Language trends: Reflexivity in commercial language policies and practices

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Abstract

Financier, philanthropist and economist George Soros is not the first to have used or derived the notion of reflexivity (for example, Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and others have found it useful in their work). What is different about the approach of Soros is that he has used the concept of reflexivity to explain the workings of global markets, and for this reason his work seems to me to have particular potential for explaining language trends in the linguistic policies and practices of global marketers. Soros has challenged ruling economic orthodoxy by arguing that demand and supply are not given or objective, and far from determining how markets develop. Participants in economic processes inevitably and unavoidably shape and determine the outcome of those economic processes and also create the conditions for future development of those market processes. This particular insight, I would argue, could help us to understand and develop further the notion of normativity in 'global' linguistic practices and policies, particularly when linked to economic processes since "the self-validating capacity [of such processes] encourages trend-following speculation" (Soros 1994). We can equate the decisions of many global marketers to that of stock brokers, who largely act on their intuitions (linguistic intuitions), but who in turn create conditions for those intuitions to be successful now and in the future, in effect by creating language trends.

Keywords: Reflexivity; language trends; language policy; normativity.

1. Introduction

The notion of commercial language policies and practices can be seen to encompass all decisions made in the context of commercial activities (i.e. buying and selling) that have to do with language. Some of these decisions may be codified into explicit (Schiffmann 1996) or overt (Shohamy 2006) policies or documents; or they may have become established, implicit (Schiffmann 1996) or covert (Shohamy 2006) policies through long-term use, which become accepted as the status quo, the way things have always been done in a particular company; or, they may simply be one-off practices. Whatever the case, they involve decisions which relate to managing languages – or more precisely speakers (cf. Heller and Duchene 2007) – for commercial purposes. Languages/speakers can be managed either as a problem or as a resource from a commercial perspective. On the one hand, linguistic diversity can be seen as a problem for many businesses; it is an external, uncontrollable factor (cf. Kelly-Holmes [forthcoming a], for in-depth discussion of this; cf. also da Silva et al. [2006] in relation to Canada), which needs to be managed by categorizing markets (i.e. groups of people / speakers of languages) in terms of particular languages with which they can be then targeted. On the other hand, linguistic diversity can also be seen as a resource which can be managed and exploited in order to differentiate a particular product or brand from other products or brands by appealing to primarily ethnocentric perceptions of other cultures, or of some essential qualities inherent in the language, which are essentialized in the language-product link and which the targeted consumer is deemed to share (cf. Martin 2006; Piller 2003; Ustinova and Bhatia 2005; Lee 2006; Kelly-Holmes 2005).

Advertisers thus use languages for differentiation, in order to differentiate their product from other products, and also for segmentation, in order to segment markets and break them down into manageable units that can be targeted by specific strategies (cf. Kelly-Holmes [forthcoming b] for an overview of this). However, there is a sameness – and to a certain extent a predictability – in the ways in which language is used in these differentiation and segmentation practices: global brands which originate in non-English-speaking countries of origin use English language slogans globally and use English on their corporate or dot.com pages, where they seek to address a 'global' audience (e.g. Japanese Toyota; Finnish Nokia); where global brands want to exploit a particular attribute associated with their country of origin, they may indulge in decorative use of a small amount of their 'national' language combined with global English (e.g. Spanish Seat's use of *auto emoción*; German Volkswagen's use of *Das Auto*). McDonald's has been using multilingual graphic since 2004, and Burger King and Espirit de Corps also followed suit. In terms of segmentation, we can observe similar trends, for example, the provision by international brands of strictly bilingual (i.e. parallel monolingual in Heller's [1999] terms) sites for Belgium, Switzerland and Canada, with the use of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) sites in English, French and Arabic, by a growing number of brands, and also the growing use of Spanish on the USA sites of global and US American brands.

All of these practices represent language trends and norms of a sort in advertising and market discourses. They are styles which may start with an individual, but which are then followed and come to be generally accepted as ways of 'doing language' in commercial contexts. Trends are by their nature transient, but while some inevitably fade away, others become established as norms. But, how might these trends or norms come about? As someone who has been observing such trends over a number of years, this question has come to concern and fascinate me, and in this article I would like to propose a framework that might enable us to track and understand these trends and to develop a sociolinguistics of the market (for an overview of approaches to this to date, cf. Kelly-Holmes [forthcoming c]). The framework that I am proposing is based on the economic writings of George Soros, and I want to begin by putting Soros' work in context and arguing for the use of his work and insights from the field of economics in understanding commercial language trends, before going on to explain Soros' most relevant theory, namely that of reflexivity. I then attempt to show how this could be useful for explaining how trends emerge in the use of languages for differentiation and segmentation in global, national and local advertising, and point to what I see as useful avenues for exploration in order to take these ideas forward.

2. Putting Soros in context

George Soros is a controversial figure in all of the domains in which he is active – financial markets, academia and politics. He was born in Hungary, but his grew up in the USA. His brief encounter with the Nazi occupation and with the communist regime together with his discovery of the work of Karl Popper when he studied at the LSE have made him a lifelong advocate of the 'open society'. The open society is, as one might expect, concerned with aspiring towards genuine freedom of information, thought etc., but – and this is relevant in terms of understanding reflexivity – also with an acknowledgement that there is bias at work and that we need to attempt to overcome or limit this bias, or work with it, rather than ignoring it or pretending it does not exist. Of interest to linguists may be the fact that Soros is a fluent Esperanto speaker, having been brought up with it as his first language. Soros is also known as the man who bankrupted the British pound on 'Black Wednesday' in October 1992. Much of the profit made by Soros in currency trading has gone towards philanthropic activities in former Eastern Bloc countries, particularly in the area of education (Soros established the Central European University in Budapest in 1991).

What is compelling about Soros is his combination of theory and practice. There are few eminent economists or philosophers who actually try out their ideas on the financial markets or, in a grounded theory approach, formulate theories on the basis of their experience in such markets. Economic theory is notoriously and unapologetically abstract and generally not data-driven, and prides itself on ignoring real-life situations in favor of perfect market conditions and on the assumption of rational human behavior. Soros has argued, and his argument has added credibility because of his experience as a practitioner, that this is nonsensical. He is also anti-positivistic in his approach to studying economics, advocating, like Popper, that social sciences should not try to imitate natural or hard sciences and should instead work within and around the flawed, partial and unpredictable nature of human beings.

Soros has published a number of works on his economic ideas (e.g. Soros 1987, 1998). However, to his disappointment, which he has spoken publicly about, the ideas have yet to be taken on board seriously (although as we shall see below there are points of comparison between him and the ideas of John Maynard Keynes), and he is generally seen as a maverick by orthodox economists. He has also been branded an 'anti-capitalist capitalist' and a hypocrite for being happy on the one had to make money from international financial markets, whilst at the same time criticizing them. Having put Soros in context, I will now turn to an explanation of reflexivity.

3. Reflexivity versus orthodox economic thinking

In general terms, reflexivity can be seen to occur in social systems and processes "when an actor observes and thinks about his or her actions and their consequences and then modifies his/her behavior" (Umpleby 2006: 1). Soros did not of course invent the concept of reflexivity, nor is he the first person to use it as a way of explaining social processes and to "… refer both to the fact that and to the way in which agents are confronted with the results of their earlier actions" (Mügge 2007: 10). Soros and other proponents of the reflexivity approach would argue that these results are often different from what they may originally have intended, and the reason for this is that "… societies are extremely complex, bringing together myriad agents with different agendas, capability and perspectives" (Mügge 2007: 10). Consequently, these actions and their results, from a reflexive perspective, can "generate new agency and thus inject dynamism into social change" (Mügge 2007: 10).

Furthermore, reflexivity means that the way agency affects overall structures is unpredictable, both for analysts and agents themselves (Mügge 2007: 10).

Change, therefore, should be understood as "the combination of intended and unintended consequence of purposeful agency" (Mügge 2007: 10). Reflexivity, thus, gives us a way of engaging with and studying systems that include thinking and acting participants (Birshtein and Borsevici 2001: 74), and this is reflected in the work of sociologists of globalization such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (cf. Bryant [2002] for a comparison between Giddens, Beck and Soros in relation to reflexivity). As mentioned above, Soros claims to have used reflexivity to explain and understand the workings of international financial markets. He sees market developments as dependent on "the beliefs of market practitioners about them. Therefore, a clear separation between markets and the beliefs observers hold about them is impossible" (Mügge 2007: 12). Soros argues that "many market participants are perfectly aware of this recursiveness. And they try to use it to their own advantage" (Mügge 2007:12).

Soros has a more holistic approach to finance and economics: he sees finance as a 'human player game' with himself as a participant. One of his key criticisms of economic orthodoxy is that it negates or disregards the human dimension to economics and finance. In such classical – or more correctly neo-classical – economic thinking, the individual is deemed to act rationally and to make decisions on the basis of having access to perfect information. According to mainstream or neo-classical theory, economic man or woman is rational, being rational means that s/he seeks to maximize his/her utility and that s/he does so in a consistent way, using the perfect information available to make these rational decisions. Neo-classical economic theory considers utility to be that which is of value to (or in the best interests of) the individual – something that is different to the classical or Marxist view of utility. Thus, individuals try to maximize the value of goods to them. There are of course many problems with this theory, which Soros and others have pointed out, and which, commonsensically, we can see ourselves: individual human beings are highly complex and have multiple and often contradictory motivations. As economist John Kay points out: "the economic imperialism which seeks to 'explain' all behavior by reference to rational choice is absurd" (Kay 2004: 194), and "… often this is achieved by stretching the meaning of rationality" (Kay 2004: 201).

Likewise, we can clearly see that 'perfect information' is hardly ever available in all situations, hence the famous caveat, 'buyer beware'. According to the mainstream view, however, left to its own devices, with a minimum of intervention by governments or other players, and with everyone behaving rationally, demand should stimulate supply in order to achieve equilibrium in the best possible way for all agents and all participants. Another major criticism, and one levelled by Soros, is that mainstream economic theory is not based on reality – in fact it ignores realities – or on any data or experience; instead it proposes a

Utopian view of economics. This might perhaps be acceptable in and of itself – the need for abstraction in all theory being important – were mainstream economics not used as the way in which major decisions are taken by national and international economic players such as governments, companies, international organizations etc. who operate in a far from Utopian world.

Soros has turned mainstream economic thinking (which is largely based on this neo-classical or Chicagoean model) on its head – causing "constant annoyance among advocates of the orthodox economic and political theory" (Birshtein and Borsevici 2001: 74) – and tried to move away from this abstract concept of economics, by arguing that "economic reality is actively shaped by the perceptions of market participants" (Cymbalista 2003: 1). Thus, rather than demand and supply determining what happens in markets, it is instead what happens in markets that determines demand and supply; and what happens in markets is what individual human beings do on markets, with all their flaws, unpredictable and irrational behaviour and complex ideologies. According to Soros, participants in economic processes inevitably and unavoidably shape and determine the outcome of these economic processes, rather than these processes being shaped by some abstract notion of demand and supply. Soros sees individuals as participating at a fairly unsophisticated level – they use guesswork, they formulate hypotheses and they act on these hunches or hypotheses. The key aspect, according to Soros, is that by acting on these hypotheses or guesses, they actually create the conditions for their hypotheses to be successful. Central to this understanding is an acceptance of, perhaps even an embracing of, human fallibility, "meaning both the belief in [our] own fallibility and the belief that the misconceptions and misunderstandings that go into our decisions help shape the events in which we participate" (Cymbalista 2003: 1).

Taking the example of English as a global language of business, it could fruitfully be argued that a process of reflexivity is at work here. The received idea within sociolinguistics and applied linguistics could perhaps be formulated as follows: processes of globalization have made English a global lingua franca in business, and thus there is a demand for English globally, which is being met by the supply of English. This status of English as global lingua franca leads in turn to a greater demand for English, which stimulates supply, and thus leads to a greater supply of English. This type of argument is based on 'classical' economic theory, which would predict that some kind of equilibrium would eventually be reached in terms of the demand for English and the supply of English internationally. However, demand appears to continue to grow, and so, correspondingly does supply. Soros would argue that, what such an understanding lacks is the human component. Looking at the global spread of English from the reflexivity point of view, it might be possible to formulate a contradictory point of view:

individual agents (e.g. companies) formulate their own linguistic hypotheses about using English in particular commercial contexts. These hypotheses are of course not just individual, but are also influenced by social, cultural and sociolinguistic factors; these are language ideologies (cf. Schieffelin et al. 1998; Kroskrity 2001; Bauman and Briggs 2003). But, basically, a decision is made somewhere, by someone, to use English in a particular advertisement for example, without there being any particular demand for English to be used in that advertisement. Thus, supply might precede demand. However, because the decision is made to supply or use English, English comes to be accepted in this particular context, and then more English is supplied. A reflexivity approach would argue that by using English, companies and agents are creating the conditions whereby more English can be used or is even expected to be used (e.g. corporate websites discussed above), the idea that 'everyone is doing it, so we should be too'.

Another important difference is that rather than simply focusing on variables, as is the practice in mainstream economics, Soros also looks at ideas, groups and events – factors that have either been deemed unimportant or have been neutralized or blanded out in mainstream economic theory (e.g. in the notion that there is perfect information, and that all individuals act rationally all the time). In his mind, it is particularly important that we take ideas into account – these can be seen as the bias which various actors bring to their decisions, their guesswork and hypothesizing, and, ultimately, their actions. From our point of view, this could be their own linguistic ideologies. The ability to incorporate individual language ideologies into a model of commercial language practices makes reflexivity particularly attractive to me, since too often in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, actions are deemed 'corporate', thus hiding or masking the societal, educational, familial and individual inputs in these. Often, too, it is forgotten that copywriters, marketing managers, brand and image consultants are more than just 'economic man' or rational human beings too. They have their own complex linguistic identities and these may impact on their behavior, which may be far from rational in a mainstream sense. All too often, perhaps, linguists are seen on one side and marketers on the other, whereas the reality is much more complex. For example, Atkinson and Kelly-Holmes (2006) and Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson (2007) argue that advertisers as members of particular language communities do not always act rationally as the Chicagoean school would predict. For example, some may advertise in a minority language primarily to lend financial support to a minority language newspaper and in this way support revitalization or maintenance in a language community rather than to reach particular customers and even where they acknowledge that it will probably not attract business for them. Equally, advertisers possibly influenced by majority language ideologies may decide to keep their advertisement in the national language (in this case Castilian Spanish) in a newspaper that is entirely in the 'minority' language, and which is translated free of charge into the minority language (in this case Catalan). Here, advertisers actively and explicitly opt out of speaking the customer's language.

The idea then is disarmingly simple: individual ways of thinking influence events on markets – according to Soros, reflexivity equals perception plus action. In other words, our perceptions plus our actions creates events which have consequences on markets. A recent example which came to my attention may help to illustrate this: international drinks brand Carlsberg recently produced an advertisement for the Irish market in which Irish is used (cf. Kelly-Holmes [2010] for a full discussion of the advertisement). This was the first time that Irish had been used in this way (see discussion below) in such a context by a global advertiser (it has been used nationally, and there is growing use of commercial Irish in a number of domains in Ireland). According to a source in Diageo, the global drinks company that owns Carlsberg, the marketing team, a very small group of individuals, felt that Irish is becoming 'trendy' and that an advertisement in Irish would work well. So, we can see here how these individuals formulated a linguistic hypothesis on the basis of their own language ideologies – in turn fed by societal language ideologies in Ireland. By using Irish in an advertisement for a global beer brand, these social actors have created a new scale (Blommaert et al. 2005) for the language and have also created the conditions whereby more Irish can be used in future advertisements – they have perhaps started a trend. In Soros' terms, their perceptions (changing language ideologies about the 'trendiness' of Irish) together with their action (using Irish in this particular action) create the reflexivity, whereby they help to create the conditions for their use of Irish (and the future use of Irish in such commercial contexts) to be successful.

We can equate this decision to that of stock brokers, who, Soros claims, largely act on their intuitions and biases, but who in turn create conditions for those intuitions to be successful now and in the future. Mügge argues in relation to global financial markets that "producers in the financial sector increasingly act as rule-setters in the transnational domain" (Mügge 2007: 7) and Yeung (2002) also points out in relation to globalization, that it is the social actors who exploit global scales who also and at the same time by doing so create and reinforce these global scales. For instance the 'scale' or ideology that enables English to work globally does not just exist; it is created, reinforced by people and their everyday language decisions. As Cymbalista (2003) argues in relation to price trajectories on international stock currency markets, "valuation does not represent economic value but creates economic value . . . markets and their participants are more than information-processors. They create information" (Cymbalista 2003: 20). So, we can see that rather than having perfect information about the sociolinguistic situation on a particular market or in relation to a particular customer or group, advertisers and marketers may have some – by definition – imperfect information, which they combine with their own perceptions and ideologies. Just as it is, Soros claims, impossible to have perfect information about market conditions, so too is it impossible to have perfect information about a sociolinguistic situation.

Reflexivity also provides a way of explaining the 'copycat' behavior which we can observe in commercial language policies and practices, the homogenizing trend we can observe around us (cf. Kelly-Holmes forthcoming b). Linguistic hypotheses, as argued above, become self-fulfilling: the presence of a language in a particular 'event' (see below) leads to an expectation of its presence. Consumers thus come to expect to see the particular language used in a particular way. Trends emerge, practices are copied and they become norms. For example, multilingualism has been used as an index of universalism or globalism by international organizations such as the UN and the EU. Promotional material for the EU tends to feature multilingual slogans and UNICEF's Christmas cards have long featured multilingual greetings, a practice taken up by OXFAM and other international charities. Recently, brands which are seeking a similar type of global or universal image have also started/followed a trend in using multilingualism as a way of indexing this. Most notable has been the McDonald's 'i'm lovin' it' campaign, launched in 2003, which features a multilingual slogan with Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Filipino, Turkish, Ukrainian versions of 'i'm lovin' it' alongside the English version. These versions together formed a multilingual graphic which was used on packaging in McDonald's restaurants. When fast food rival Burger King relaunched its 30-year-old 'Have it your way' slogan in 2004, it too created versions in different languages and merged them into a multilingual graphic that appeared on packaging, cartons etc., and clothes brand Esprit de Corps (EDC) uses different language versions of its slogan 'The world is our culture' on its bags to reinforce its positioning as an "international youthful lifestyle company" (www.edc.com). The combinations of languages used, while displaying some differences (e.g. in McDonald's use of Ukrainian and Filipino), also display remarkable similarities, with languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French, English acting as primary indexes of internationalization and globalization.

4. A reflexive model of language trends

In this section, I would like to attempt to model how commercial language policy and practice might operate as a social system, so that trends come about. The model, following Soros, has four key components. The first is 'variables', and in this model, the variables would be the language or languages used (including also varieties, accents, repertoires), as well as their modes of use (e.g. genres, discourses) which are also subject to reflexivity. In other words, which language(s) is/are chosen, and which are not, and how are they used? The second component is ideas, and these would be language ideologies – individual, group, societal – perceptions and preconceptions about language or languages or varieties etc. as well as about modes of use of language and about speakers. The third component Soros focuses on is 'events', and these would then be the particular texts and speech acts which take place, since these represent the action or fundamental intervention on the market (e.g. advertisements, websites, brochures etc.). Soros' final component, 'groups' would in such a model refer to all actors at micro, meso and macro levels, who are involved in these processes, who can take part in these processes and who are affected by these process. So, the marketers themselves, companies, consumers, individuals, educational institutions etc. The proposed model is presented in Figure 1.

participation / action

variables – language resources chosen
ideas – language ideologies
events – advertisements, brochures, websites
groups – speakers, designers, consumers

cognition / perception

Figure 1. *Reflexive model of language trends*

The reflexivity model of language trends (see figure 1) shows the reflexive nature of the process, whereby action and participation are constantly being described and understood by the individual actors (groups), and whereby variables, ideas, events and groups are constantly interacting and affecting each other:

> … the psychology of participants in any historical process is its integral component and by continuously interacting with reality, it forms a reflexive process: a real situation affects the minds and behavior of its participants, while their thoughts and behavior affect the development of the situation. The participants' ideas, evaluations, expectations and prevailing preferences, which are imperfect

> by nature, greatly determine the natural course of events and their basic uncertainty. (Birshtein and Borsevici 2001: 75)

Another appealing aspect of Soros' theory of reflexivity from the point of view of applying it to the language policies and practices of marketers is his focus on the interdependence of the various factors which other economists tend to treat as discrete; namely, variables, ideas, events and groups. According to Soros, interaction comes first, and the model is predicated on the interdependence of variables, ideas, events, and groups. It is in fact impossible to think of these variables as independent or existing on their own. This is nothing new to sociolinguists, but it is fairly radical in economics. Reflexivity in economic theory recognizes that "… a factor never acts alone, but only as it changes and is instantly changed by being in interaction with all other factors" (Cymbalista 2003: 19). Thus, rather than a static and independent set of variables, a reflexive model should instead be seen as an "unseparated multiplicity" (Soros 1987), in which "interaction comes first" (Cymbalista 2003: 19).

The model proposed above should therefore not be seen as something static or measurable. It is instead an attempt to model or gain a snapshot of a process that is continuous. The variables (languages, varieties, accents) are not static and measurable, since they are always interacting with ideas (ideologies) and groups (speakers, hearers) in ever-changing, continuous conversations and narratives (events) – the speech act we encounter at this moment cannot be seen or measured or encountered in isolation from the speech act immediately before or after it. Our ideologies are inseparable from our experience of events and groups and vice versa. It is this state of constant diachronic and synchronic change that leads to uncertainty, which in turn leads to (and actually necessitates) guesswork on the part of individual actors in the market. This state of uncertainty is due to the 'unseparated multiplicity' of variables, events, ideas and groups, which are constantly participating and reflecting on and understanding this participation, and which in turn leads to a state of constant change. Thus, "uncertainty is therefore not just the absence of certainty about an outcome: it is also the presence of the ongoing process of events" (Cymbalista 2003: 19). Market processes are "not a series of discrete events, a chain of completed occurrences, of finished happenings. The future is uncertain because it's always in the process of being formed" (Cymbalista 2003: 19), and all the components of the reflexive model have a hand in how it is being formed.

This concept of an 'unseparated multiplicity' also shows how ideologies and norms come about. Just as 'the market' does not consist of a series of discrete events, information too is "a continuous process which is created over time as the market participant engages with the events" (Cymbalist 2003: 20).

Trends emerge when consensus emerges in this process among a range of market participants, who "not only perceive outside events in a similar way but also share perceptions of transition or stability, thus creating, reinforcing of reversing trends" (Cymbalista 2003: 20).

Reflexivity can also be seen to have something in common with the process of linguistic normalization, in particular as exemplified by Strubell's Catherine Wheel (cf. for example, Strubell 1998, 2001) – the case of commercial Irish being a good example. Although not explicitly economic in orientation, Strubell's Catherine Wheel does show the reflexive impact of intervention in processes of language revitalization. Strubell shows how supply and consumption of goods and services in a particular language can lead to perception of a greater need for the language, leading to more motivation to learn and use the language, leading to more learning, more informal use in social situations, more demand for goods and services in the language and back to even greater supply and consumption of goods and services in the particular language. Interventions set the wheel in motion.

However, the Catherine Wheel is predicated on the same assumption as mainstream economic thinking, namely that demand stimulates supply or supply stimulates demand. A reflexivity modeling of the processes of language revitalization or language normalization would instead focus on expectations and acceptability (in Bourdieu's [1991] terms), rather than seeing a straightforward cause and effect or input-output relationship – again keeping in mind the contradictory and paradoxical behavior and ideologies which individuals have and which they are constantly revisiting. Taking the example of the Irish language, the introduction of Irish language television station TG4 (originally TnaG when it was founded) in 1996 can be seen to represent an intervention that would correspond to an increase in the supply of goods and services in Irish that would lead to greater demand and greater supply, according to Strubel's Catherine Wheel. If we take the example of advertising in Irish, however, the situation is not quite a straightforward as this – there is an effect, but it happens in a much more indirect, unpredictable and long-term way. When TG4 was set up by the Irish government, many national and international brands initially started to advertise on the channel in Irish and paid for the production of Irish language advertising. However, soon after its launch, the channel began to lose its viewership and it consequently also lost advertisers. When the station began to recover and relaunched itself, it did win back advertisers, but this time the majority of the advertisers kept their advertising in English (cf. Kelly-Holmes 2005). So, in the ad breaks in the programs (which are in Irish with English subtitles during prime time) the bulk of commercial advertisements for national and international products are in English.

While the intervention into the supply side (providing a television station in Irish) might not have led to a growth in the demand side (for advertising in Irish), the conclusion is too simple and points to the inadequacy of the mainstream economic view. In parallel with TG4's growth and success, a number of interesting initiatives have happened – we could describe these as trends. An increasing number of businesses in particular domains are using Irish company and brand names, particularly in the areas of food (cf. Kelly-Holmes 2005), tourism (cf. Kelly-Holmes et al. forthcoming), but also in newer domains such as beauty (a local beauty parlor in Limerick uses the name *Mise* or 'me' to brand itself) and child care (a day care-centre uses the Irish word for care, *Aire* to mark itself out). The young producers on TG4 and the trendy programming have contributed to a phenomenon identified as 'Sexy Irish', and Irish has started to feature in comedy acts (Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007b). Recently, as highlighted above, Carlsberg, a global brand, used Irish in an advertisement for lager. The last time Irish was used in a commercial for beer, it was for the iconic Irish brand of Guinness, and featured the inhabitants of the Irish-speaking Aran Islands, off the Irish west coast, watching the clock and the sea to await their supply of Guinness due to arrive by the traditional currach boat (1977). The Carlsberg ad on the other hand featured three young Irish men on holidays in Rio de Janeiro, and the message of the ad, that speaking Irish makes one attractive in international tourist destinations, was very much in tune with the 'Sexy Irish' discourse (cf. Kelly-Holmes [2010] for full discussion of this). What I think we can see happening here is something that cannot really be explained in terms of demand and supply or even demand/supply and consumption. It is instead a process of taking chances and making guesses about what is credible, acceptable (in Bourdieu's [1991] terms), what is possible to say; and in the process of stretching the boundaries of what is currently acceptable, possible, credible, creating new levels of acceptability, credibility and possibility, while challenging prevailing ideologies. It involves very subtle guesswork based on knowledge of prevailing language ideologies, and knowledge of how far these can be stretched and challenged. In this way, trends are created, and reflexivity, by creating new trends, norms and expectations, ultimately leads to predictability and sameness.

5. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, this article grew out of my own curiosity about patterns and trends that I have been observing over more than ten years of research around the area of commercial language policies and practices. In particular, my engagement with reflexivity is driven by a desire to deconstruct the discourse around ‘the market’ and globalization, which is reflected in the ‘uneasy relationship’ between sociolinguistics and economics (cf. Kelly-Holmes [forthcoming c] for a discussion of this). One appealing thing about reflexivity is that it enables us to stand back from vast nebulous processes like globalization or the global spread of English and break down these processes into the micro-level decisions of companies, teams, and sometimes individuals, sometimes working on their own, with their own particular language ideologies. The attempt to use reflexivity is also motivated by a conviction that orthodox economics, with its reliance on ‘perfect’ information, rational human beings and a notional equilibrium created by supply responding to demand and vice versa has little to offer us in understanding the complex and multi-layered interactions between languages and markets. More than this, it may even obscure what is actually taking place, masking the agency involved.

What would be needed in order to build a credible and useful reflexive theory of language trends would be longitudinal, historical studies and tracking of institutional practices and of the development of such trends, in combination with ethnographic studies of the ‘groups’ identified in our model, in particular of course the actors who create the events and who make the language choices. Further fruitful research could look at the real effects of these choices, the ripple effects, in terms of speakers, ideologies, equalities and categorizations (cf. Blommaert 2003). Just as “… the evolution of prices on financial markets can be regarded as a reflexive historical process” (Birshtein and Borsevici 2001: 75), so too might we usefully research the evolution of language trends as ‘a reflexive historical process’. By acknowledging the ‘unseparated multiplicity’ of ideologies, languages, speakers and events, and their constantly modifying interactions, reflexivity allows us to understand a dynamic ‘future is now’, ‘past is now’ model of these interactions and their ongoing effects.

Of course, reflexivity does not and cannot provide all of the answers; it may simply help to illuminate one part of the picture. As Cymbalist highlights, reflexivity in economics and international financial markets remains “mysterious, both at the theoretical and at the practical level: neither his [Soros’] conceptual framework nor the manner in which it gets translated into investment decisions is fully understandable” (Cymbalista 2003: 1). This mystery is, however, due to the fact that reflexivity allows us to acknowledge that we are dealing with human beings who are not rational and who are unpredictable, who behave in complex and contradictory ways – orthodox economics which eliminates these messy factors is much easier to comprehend and less mysterious, but not very useful, I would argue. Messiness is what sociolinguists and applied linguists deal in – the messy, mixed-up language practices that again and again defy categorization and labeling – and a useful, workable theory that helps us to understand language trends and their implications needs to have this messiness built in.

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