Sociolinguistics and economics: Reassessing an ongoing dialogue

observatoire économie langues formation **élf**

SYMPOSIUM ON LANGUAGE, THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

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The issue (1/2)

Language economics is a field of specialization currently coming into its own:

- o it has increasing visibility via applications to the selection and design of LPP (e.g. chapter on economic approaches in Hult & Johnson [eds.], 2015)

- o there is a growing number of monographs in the field (e.g. Grin, Sfreddo & Vaillancourt, 2010; Gazzola, 2014)

- o three important edited volumes in this area have recently been published (Ginsburgh & Weber 2016; Carrère 2016; Gazzola & Wickström, 2016)

- o a recent overview of the literature shows that the specialty numbers over 500 entries (Gazzola, Grin & Wickström, 2016)

Some recent edited volumes

L'impact économique des langues


The Economics of Language Policy
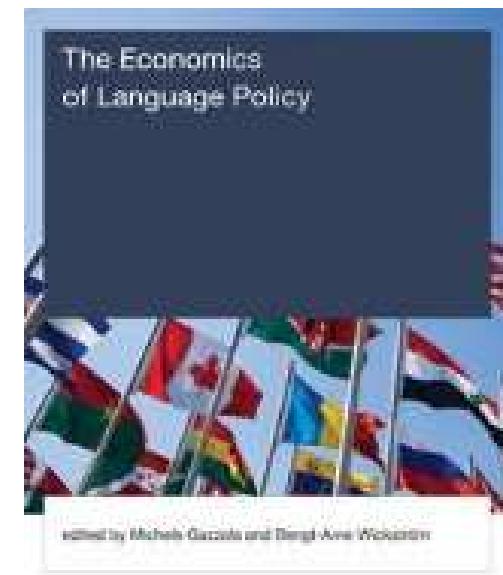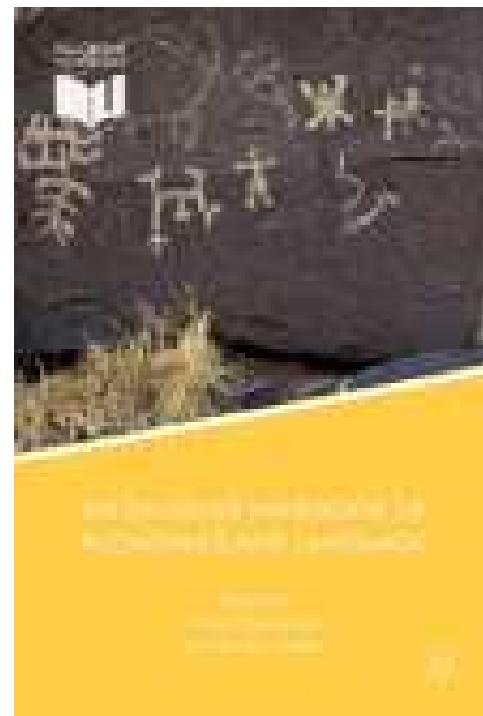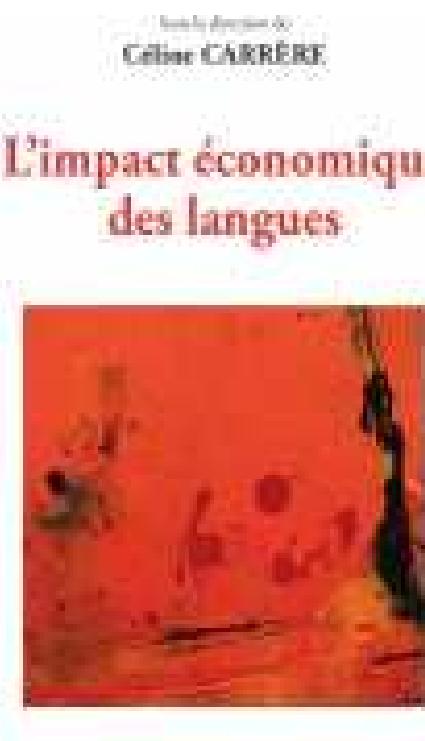
The issue (2/2)

But how good / persuasive / relevant is this work in terms of the variables used?

- o does economists' work on language make *sense* in terms of "really" addressing *language*? Do economists *understand* what language is about?

- o reciprocally, when linguists import economic concepts or refer to economic processes in their own work, is their understanding of the concepts sufficient?

- o When it comes to connecting variables with each other through an explanatory framework (a model), is the analysis careful enough?

- o Shouldn't we go beyond this *bi* – lateralism?

"Menu" of this four-part presentation

- Key features of language economics
- Conceptualization of language in economics
- About some visions of economics in linguistics
- Assessment

Language economics as a diagram
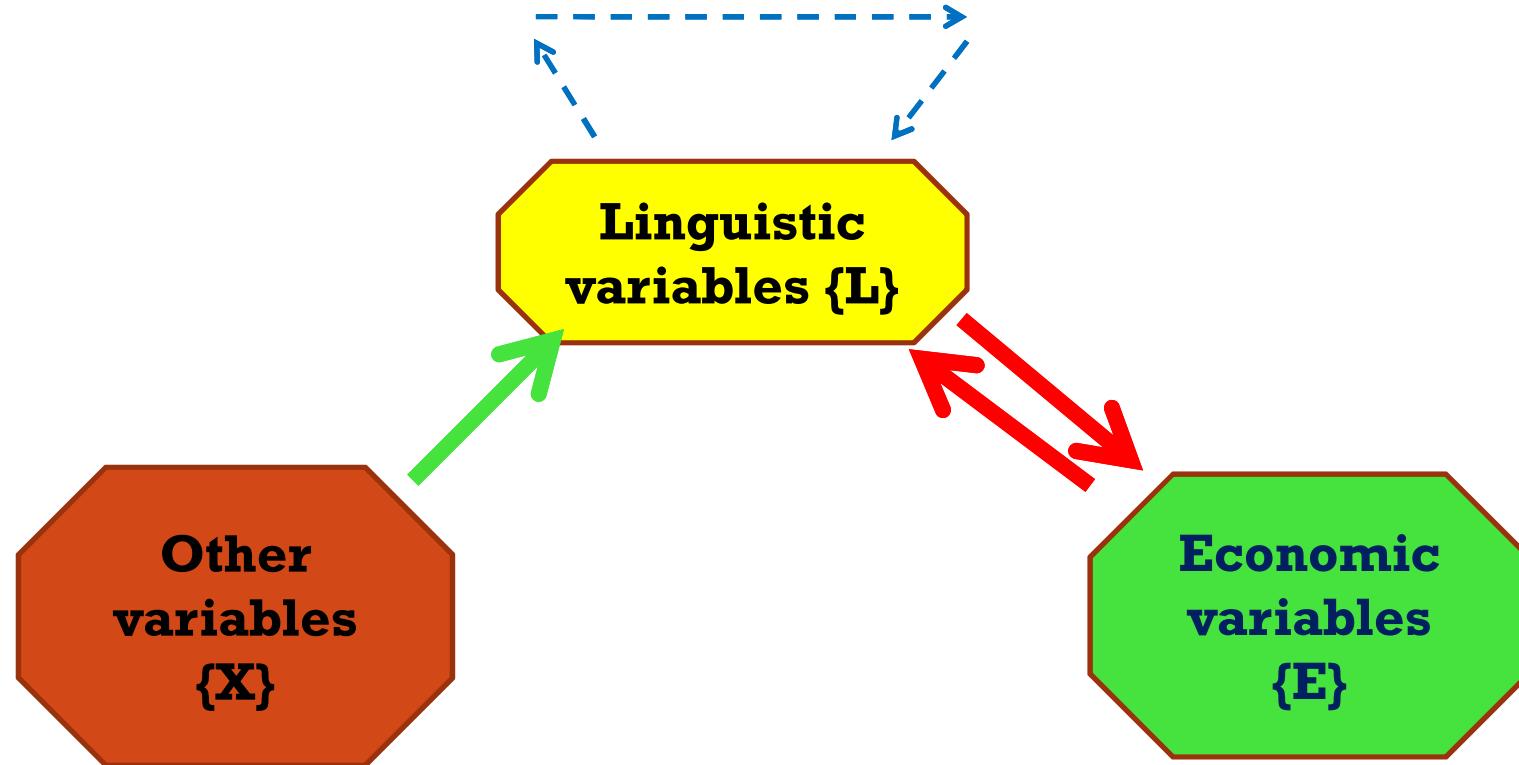
Corresponding formal definition: "Language economics refers to the paradigm of mainstream theoretical economics and uses the concepts and tools of economics in the study of relationships featuring linguistic variables. It focuses principally, but not exclusively, on those relationships in which economic variables also play a part"

Sets of variables and relations

1. $\{L\}$ *e.g.: level of a person's L2 skills*

2. $\{E\}$ *e.g.: wage premium for L2 skills*

3. $\{X\}$ *e.g.: geopolitical location of a particular country*

4. $\{L\} \rightarrow \{E\}$ *e.g.: how do a person's L2 skills affect earnings?*

5. $\{E\} \rightarrow \{L\}$ *e.g.: how do patterns of international trade affect language spread?*

6. $(\{L, E, X\} \rightarrow \{L\})|_E$

e.g.: how does geopolitical location affect patterns of FL (foreign language) learning?

Fitting language into economics (1/4)

o Navigating the meaning of "language": language *is* complex, and not any simplification will do

- o fundamentally complex nature of "language" as a phenomenon. One *possible* entry point into this complexity is the distinction between [Fr.] "langue", "langage" and "parole" (systematized by Ferdinand de Saussure): "langue"=language as a system, "langage"=capacity to use signs for communication and "parole"=language in use; speech

- o *up to a point* (though this, I believe, has never been formally examined) the "system v. use" contrast correlates with the "corpus-status" distinction (Heinz Kloss, 1969) known to (and adopted by) many economists

Fitting language into economics (2/4)

o Dealing with the multi-level nature of language: language cuts across levels of human experience

- o "narrowly" linguistic (morphology, syntax, phonology); linguistic "in a broader sense" (pragmatics); at the level of level of language-in-society (sociolinguistics)
- o social (incl. anthropological / cultural), psychological, political, spatial / geographic, historical, economic
- o etc.

o ⇒ Perpetual risk of omitting a relevant dimension ("make everything as simple as possible, but not more") — but I believe we may *still* use allegedly "oversimplifying" concepts like "mother tongue" and "named languages"!

o ⇒ The risk of oversimplification (e.g. "language = communication = information transfer") can lead to absurdities

Fitting language into economics (3/4)

o Operationalization and measurement

- o in practice, variables need to be quantified (or *quantifiable*) for modelling, but quantification often leaves out some important dimensions (e.g. measuring the vitality of X through the absolute number or proportion of time units in a day/week during which X is used is very crude)

- o relationships $x=f(y)$ involving language are seldom simple and unambiguous. For example, the claim that the adoption of a company language (e.g. English) in some multinational corporation will result in "English being used" in its internal operations obscures the fact (well-known by sociolinguists) that *actual* communication practices typically remain highly multilingual

- o choosing relevant variables is tricky, e.g.: definition of a "bilingual" (Bloomfield v. Macnamara)? Which of the 5 portfolio skills to take into account when designing an indicator of proficiency in L2?

Fitting language into economics (4/4)

o Summing up:

- o Caution is indispensable for language economics when using concepts in which it is not specialized

- o This requires reciprocal familiarization (bridge-building)

- o LPP provides in itself a very welcome reality check – consider for example the following questions, which are politically charged and cannot be answered realistically without taking these political implications into account):

  - o what is the proper role of English as a medium of instruction at universities in non-English speaking countries? Does it even make sense to look for *one* optimal level?

  - o should migrants be required, as a condition for applying for citizenship, to pass language tests certifying their competence in the official language?

  - o etc.

Language in economics: some challenges

o "Named languages"
  o the challenge (originating in some parts of applied linguistics): "languages don't exist"

o Diversity as fragmentation
  o the challenge (coming from some quarters in economics): language is for information transfer, and there must be only one language of communication

o Interlinguistic distance
  o the challenge (because oddly, this variable often turns out to be statistically significant, but it's not always clear *why*, and any policy implications must be handled with extreme caution): interlinguistic distance necessarily matters

o Language and culture (a frequenty encountered ambivalence)
  o the challenge (coming from various sides, including politics and media): "language carries burdensome cultural baggage" [in most cases]; *yet* "language is free of cultural content" [miraculously... if it's a dominant *lingua franca*]

Economic variables and processes in linguistic approaches

o **Some authors seem to be missing the core message?**

  o … what economics is really about:

    o Max $U|_c$ (maximising satisfaction, *both* material *and* symbolic, under a set of constraints, *both* material *and* symbolic)

    o Economics of language is not the same thing as "language in the economy" ! (often, an ethnography of language at work seems to be regarded by some as containing some "economics"… but it doesn't!

o **Seductive but misleading analogies**

  o e.g. "language-as-currency": it looks reasonable… but it isn't!

o **Occasional typological mix-ups**

  o "development" v. "regional" economics: these are two different areas of specialization

From variables to models: example (1/3)

o The case of the role of linguistic diversity/fragmentation in economic development (in developing countries)

  o in standard development economics, diversity actually means fragmentation, which hampers communication and is detrimental to productive exchange and cooperation, and hence to economic development

  o this theoretical explanation is *prima facie* backed up by econometric results

  o BUT is the approach credible?

From variables to models: example (2/3)

o This reasoning rests on oversimplified variables, namely:

  o a conflation of "diversity" with "fragmentation"

  o … leading to the conclusion that communication is not possible

  o … thus automatically excluding or at least neglecting the bridging potential of T&I, foreign language learning, L2 acquisition, intercomprehension (IC), etc.

o This invites the researcher to take a *negative* correlation between linguistic diversity in country *X* and GDP per capita in country *X* "as is", and to interpret it as a causal connection *without* pausing to reconsider it, and we end up with the (faulty) logical chain:

$$\{\text{FRAGMENTATION}\} \Rightarrow \{\text{LOW GDP PER CAPITA}\}$$

From variables to models; example (3/3)

o But another pattern is perfectly plausible, namely:

$$\{\text{HIGH DIVERSITY}\} \Leftarrow \{Z\} \Rightarrow \{\text{LOW GDP PER CAPITA}\}$$

o in this case, high diversity and low per-capita GDP co-occur *without* there being any relationship between them

o this conjecture can be tested with econometric tools going beyond standard OLS ("Instrumental variable approach", which "endogenizes" the diversity variable [Arcand & Grin, 2013])

o this procedure shows that linguistic diversity is (i) *either* not statistically related to per-capita GDP (in most analyses) (ii) *or*, when it is, the effect of linguistic diversity turns out to be positive!

Two generalizations (1/2)

First,

o Approaching language through economics (and treating linguistic variables through an economic approach) *or* importing economic variables into a linguistic approach does not just work by itself

o Confusions can arise

- o when choosing and interpreting variables
- o when connecting these variables through modelling

o The best way to ward off these confusions is to develop a certain degree of familiarity with the other discipline (a similar problem arises in practically any combination of disciplines!)

Second,

- ***Some*** of the confusions and resulting errors ***may*** owe something to ideological bias:
    - *When the approach originates in economics*, this bias can take the form of a deep-seated hostility to the notion that linguistic diversity may be good / profitable
    - *When the approach originates in the language disciplines*, the bias is liable to stem from clichéd views of what economics is about
- Therefore, interdisciplinary curiosity should be completemented by a willingness to question respective disciplinary orthodoxies and tropisms (Jonathan Pool has warned us against "extraordinarily stubborn beliefs", which sometimes can also be our own)
- Perhaps the best antidote to this is to extend the move from disciplinary bi- to multilateralism

Conclusion

1. An undiminished need for interdisciplinary openness

2. … encouragingly, the perception of the acuteness of this need seems to be on the rise

Merci – Danke – Grazie – Grazia