[1] Hi everyone, I'm Ean Henninger. I want to start by recognizing that I'm coming to you from the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, who speak the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ and sqʷχʷoʔməʃ languages among others. I name these nations and languages here not to be performative but because the issues around them--the suppression and destruction of Indigenous languages by colonizers, and the ongoing work to sustain and revitalize those languages by Indigenous peoples--show recognition of the facts that languages have power, that they are important to culture and identity, and these are some of the topics that I want to touch on today.

[2] To start out with other examples, this is a tweet from Jess Schomberg where they talk about 'strong communication skills', and it raises questions like: Are these linguistic assumptions inherent in -our- concepts of strong communication, or our views of patrons and students and staff who speak multiple language forms? Do these ideas reinforce existing and harmful social norms? As this tweet shows, there are often lots of language ideologies that are implicit in and indexed by everyday words and phrases.

For more on these ideologies, **[3] here's a tweet** from Nelson Flores, who's a scholar who does a great job problematizing language issues as they relate to race, colonialism, and more.

Like perhaps many of you, I was raised on the classically liberal and Western ideas he mentions of languages as bounded, homogenous, and, I would add, functionally equivalent--at least on paper. That's why I chose this title and these slides, which blur the lines a little bit, because languages aren't separate from each other or from the people who speak them, and although they should be equally valid and accepted, they're not always treated as such.

[4] So, my main goals today are to talk about the social and power dynamics of languages and to offer some thoughts on linguistic justice in libraries.

My time is brief, but if you want to get more into this topic, I've collected some sources in a document which I'll share out in the chat here and on Twitter. It also has the script, slides, and abstract, so you can read along with this talk if you like.

So, I'm going to approach these dynamics in languages via some of the assumptions that I bring to this topic, which don't always show up in the LIS literature.

The first assumption: **[5] languages aren't neutral.**

I'm not going to spend too much time on this, because I think it's the easiest one to wrap our heads around. Libraries aren't neutral? Languages aren't neutral. The use of a given language is ultimately a value-laden, even political act--even if it doesn't feel like it--and by extension, English isn't neutral either--more on this later.

Also, **[6] languages are an aspect of identity giving rise to difference and affinity.**

We see this in how it's possible to talk about linguistic diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, marginalization, discrimination, access, rights and whatever other terms we like in a similar way as we do things like race, gender, and disability.

Languages are a bit different because people might think, hey, you can 'just' learn another one, you can't do that with something like race--that's true to an extent, but they still intersect with other aspects of identity. Yo podría hablar casi todo el día en español, pero--I'm still a white American who started learning Spanish in high school. My experience as a Spanish speaker is always going to be informed by those other differences, a white immigrant with an accent is going to be treated differently than a brown citizen with an accent, and so on.

I did a workshop with some colleagues a couple years ago where we asked people to imagine the absolute worst thing they could do to exclude people who didn't speak English from their library. We did a little think-pair-share, then we hit them with the follow-up: Does your library do anything like this in some way? You can probably guess what happened.

Language is never just an issue on its own. Even if something seems to only deal with language, if you have or do something in your library that requires extreme proficiency in, say, English, who do you think that is going to end up affecting disproportionately?

I also try to keep in mind the idea of **[7] English as an unmarked default.**

Just as whiteness and maleness are often the default position against which difference is indicated, we often see English as a default, monolingualism as a default, being a 'native speaker' as a default, which all center certain ways of being. These defaults also give rise to all these binary dichotomies where, for example, you're either monolingual or multilingual, native or non-native, there is no middle ground, and that reduces the complexity inherent to language.

Now, I think these defaults and dichotomies go under-noticed in libraries. Why? Because so many librarians--not necessarily library workers--in the US and Canada are white and therefore very likely monolingual English speakers. We conduct so much of our business in English that it becomes a gap in awareness brought about by our privilege--and it's a privilege to not have to reckon with the fact of linguistic difference on a daily basis.

It often goes without saying in libraries and society that you need to learn English, or a particular kind of English. Sometimes it's quieter, other times people say the quiet part out loud, like when racist nationalists say 'this is the US or Canada, learn English'--and never mind that English itself is originally foreign to these lands.

So, we just become used to it, we assume it's the way things are, and we naturalize it. To paraphrase a bit, it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of English.

However, when the use of English in libraries is treated as natural, logical, and immutable, and the use of other languages is treated as irrational and superfluous, it shuts out any possibility of

change to that use and, by extension, shuts out part or all of the identities of people who use other languages. If we think a given language is something neutral that's just natural to learn--who does that benefit? My guess is that it's part of reproducing the status quo. And speaking of the status quo...

[8] English is part of upholding colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and white supremacy.

For reading on these topics in general, I especially recommend the books *Language, Capitalism, and Colonialism*, *Markets of English,* and *Linguistic Justice,* all cited in my sources. As these and other works make clear, control and suppression on the basis of language have never really gone away.

In libraries, Denisse Solis and Jesus Espinoza have a fantastic new chapter out on the history of English as a tool of dominance and assimilation in US libraries, and they also did a survey of multilingual staff that was really revealing in terms of things like language policing on the job. There are also some articles in the document I've shared that look at English-language hegemony in scholarly communications and explore the ramifications for knowledge equity there.

Regarding capitalism, English is one way for white people to gatekeep access to capital and to profit off the language itself. The mainly US- and UK-based English-language-learning industry had revenues of almost 9 billion USD in 2019, and it exports cultural norms along with it. Similarly, do we in libraries gatekeep access to information by making English such a huge focus of our collections and offerings? What norms around English and economic participation or assimilation do we promote?

Regarding white supremacy, Anastasia Collins has a great article about language in general as a tool of oppression upholding whiteness in LIS, and Myrna Morales and Stacie Williams have been developing the concept of epistemic supremacy, which they locate language at the heart of. I think it's possible to extend these works to name 'standard' English specifically as part of upholding white supremacy.

[9] So, in terms of linguistic justice: I'm not saying that Englishes are inherently bad--we can't help the languages we were born into, and I think they can be used for resistance--but we need to be mindful of how we use and view and accommodate standardized English relative to other languages and language forms.

I've seen people judge public library patrons with accents, express frustration because international students aren't 'good enough' at English, or otherwise do things that just aren't welcoming to folks who speak other languages. We need to do more to treat languages and the people who speak them with the respect they deserve.

So, part of linguistic justice, I think, is to give people space for the languages they bring with them and **[10] give more power to languages besides English.**

Systems of power in society would not seek to treat languages in a particular way if languages did not have the potential to challenge power. They're how we talk, they're how we write, and how we build solidarity. However, people who do not speak a given language (i.e. English) will necessarily have less power in environments where that language is dominant.

So, encourage students to use their own languages in the classroom during activities. Have peer tutors in your writing center who can scaffold students' learning English with another language. Put Indigenous languages in your spaces, and follow through to make sure it's not just performative window dressing. Don't make people learn English to use discovery systems, make discovery systems easier to use in other languages.

Also, **[11] don't view language in isolation, as a resource, or as a commodity.**

Neoliberalism in particular wants you to think of it these ways, which are reductive and individualizing, but there are alternatives. Nelson Flores talks about viewing language as a site of struggle, not a resource, and many applied linguists also locate language as residing in social relations, not as a system that just exists in a vacuum.

In this relational view, to dictate the use of a given language is to dictate the kinds of social relationships that can be had and even the extent to which they can be had in the first place. Sam Popowich talks about violence as directed at social relationships with reference to transmisia, and I think it's also possible to see this with languages: colonialism certainly did violence to Indigenous social relations by attacking Indigenous languages.

We need to look at how we and our systems do violence to people who speak other languages and respond accordingly. Maggie Melo identifies transparency as one way to mitigate the harm caused by pedagogical and linguistic violence, and there are of course other options. So, let's expand our imaginations and our conceptions of language if they're not already there.

[12] I want to close with another tweet that stood out to me as an example of just how much languages matter and how much English's dominance can affect people's literal lives. Of course the stakes aren't as high in libraries, but language still matters there, and its treatment still disproportionately affects marginalized peoples.

We need to raise awareness about the complexity and importance of language--don't settle for what colonial white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal capitalism wants you to think about it! And then of course it's not enough to just know about language, you have to put that knowledge into action. I've offered a few ideas and questions here, but there's lots more out there.

The end goal, I hope, will be increased linguistic access, equity, and justice for everyone as part of broader struggles.

[I come to this topic from a place of privilege as a white, male, fluent English-speaking settler, and so my understanding of these issues is always partial, sometimes secondhand, and a work in progress. I welcome insights and feedback especially from BIPOC and other folks with lived experience of linguistic barriers.]