colonial languages, finally, I turn to the affordances and constraints of using interpreters.

## Data and Methods

This article is based on fifty-seven qualitative interviews which were carried in the context of a larger study addressing the biographies and careers of people working in aid (Roth, 2015). Two interviews were carried out in German (my mother tongue), the rest were conducted in English. Many interviewees were multi-lingual. Among the second languages English was the most popular (though this could be a sampling effect given my own linguistic limitations), followed by French and Spanish. Fewer respondents spoke Arabic, Swahili or Russian.

Respondents came from countries around the world and had been on assignments in a wide range of conflict or post-conflict settings conducting long-term development cooperation, short term emergency relief or human rights work. The majority of the semi-structured interviews were carried out between 2004 to 2006 in London, Cambridge and New York. Between 2011 and 2013 I carried out additional interviews in London, Cambridge, Geneva and via skype. One reason to carry out the second wave (2011-2013) of interviews was to include more French speakers. In both waves, some of the interviewees were recruited through snow-ball sampling, while the majority of participants were contacted through university courses in humanitarian studies. The 33 women and 24 men were born between 1937 and 1980. The data analysis included pathways to aid work as well as positive and negative aspects of this work. The interviews were summarized, transcribed and coded using Nvivo. The main codes included biographical continuity, identity, interaction, resources, values and empowerment. New themes such as the role of language emerged during the data analysis.

## Language Skills and Technical Skills -- Linguistic Capital and Access to Aidland

Aid organisations need bi- and multi-lingual staff and many people working in the aid industry speak more than one language (Nowicka and Kaweh, 2009). Linguistic and transnational human capital (Gerhards and Hans, 2013) play an important role for everyone getting involved in aidwork. However, what type of skills mattered for recruitment and promotion within aid organisations differed depending ethnonational status. Many international aid workers from the Global North acquired ‘transnational human capital’ (Gerhards, 2014) in childhood and youth, as children of highly skilled expatriates or working class migrants. Some had attended international schools, others grew up bi-lingual at home. Many had travelled and worked overseas during and after their studies. They often chose university degrees, job training and professions that provided them with necessary technical skills. This reflects the values of the international development industry which highlights universal technical expertise, including techniques and themes such as gender analysis, rural development and environment impact assessment (Kothari, 2005; Roth, 2015; Swidler and Watkins, 2017). Development expertise and professionalism privileges Western forms of knowledge, and reflects a form of “cultural imperialism” (Kothari, 2005: 427). The emphasis on technical expertise devalues language skills of national staff which are taken for granted or othered, while it is legitimate – and necessary -- for international staff to rely on translators and bi- or multi-lingual colleagues. Although, it is desirable and useful for aid workers from the Global North to speak multiple languages, a lack of language skills does not necessarily represent an obstacle to a career in aid organisations. This is particularly the case for native speakers of English.

Some monolingual native English speakers from high-income countries were self-conscious about their lacking command of the vernacular language and were aware of the skills of their lower paid national colleagues. These expatriates found it difficult to manage national staff, especially if their national colleagues were older, better trained and more experienced, and thus had not only the necessary language skills but also technical expertise. The subordination of better qualified national staff under less capable international staff is an expression of ethnonational inequality (Lee, 2013). International aid workers from the Global North justified their lack of language skills by the short preparation time prior to a new assignment (something more typical for short-term relief missions than long-term developments) and a lack of resources of the organisations which hired them. They explained that the organisations could not afford to provide language training for their staff. While some organisations expect that applicants have language skills that allow full immersion (more likely for long-term development) other organisations (more likely for humanitarian aid and relief) need to hire quickly responding to an emergency and therefore recruit staff whether they speak the local language or – more likely – not. Thus, the inequality embedded in the aid system is expressed in a disregard, devaluation and othering of knowledge about social and cultural context including the vernacular language of beneficiaries (Roth, 2012). ‘Capacity building’ is pursued by those not even speaking the language of their ‘beneficiaries’, but promoting Western concepts which are made invisible through the power relations which underpin aid encounters (Kothari, 2005). The linguistic capital of Western staff is embedded in privileged positions in aid organisations and hegemony of English as a lingua franca and enables mono-lingual English speakers to pursue careers in multi-lingual spaces.

In contrast, bi- or multi-linguistic skills were crucial for national staff of international aid organisations. Native speakers of French, Portuguese or Arabic made the strategic decision to learn English to increase their employability. This reflects the world-wide spread of English (Phillipson, 1992; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017; Jenkins, 2017). International aid organisations offered employment opportunities for English speakers for a variety of positions ranging from drivers and translators to programme implementing staff (see also Swidler and Watkins, 2017). Non-governmental organisations, bi-lateral or regional organisations and UN agencies offered translators higher pay than the local labour market (C Baker, 2010), for example as teachers or engineers. This demonstrates that for national staff linguistic capital was more valuable than academic credentials and job experience. Several respondents who started out as national staff had one or more university degrees and considerable job experience but were initially recruited as drivers or translators before they could move into programme or management positions. One international aid worker originating from the Middle East, who started his career as national staff, recalled:

NGOs came. Many, many of them. And because they don’t have this kind of experience working with, and because they were looking for people who speak English, so it was like, you know, this is a good, you know, qualification to get a job. But you know, there were like many of them [aid organizations], to work with.

His command of English allowed him to pick and choose the organisation he found most interesting. In the multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment of international aid, language skills are of high importance and provide opportunities for recruitment and promotion. Like the translators studied by Catherine Baker (2010), national staff working for international aid organisations mobilised their language skills in order to find work. Language skills need to be distinguished from professional competencies and cultural competence but intersect with these two types of knowledge. In order to understand unequal aid relations, it is of interest how language, intercultural and technical skills are distributed among international and national staff and to what extent the possession of such skills is evaluated differently depending on nationality and regional origin (Roth, 2012). In the aid system, the language of donors and has a higher value than the language of the ‘beneficiaries’ (Footitt 2017). In addition, even though donors and international staff could not carry out their projects without the linguistic competence of brokers, donors’ incompetence and brokers’ crucial skills are make invisible through the hegemonic position of English.

## The Competition between English, French and other Colonial Languages - English as Lingua Franca

According to my research English is the language with the highest value6) (see also Nowicka and Kaweh, 2009). Both, national and international staff saw high value in learning English themselves or teaching national staff English. This was important in order to be able to communicate with donors and the senior management of international aid organisations. Even in a French speaking country like Haiti, French speaking staff of a French organisation such as Medecins sans Frontières (MSF, Doctors without Borders) participated in meetings conducted in English since it is more widely spoken than French. An international staff member from Latin American explained that he felt that he had to learn English first before he could apply for a position in a humanitarian organisation. After completing his university degree and learning English for several years, he applied for a position with an INGO.

They called me for an interview in Washington, in DC. I met them and it was two-hour interview, very nice, it was the first time that I realized that I knew how to speak English, […] Ok, but they called me and said ‘ok my friend, welcome to [NGO], welcome to Angola.’

It might seem ironic that a native speaker of Portuguese had to learn English in order to get hired for an assignment in a Portuguese-speaking country. However, this demonstrates the hegemony of English and indicates how useful it was for a North American NGO to hire a Portuguese speaker who is able to communicate with English speaking staff in the head office and with national staff in the field, thus taking on the role of a translator and bridge builder (Doerr, 2012).

Linguistic capital in the form of English language skills was emphasized by both, native English speakers who had mentored and taught national staff, and by national staff. An international staff member who had a long career as local staff member in the Middle East described the support he had received from a North American line-manager.

So he [his mentor] developed me. The first thing he told me was ‘Look, you have to learn the English language.’ So I was good at languages but English, my English is still weak, but it is him who really encouraged me. And then, of course, and my going abroad, a big credit goes to him because he wanted me to go for this course, and he really made it through the bureaucracy of the organisation, right, for me to go abroad.

The dominance of English as a working language in multi-lingual teams of aid organisations is also reflected in the fact that even those who spoke multiple languages, stated that they preferred conducting staff meetings in English. A European respondent who had lived and worked for many years in East Africa felt that his colleagues appreciated that spoke and used the local language when socializing with them and communicating with beneficiaries. However, at staff meetings he preferred to speak English:

I mean sometimes we talk in the local language, but it’s easier, because very often we talk about administration, we talk about management. Like I am better in English and they know English perfectly, so it’s more efficient just to have, but with beneficiaries, they don’t know English so it is better to speak local language. We have more, like the conversation can go deeper in English.

By using English at work, he asserted his dominant position as he spoke English better than the local language thus making use of his linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). However, he was not a native speaker of English and he emphasized that his African colleagues spoke fluent English. Moreover, he was able to switch between English and the local language depending on the language skills of those he interacted with and his own preferences. He thus made an active effort to minimise the distance between himself, national staff, and beneficiaries.

While some respondents from the Global North spoke about their efforts to learn languages other than English, much more effort was placed on English. Furthermore, it was taken for granted that national staff was able to communicate with beneficiaries (Peters, 2016). Native speakers of English from the Global North held leadership positions even without additional language skills or cultural competence – and in the case of some novice aid workers even without job experience – and became managers of trained, experienced and multi-lingual national staff. In contrast, the language skills and technical skills of national staff found less acknowledgement and appreciation. Hierarchies and inequalities in aid relations and the dominance of international staff thus intersect with the dominance and hegemony of English.

## Affordances and constraints of using interpreters - Translation and its Discontents

Due to the high value of English in international aid, it is therefore not surprising that my sample includes several mono-lingual native speakers of English. They relied on translators and the English proficiency of their colleagues in addition to a few phrases of the local language. Some respondents described the work with interpreters as unproblematic and felt that translation allowed them to understand the lives of people in other countries. One Western aid worker, a native speaker of English, who had been working in various world regions, including the Middle East, explained.

They [the meetings] were in Dari, so I always needed a translator with me, attend those meetings to see what is going on and try and support the lead organization of the health working group, department of health. And again, the capacity is extraordinarily low. Very, very limited capability. So our role was to follow what was going on.

This quote underlines the hegemonic position of English since she did not perceive her lack of language skills as limited capability. Without the help of a translator, this expert would not have been able to contribute to capacity building by disseminating the procedures of Western aid agencies (for example taking minutes at meetings or arriving at meetings on time). One of the core assumptions of the development project is that the Global North contributes to the capacity building of the Global South through the dissemination of technical knowledge and ELT (Ferguson, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Mosse and Lewis, 2006). At the same time the crucial language skills of national staff who are able to communicate both with international staff and with local beneficiaries remain unacknowledged (Peters, 2016), even though it would be impossible to carry out any form of “capacity building” without their linguistic support. This reflects a disregard of understanding the complexities of translation (C Baker, 2012) and the fact that translators and interpreters and the work they are doing tends to be invisible (Rosendo and Persaud, 2016).

However, some of those who relied on the language skills of national staff were aware that their interpreters were highly talented and skilled. An international staff and native speaker of English who relied on the support of interpreters stated:

My interpreter in [Eastern Europe], (….) was so talented and would have a better understanding of the sensitivities [interviewing rape victims], so I would get her to actually do the interviews, and then to report back to me. Just because you can’t get any, you know yourself, when you interview, can get any sense of trust build up where it’s ‘Tell them this, tell them.’ You got going three ways. So, so [name] would do all the interviews for me, So we had really talented local staff, that was being underutilized.

The command of English represents linguistic capital not only for native English-speakers in leadership positions, but also for national staff who started out as interpreters and translators. Subsequently, some pursued careers in aid organisations by moving into programme positions and changing from being national to becoming international staff. For national staff from the Global South, initially linguistic capital offered more career opportunities in aid organisations than training and job experience in law, engineering, medicine or media communication. They were hired for their language skills rather than for their technical expertise. Whether the language skills and technical capacities of national staff were acknowledged, depended on their line managers as well as on the policies of the organisations. There were institutional barriers to the promotion of multi-lingual staff from aid-receiving countries (cf. Shevchenko and Fox, 2008). One African respondent, who spoke English, French and Arabic in addition to her mother tongue, had worked for many years as a freelance protection interpreter for a UN agency. In addition to working as a translator, she had served as refugee advisor, but due to her refugee status was ineligible for a regular contract. This infuriated her and she told her supervisor:

‘It is about time [to get a regular contract], because I am not only interpreting, I am doing other stuff! I am going out working as a social worker, meeting asylum seekers when they first come, I am doing like exactly what everybody is doing here, whether they are an officer or associate, so I need, I am not asking for more money, I just need recognition, and to change contract.’

She explained that this lack of recognition ‘pushed her to go abroad’. Other respondents from the Global South also embarked on international positions because they could not expect to be promoted as long as they were national staff. Thus, the much lamented ‘brain drain’ of skilled national staff can to some extent be explained by limited promotion opportunities for national staff.

The othering of multi-lingual national staff and international staff from the Global South is expressed in expectations of taking on the interpreter role regardless of their official position. An African respondent from a French speaking country, who was a medical doctor with years of research experience, had learned English in order to improve her employability. She criticized her employer, an NGO, for not having a French-speaking country director and not enough French-speaking staff.

The problem is also with [NGO], they hire too much English speaking staff and they come to [French Speaking African country] and they started to learn French there. So I was a link as a translator also, but, yeah, I think it is a problem of many NGOs not to find French speaking people, it was very, very hard to for the communication, sometimes they [international staff] got angry because they did not, they think that the national staff did not respect them, but it was not the case, because it was that they did not understand, it is not that they did not respect you.

This quote describes the tensions between national and international staff that are grounded in language barriers and hierarchies. This respondent served as a crucial link between country director and national staff and felt that her technical skills were overlooked by the European and American leadership of the organisation in the racialized context of the aid industry (Crewe and Fernando, 2006; Roth, 2015). Thus although her language skills provided her with bridging capital (Heugh, 2013) and put her into the position of a gatekeeper (Méndez García and Pérez Cañado, 2005), as an African respondent she felt that her opportunities were limited compared to less linguistically capable North American or European staff who assumed dominant positions. In the context of aid relations, translation thus does not necessarily contribute to democracy and social justice (Santos, 2006; Doerr, 2012) but perpetuates existing inequalities and bolsters the leadership positions of English speakers from the Global North.

## Discussion

English is certainly not the only important language in aid encounters, in fact, as I have discussed above, limited language skills represent an obstacle to the delivery of aid whereas the ability to communicate with different language groups represents an important resource and form of capital that shapes the careers or aid workers. However, English has a dominant and hegemonic position – even in contexts where English is not the vernacular language – given that it is the language of the donors. Language skills – in particular English – represent linguistic or symbolic capital which underpins the unequal relations between national and international staff of aid organisations.

The concept of linguistic capital illuminates the role of a colonial language (English) and the marginalisation of other (in particular non-European) languages in contemporary aid encounters and indicates how global historical and contemporary global processes shape current configurations. My analysis demonstrates that the relationship between technical and language skills, the competition between English and other colonial languages, and the affordances and constraints of working with interpreters are closely intertwined. It might seem obvious that language skills and technical skills are necessary to pursue careers in aid organisations. But whether these skills are acknowledged and appreciated varies significantly between staff originating the Global North and staff from the Global South. The efforts of International Aid organisations to contribute to development and capacity building clearly rely on language skills, in particular those of national staff who often serve as official or unofficial translators within multi-lingual teams. However, rather than being acknowledged these language skills tend to be othered (Said, 1978; Fortier, 2017), they are invisible, essentialised and taken for granted (Peters, 2016). This is an effect of the hierarchy of languages, the higher value of English or linguicism (Phillipson and Skuttnabb-Kangas, 2017) or linguistic racism (Fortier, 2017). Furthermore, the technical skills of national staff are also valued less than the expertise of international staff.

English is of high value in the linguistic market of aid organisations and has become the lingua franca even within the organisations of the ‘French Doctors’: Medecins sans Frontières (MSF) (Fox, 2014). While linguistic capital provides employment opportunities for bi- or multi-lingual national staff, the lack of linguistic capital of international staff raises doubts concerning the cultural sensitivity and understanding of the local context. Intercultural awareness is particularly relevant in the context of humanitarian aid (Chang, 2007). International and national staff have criticized internal and external communication practices including the inability of international staff to communicate in local languages (Abu-Sada, 2012). The rise of new donors (Six, 2009) such as the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa might result in a pluralisation of languages in a perhaps more regionalised aid system.

## Conclusions

My analysis of the role of linguistic capital in aid encounters makes an important contribution to the understanding of globalisation processes and postcolonial sociology.

Aid organisations constitute a global work culture that is stratified and constituted by historical contradictions, geopolitical conflict and global crises (Roth, 2015). Sociological attention to development and humanitarianism contributes to ‘connected sociologies’ (Bhambra, 2014) and to theorising the intersection and co-constitution of processes in the Global South and the Global North. Language skills and translation play a central role in these multi-lingual and multi-cultural spaces. In order to understand the reproduction of hierarchies within aid organisations and the field (Krause, 2014) in which they are operating, more attention to the value, acknowledgement and appreciation of language and technical skills is needed. My analysis demonstrates that the value of different forms of knowledge varies by the region of origin of individual aid workers. The hierarchies within aid organisations appear to stymie intercultural translation (Santos, 2012) as long as English serves as lingua franca in aid encounters. There are certainly pragmatic reasons for using English as a lingua franca in international aid organisations and it would be unrealistic to expect from international aid personnel to be fluent in every vernacular language. Moreover, in most countries around the world a colonial language serves as the official language. With its adoption of Swahili, Tanzania represents an exception. However, even here English is becoming the language of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels of education (Rubanza, 1996). The apparent hegemony of English as lingua franca in the aid system is a consequence of global historical processes (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). More equal North-South relations require more attention to linguistic capital and how it underpins and intersects with power and inequality.

## Notes

1. The notion of ‘Aid’ is problematic as it implies unequal relations. It implies the donor as benevolent and the receiver as in need of assistance.
2. I refer to the high income countries in Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia as ‘Global North’ and to the middle and low-income countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America as ‘Global South’. Obviously, this is a very problematic distinction that hides not only the role of newly emerging markets, the role of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and MINTs (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey), but also the inequality within the countries in these regions, i.e. elites and middle-class in the Global South and precariat in the Global North. Nevertheless the distinction between Global North and Global South to highlight global inequalities.
3. Multi-lingual Switzerland, one of the richest countries in the world, is a good counter example.
4. A current AHRC project (2015-2018) at the University of Reading and Oxford addresses the role of languages in development work: <https://www.reading.ac.uk/modern-languages-and-european-studies/Research/mles-listening-zones-of-ngos.aspx>.
5. International aid organisations comprise international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations, Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, UN agencies, and bi-lateral organisations. Within bi-lateral organisations, English might be less important as vehicular language. However, staff of bi-lateral organisations communicates with other national and international aid organisations. Furthermore, due to the high prevalence of fixed-term contracts, staff change frequently between organisations (Roth, 2015).
6. Although this might be a result of my own limited language skills which prevented me from carrying out interviews in any other language than English or German. It would certainly be important if this study would be replicated by a French, Spanish or Arabic speaker.

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