

# (Im)possible change

## Criticality and constraints in the infrastructures of the academic knowledge economy

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This article examines three sets of infrastructures that give shape to the academic knowledge economy, namely: institutional infrastructures (universities and conferences); gate-keeping infrastructures (journals and publishers); and validation infrastructures (competitive assessments of individuals and institutions). We analyse the tensed interplay between critical perspectives in applied linguistics and the influence of academic neoliberalism. We develop our argument in three parts: (1) Academic critique and its emancipatory epistemologies are intertwined with established systems and coexist with mechanisms that perpetuate inequalities. (2) Inequalities in knowledge production reverberate in knowledge dissemination, where the hegemonic role of English as the language of academic publishing reinforces the unequal position of different actors in their academic fields. (3) These inequalities (that originate in institutional and gate-keeping infrastructures) extend to the validation of knowledge, which is entrenched in the audit culture that pervades academia and further reinforces neoliberal competitive dynamics. We conclude by reflecting on the possibilities for change at these three levels.

**Keywords:** Academic knowledge economy, criticality, inequality, infrastructures, neoliberalism

### 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen more awareness and explicit discussion of the inequalities embedded in the production, circulation, and consumption of academic knowledge within applied linguistic and sociolinguistic circles (see e.g., Del Percio et al., 2021; Duchêne et al., 2021). How academic knowledge is developed and validated is an inherently political-economic question, determined by the social conditions



of those involved in the process. In this article, we reflect on three focal infrastructures that shape and constrain the development and legitimation of knowledge, as we explain below. We discuss how criticality in applied linguistics, while seeking to advocate for those disadvantaged by inequalities in knowledge production, is liable to be co-opted by mainstream agendas dominant in these infrastructures, thus becoming integrated with, rather than antagonistic to, hegemonic neoliberalism in higher education (Bacevic, 2019). Our aim is to further the crucial discussion (Kubota, 2023) on whether critical approaches within applied linguistics can bring about meaningful change in the context of neoliberal academia, and if so, how extensively.

In the article, both criticality and academic neoliberalism, and the tension between them, are key to us. On the one hand, we take criticality as an approach that underscores the political foundations of language and that connects broader societal level factors of socio-economic and ideological nature to applied linguistic concerns (Pennycook, 2021). On the other hand, academic neoliberalism refers to the impact of neoliberalism itself (the political economic theory of the free market, individual entrepreneurial freedom, and lack of state intervention) (Harvey, 2005) on academia (the individual scholar as an entrepreneur that focuses on maximising productivity in a market-oriented higher education sphere).

Our article develops the following tripartite logic: (1) in terms of knowledge production, academic critique and its epistemological narratives of emancipation are embedded in institutionalised structures (e.g., universities, conferences and professional organisations), in which they coexist with the very mechanisms of production of forms of disadvantage, such as precarisation of academic labour, ballooning costs of attending conferences, the culture of academic celebritisation, etc. (2) Disadvantages in knowledge production have a subsequent effect in the dissemination of knowledge; in addition, at this level, the unequal position of actors from different backgrounds in the uneven playing field of academic publishing is boosted by the hegemonic neoliberal structures of the industry. This is further complicated by the dominant position of English as the language for academic publishing (Martín Rojo, 2021). Finally, (3) in terms of knowledge validation, all these inequalities are embedded in the audit culture that permeates contemporary academia (Spooner, 2020), and are thus deeply integrated in the neoliberal logic of competition – both between institutions and individuals – a particular concern at a time of real existential threat of job losses through downsizing or closure of departments. In the next sections we develop each of these three arguments one by one.

## 2. Institutional infrastructures of knowledge production and academic critique

Knowledge production is intricately connected with academic, cultural, sociopolitical and material relations. This means that academic outcomes cannot be detached from the real-world conditions that enable and constrain them. The same applies to academic critique and its epistemological narratives of emancipation. Similar to other forms of knowledge creation, academic critique is embedded in institutionalised infrastructures, where it coexists, as already mentioned, with the very mechanisms that can create disadvantages, such as precarious academic labour, soaring costs associated with attending conferences and the culture of academic celebritisation, to name but a few.

This situation has given rise to a paradox wherein critical research of neoliberalism burgeons while staff and students in universities worldwide face significant challenges resulting directly from the adoption or imposition of the neoliberal reason in higher education. The advancement of a market-based logic in academia (see Holborow, 2013, for the particular case of applied linguistics) is not solely confined to a select group of senior academic staff in top managerial positions in universities. Such logic permeates the subjectivities and practices of many individual academics who either internalise neoliberal notions of selfhood or feel compelled to align their scholarly work with market-oriented models of valuation to obtain professional rewards.

The fact that the emancipatory critique of neoliberalism can thrive alongside the persistence of neoliberalism itself can be partly attributed to its capacity to reassert its primacy by accommodating some elements from its critique. One such element is what Bacevic (2019) calls “reflexive neoliberalism”, a phenomenon in which academics are directed towards producing critical accounts of neoliberalism, effectively diverting their efforts from enacting transformative political and economic actions against the neoliberal measures they criticise. Put differently, possessing knowledge about the adverse effects of neoliberalism does not necessarily lead to concrete actions against the underlying conditions that generate these effects (Kubota, 2023). The relationship between the epistemic and the political, that is, between getting to know neoliberal academia and doing something about neoliberal academia, is one of the key tensions in academic critique (Bacevic, 2019), as well as in academic praxis.

The proliferation of critique of neoliberalism within the context of the neoliberal university inevitably raises unpleasant questions concerning the potential ambiguity or ambivalence of scholars who obtain profits from the very structures they criticise. Can the pursuit of ever-more-sophisticated analyses of neoliberalism in academia, or the commitment to hyper-reflexivity and critical

consciousness alone, lead in any tangible way to structural change in universities? To whom are ritualistic critiques of neoliberalism in academia actually intended? These questions are particularly relevant for our community because applied linguistics is a praxis-oriented discipline that seeks to transform society. They are also important because, despite calls for acknowledging the interconnectedness of theory and practice in academic praxis as one of an inextricable nature (Pennycook, 2022), theory has primacy over action in academic praxis, and the gap between them remains unaltered (Kubota & Miller, 2017; Kubota, 2023).

Partly due to this existing disparity, critical scholarship in applied linguistics is liable to be co-opted by mainstream agendas, as the two following brief examples encapsulate. Firstly, universities in the Global North have begun adopting decolonising initiatives as mere branding devices for marketing and promotional purposes within their broader diversity regimes, thus reducing decolonisation to a profit-oriented scheme and often undermining its potential for meaningful change (Meghji, 2021). Secondly, numerous scholars within the critical tradition, predominantly affiliated with UK or US universities, occupy prominent positions within hierarchical structures in the knowledge marketplace, particularly in the multi-million academic publishing industry (e.g., serving on editorial boards of journals). Critical applied linguistics seems to comfortably flourish under a regime of knowledge production that neoliberal academia has turned into the tyranny of metrics and impact. Here, it must be recognised that not all forms of critique are equally co-optable by the neoliberal university. Certain critiques, especially those that challenge the corporate culture in university management and pose a threat to the for-profit higher education model, are deemed as dangerous by the academic establishment and can lead to the stigmatisation, marginalisation and dismissal of critical scholars.

Admittedly, academics across all traditions, not limited to those adopting a critical perspective, face challenges when attempting to implement transformational practices in a system where the neoliberal rule is intensifying. Within this context, applied linguists have put forth specific measures to counteract neoliberal forms of knowledge production. Kubota (2016: 490–491) highlights the role that professional organisations can play in the enactment of transformational activities, for example, recommending guidelines for tenure and promotion with a focus on

more on quality of research (e.g., originality, social relevance, and critical reflexivity), practical impact (e.g., community-based inquiry and improvement of practice), and diverse venues and methods for knowledge mobilization (e.g., equal weight from given to research output in languages other than English or alternative formats that have a greater social impact) than on quantity of output, prestige of journals or publishers, or uncritical alignment with popular approaches.

Indeed, these and other commendable proposals (see Kubota, 2023) are often directed towards the scope of action corresponding to professional associations, conference organising committees and other self-organising networks of academics. In fact, these are traditional strongholds of resistance to the detrimental effects of the neoliberal reason in academia. However, one might wonder whether our determination to criticise the effects of neoliberalism within the safe confines of morally committed professional associations, comradely conferences and routine articles with a narrow readership – often detached from any radical politics of contestation –, can effectively turn the tide in the battle against the structural inequalities prevalent in academic institutions (Phelan, 2022). Another question we may wonder is whose voices get heard and picked up in the debate about academic inequality, a question that requires a reflection on the sociolinguistic basis of the unequal conditions of knowledge production and dissemination, as we further discuss in the next section.

### 3. Gate-keeping infrastructures in knowledge production and dissemination

As is well known, academia is a hierarchically structured field, or collection of fields, not just in terms of scholars' levels of seniority, but also from the point of view of the different positions that different academics *qua* social actors occupy in the structure. Briefly put, academia is filled up by a widely diverse population of scholars with different backgrounds, experiences, and trajectories, a range of factors that translates into a variety of situations and conditions under which scholars produce and disseminate knowledge. One important element amongst this diversity of factors is of linguistic nature, and it has to do with the hegemonic language in which most academic production is disseminated at present: English. Not only this is the language in which the majority of academic journals are published, with 75% of the approximately 46,000 total scientific journals in 2020 in English (Curcic, 2023), but also there exist privileged forms of the language that are at the basis of forms of exclusion within academic exchanges. This affects disproportionately scholars working in geopolitical peripheries, particularly in the Global South (Canagarajah, 2002), who typically have limited access to both the material and rhetorical resources that shape the flow of scholarly communication, described recently by Hyland (2023) as a field in which the ability to capture and maintain attention has become central.

To be sure, linguistic injustice in academic publishing is not a myth (cf. Hyland, 2016), but it is also not determined by scholars' L1 alone or primarily (cf. Flowerdew, 2019). Rather, linguistic injustice rests at the intersection of multiple

factors mediated by the dominating role of English as the hegemonic language of academic dissemination (Martín Rojo, 2021). There is plenty of linguistic injustice in contemporary academic publishing, an injustice that emerges from the uneven access to and distribution of the material and symbolic resources that have value within academia. Put differently, not all scholars around the world have the same means and the same opportunities to access the most up-to-date and relevant literature (in English) in their field, or to attend the world congresses and key (English-based) conferences in it; hidden behind high paywalls and skyrocketing registration and travel fees, these are contexts where the relevant forms of linguistic and social capital can be acquired and exchanged (Bourdieu, 2021 [1983–84]), where ties can be forged with colleagues to foster collaborations and joint publication initiatives; so, limited access to these contexts and spaces can impinge negatively on scholars' chances to be seen as legitimate knowledge producers and disseminators.

The above, then, implies that there is a differentiation between scholars who do have access to these contexts and spaces and scholars who do not. The former will likely be more able to capitalise and mobilise the right kinds of resources and to continue accumulating more and more capital of all sorts, while the latter will be less able to do so. The result is that some voices will have to struggle less than others to have their contributions heard and legitimated. However, here again we need to remind ourselves that we are not simply talking about individual factors and personal sets of conditions, and also that these inequalities are not to be understood exclusively in terms of Global North versus Global South dichotomies; indeed, there can be positions of inequality within both contexts. With Kubota (2020) and Martín Rojo (2021), we argue that if we do not recognise the political-economic structures that reinforce social inequalities, we will fail in our analyses of inequality in academic communication. Moreover, Kubota (2020: 728) adds:

What we see and hear in books, journals, or conferences are the results of the decisions to accept or reject certain ideas produced by real people. These decisions made by authors, presenters, reviewers, and editors affect how many male or female scholars or white, black, indigenous, Asian, and Latinx scholars appear in publication titles and conference programs.

So, it is at the intersection of individual decisions by editorial teams, publishers, conference organisers, and reviewers, and the capitalist and neoliberalising structures of academia (that seek to maximise profit at minimum costs, and favour visibility and “impact”) where we need to look for some of the key sources of academic inequality. In the next section, we elaborate further on the neoliberal character of present-day academia and its significance for processes of knowledge

creation and dissemination. From the point of view of linguistic justice in academic publishing more specifically, the (in)visibilisation and (de)valuation of authorial voices seems to operate most clearly during the peer-review stages of academic publishing, where language matters become more pronounced and where potential deviations from a perceived academic “standard” may lead to negative evaluations by reviewers and journal editors (Lillis & Curry, 2015; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007). This works in the favour of established voices working on trendy topics and methodologies in unmarked centre contexts and against emerging alternative voices from the (semi-)peripheries.

Therefore, it seems important to shift the weight of responsibility from writers to readers and evaluators so that more attention is placed on how unconventional voices are constructed as deviant and/or deficient, even though discussions about injustice in academic publishing attract the attention the most when framed in simplistic opposites of “native” vs. “non-native” English speaker divide, particularly outside applied linguistic circles (e.g., Amano et al., 2023). Developments such as Open Access publishing might tame some of the sources of inequality outlined above, as they allow enhanced access to publications in journals of reference by everyone regardless of subscription status. These are, however, also potentially problematic in cases where they presume a flow of public research funding (grants supporting researchers in different contexts) into the for-profit academic publishing business through extortionate Open Access fees. The emergence of the “Gold Open Access” model changes little from the actual infrastructures of knowledge dissemination and in the end may help strengthen the neoliberal underpinnings of how knowledge and people are validated in academia, to which we turn next.

#### **4. Validation infrastructures, precarity and morality in neoliberal academia**

In order to make full sense of the impact of unequal conditions of knowledge production and dissemination in applied linguistics, these need to be contextualised in the broader dynamics of contemporary academia, particularly with reference to the neoliberal values that now permeate our institutions and associations. Particularly key to consider in this regard is audit culture, which can be defined as a nexus of practices in which there is an orientation to continuous external assessment in the form of quality assurance exercises and teaching or research assessment frameworks (Strathern, 2000). Such mechanisms are typically presented in the form of rankings, purportedly neutral but, when examined more closely, clearly driven by neoliberal ideology, most notably in the way they presume that inter-

institutional competition is the natural status quo for academia, or for any other field of action (Brankovic, 2022). A significant effect of rankings from a global perspective is that they shift perceptions and definitions of quality in academia by foregrounding specific quantitative measurements (in publication, for instance, impact factor, citation score, see Kulczycki, 2023) and concurrently backgrounding the many localised ways in which academics work to achieve “quality”, solidifying traditional disciplinary boundaries in the process (Pardo-Guerra, 2022). Thus, while socially engaged research may contribute to debates and achieve concrete outcomes in a particular context, its validation in audit-driven academia is primarily dependent upon its conformity to such global measurements (e.g., publication in an indexed, high-impact journal). From an applied linguistics perspective, this has significant implications, since it means that a field whose core ethos involves an orientation toward practicality (Kramsch, 2015), and by extension context-specificity, is instead shaped by discourses in which what matters most is the de-contextualisation and universalisation of knowledge, as well as its presentation through sloganised, citeable “concepts” (Schmenk et al., 2018). As highlighted by Kubota (2020), such de-contextualisation and universalisation in many cases in fact constitute the imposition of experiences and ideologies of dominant (racial, gender) groups, placing all others in the role of perennial listeners – consumers of knowledge produced elsewhere – and largely without a voice in global academic discourse.

While the tendency toward de-contextualisation and universalisation has historically played out between the Global North and Global South, recent developments in audit-driven applied linguistics suggest that the inequalities between producers and consumers of knowledge are also predicated on other factors. With few exceptions, it appears clear that rankings for instance perpetuate the logic that it is primarily Anglophone universities that can be truly *international*, since HE institutions in non-Anglophone nations are chronically under-represented in the top range of most rankings despite being sites with significant traditions of scholarly excellence (Albuquerque, 2021). Rankings, while being clearly problematic, do matter; they are a factor in decision-making by prospective students (Souto-Otero & Enders, 2017), as reflected in their increasingly widespread use in university advertising. Indeed, it is the ability of highly-ranked institutions to recruit students that is a relevant issue for applied linguistics in countries like the UK, where we can concurrently find examples of departments and programmes being shut down or downsized in the name of post-Covid austerity (see for instance the widely publicised closure of the Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages at the University of Huddersfield) as well as of flourishing departments whose Masters programmes in TESOL or applied linguistics are particularly successful in attracting large, three-digit cohorts of international students.



Aside from exemplifying the continued relevance of conventional colonial economic flows – since the success of large programmes is at least in part dependent upon the availability of public funding in international students' home countries (the cost of Masters study in the UK now being well beyond the financial strength of most individuals, particularly in the Global South) – disparities of this type highlight the growing danger of precarity for applied linguists in the Global North. Insecure employment (or unemployment) is both the consequence of departmental closures and the pre-condition for the existence of extremely large programmes, which are in many cases made possible by the availability of a large pool of staff on casual contracts (part-time seminar tutors and dissertation supervisors, most often early career scholars). The growing trend toward casualisation, far from being limited to the UK, is a central factor in perpetuating the unequal relationship between producers and consumers of knowledge in applied linguistics. While there is no denying the need for us to interrogate our loci of enunciation as part of decolonisation efforts (De Figueiredo & Martinez, 2021), we also need to consider that the key consequence of precarity is that loci of enunciation become unavailable – without access to key resources and without long-term security, few scholars can hope to become knowledge producers, or indeed to achieve eternally sought-after “excellence” in other areas of their work, like teaching (McCulloch & Leonard, 2023).

The impact of validation infrastructures on applied linguistics is also key to consider when it comes to the way it affects our identities as scholars. De Costa et al. (2019) make the convincing argument that audit culture, when integrated into the policy of institutions or the discourse of communities, functions as an affective regime (see also Wee, 2016) in the sense that it establishes moral imperatives about what it means to be a “good” member of the collective. The focus of De Costa et al. (2019) was on the way individuals are pressed to act as “linguistic entrepreneurs” and gear their language acquisition to the needs of the job market, but a corresponding notion of *academic entrepreneurship* can be also envisioned when considering how applied linguists as individuals are pushed by the neoliberal university to act strategically and gear their efforts toward “building up a profile” or “establishing a track record” (McCulloch, 2021). As entrepreneurs seeking to become “good” members of the global applied linguistics community, we are in this way coerced into accepting the moral imperative to compete, not only against institutions other than our own, but against other scholars – an imperative which may be easy to resist on a declarative level, but is much harder to argue against when considering the cold and hard reality of precarity. The power of audit culture also stems from the positive reinforcement on offer, in particular the sense of pride that comes with being in the “top 2% of scholars worldwide” or working in a “top 10 university” – the frequency with which

such “achievements” are celebrated on social media suggests a passive acceptance rather than critical questioning. Similarly, while convincing arguments can be made for the need to contextualise knowledge produced by members of dominant groups (Kubota, 2020) and reflect on loci of enunciation (De Figueiredo & Martinez, 2021), it is increasingly difficult to resist the moral imperatives that come with “good” scholarship – to produce de-contextualised, universal knowledge, suitable for presentations at “must attend” conferences and for publication in “must publish” journals (with editorial teams eyeing the “citeability” of submissions in their own eternal quest for higher ranking). This is a particular concern at a time when employment, funding and promotion can hinge on quantity of outputs and citations rather than quality of contribution and its contextual relevance. There is thus a significant risk of a destructive moral order emerging, where scholars who play the game and embrace academic entrepreneurship are positioned as “good applied linguists” and those who do not – or more importantly *cannot* due to lack of secure employment or key resources – end up being seen as “bad applied linguists”.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Summing up, in this article we have sketched three main arguments for an analysis of criticality and constraints in the infrastructures of the knowledge economy in academia, namely in connection to (1) institutional infrastructures of knowledge production and academic critique, (2) gate-keeping infrastructures of knowledge production and dissemination, and (3) validating infrastructures, precarity, and morality in academia. Lack of space has limited the depth of our argumentation, so more needs to be said in connection to the different ideas outlined in the sections above. One missing aspect that seems particularly important to address, perhaps in future studies, is the historicisation of the topic at hand, i.e., the historical origins and development of the link between academic neoliberalism and critique. That aside, let us conclude our piece by phrasing its title in the form of a question: is change possible in the infrastructures of the academic knowledge economy? Yes, change is indeed possible, but given the constraints we have identified, we would argue it is possible to a limited degree and in small proportions. Therefore, we share Kubota’s (2023) concerns about the actual impact of critical research aside from its influence on the career advancement of critical scholars themselves. Furthermore, we adopt a somewhat sceptical stance regarding the potential of critical scholarship to bring about tangible structural transformation in the context of neoliberal academia.

In terms of institutional infrastructures, assuming that conflictual and antagonist politics cannot be the basis of a viable strategy for achieving transformational change in academia, some scholars in the social sciences have proposed the rearticulation of social phenomena typically associated with neoliberalism as part of a coherent anti-neoliberal politics (Phelan, 2022). This suggestion resonates with Kubota's (2016: 491) proposal for strategically appropriating neoliberal discourse to promote critical awareness of diversity without endorsing neoliberal dominance, aiming, for instance, to more easily persuade policymakers about the benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Given the difficulties in devising action alternatives to reduce the gap between theory and practice, discursive rearticulation may be one of our few remaining strategies with the potential to tackle inequalities and instigate change in academia. If this holds true, instead of striving to dissociate ourselves from the charge of being complicit with neoliberalism, perhaps we should concede that our practices, and even our subjectivities, as critical scholars are inevitably intertwined with the prevailing logic of the ideological framework that we vehemently oppose but in which we must operate (Phelan, 2022).

As for gate-keeping infrastructures of knowledge production and dissemination, at least in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, there is increasing awareness and discussion that the current system does not work equally fairly for everyone (Del Percio et al., 2021; Duchêne et al., 2021), and a growing effort is being made to legitimise the epistemologies and voices from Global South contexts (Deumert & Makoni, 2023; Kerfoot & Hyltenstam, 2017). Moreover, the actual shape of the English language that appears in academic publications can gradually shift to include unconventional forms for enhanced diversity and empowered authorial agency (Canagarajah, 2022), and Open Access publishing developments can have a positive effect in lowering the burden of journal subscription paywalls (Willinsky, 2006). However, changes in the actual system of academic publishing for a more radical inclusivity of less represented voices are hard to implement, certainly by single journal editors alone (Besnier, 2019; Piller, 2022), and empirical evidence continues to show that the pluralisation of English for academic publishing might be constrained by authors' general orientations to "standard" forms of academic English across different fields (Heng Hartse & Kubota, 2014; Hynninen & Kuteeva, 2017). So, concerted efforts by entire editorial teams, scholarly associations, and higher education institutions are what seems to be needed to foster justice in knowledge production and dissemination in academia, rather than ad hoc individual actions. Ultimately, it seems urgent to continue investigating further the tensed relationship between, on the one hand, knowledge about the political economic nature of academic knowledge production and, on the other hand, action and agency by those in key structural




positions in the system (journal editorial boards, conference organisation committees, etc.). And even more fundamentally, perhaps the question worth asking is whether widening access to academic knowledge production and circulation is the way to redress this flawed system. Is having more people feed an already crumbling machinery and help reproduce it the solution to academic inequalities? What other strategies could we, or should we, pursue?

Finally, in terms of validating infrastructures, concrete moves can be made to transform how we position ourselves and others as scholars. While most applied linguists may never find themselves in a position where they can single-handedly prevent the closure of a department or a programme, we can make concrete moves to resist the culture of academic entrepreneurship and the competitive, transactional relationships it encourages in the field, and which ultimately contribute to the dominance of audit culture in contemporary academia. The growth of academic celebrity culture is as much a product of the institutional order of neoliberal academia (Walsh & Lehmann, 2021) as it is of our own willingness to accept its core tenets, and indeed our eagerness to benefit from its practices in the form of invitations to give keynotes at conferences, to contribute to exclusive journals, or to participate in large grant applications. All these perpetuate the distinction between “producers” and “consumers” of knowledge, and it is rather surprising that the notion that such privileges should be afforded to a select few remains relatively unquestioned even at a time of critical reflection in the field. There have, for instance, been efforts to afford greater visibility to scholars from minority backgrounds or from the Global South when it comes to the selection of keynote speakers at major conferences, but it remains a difficult challenge to find examples of conferences which do not feature plenary speakers, and instead try to position all contributors on a more level playing field.

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