

# Introduction

## THE FIRST LANGUAGE OF CAPITALISM

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For many in the world today, learning English is virtually a must. English has made an unprecedented rise to become the world's lingua franca, the most commonly used language of global trade. As such it has become the object of enormous investment, as eagerly sought as a piece of property or a hot stock. At the millennial moment, defined by global capitalism and the rise of the knowledge economy, people around the world are buying into English, investing their money and time in it, hoping for a favorable outcome.<sup>1</sup>

These investments are motivated by the common belief that English, as the language that allows for the free movement of people, goods, and services that characterizes globalization, is essential for developing countries to compete on a level playing field with developed ones. *Buying into English* questions that belief through a critical ethnographic study of a piece of the world where people are buying into English at a furious pace—the postcommunist state of Slovakia formed in 1993, after Czechoslovakia split into separate nations.<sup>2</sup> For Slovakia, a large part of the busi-

ness of becoming a capitalist state was learning capitalism's first language: English. Before the Soviet Union's collapse, English language material was heavily censored by the government and English instruction limited due to the language's association with capitalist countries. Following Czechoslovakia's peaceful overthrow of the communist regime in the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, however, English in Slovakia flourished, supported by a booming language teaching industry. In the space of little more than a decade, Slovaks went from very rarely hearing or using English in daily life to walking through shopping malls sporting English names, including one in the capital city of Bratislava whose corridors were dubbed "Wall Street" and "Fifth Avenue." English had made the leap from *lingua non grata* to *lingua franca*.

The English, the malls: the "real" Wall Street embraced both developments in Slovakia. In 2005 *Barron's* deemed Slovakia "central Europe's star reformer," a "hot spot for foreign direct investment," though with the caveat that mass proficiency in English would be instrumental to the country's sustaining its star status. The *New York Times* trumpeted, "Once a Backwater, Slovakia Surges," for an article that compared Slovakia's auspicious signs of development to those in Ireland two decades prior. The *Economist* declared, "The Slovaks have it right," namely, the ability to attract investment from richer countries by flaunting low labor costs while investing in education.<sup>3</sup> Even the World Bank sang the country's praises, rating Slovakia the top reformer in improving the climate for foreign investment.<sup>4</sup>

While these reports from the Western press suggest a somewhat uncomplicated transition out of communism, one brought about by the adoption of a slate of neoliberal economic reforms including corporate tax breaks and loosened labor codes, the stories of the individuals I spoke with in Slovakia, who learned and used English in the midst of this transition, belie this easy picture. They instead reveal the complexities of lives transformed in ways big and small by capitalism and its *lingua franca*. During the communist regime, Slovaks had looked forward to capitalism, equating it with freedom of choice, freedom of movement, and fully stocked stores. Capitalism when it came, of course, was somewhat more complicated than had been anticipated. Far from intuitive, capitalism in practice had to do some work to establish itself as the "common sense" of how to

operate in the world,<sup>5</sup> and some form of English had equally to establish itself as the common sense of how to communicate in global capitalism. English lessons in postcommunist Slovakia thus conveyed the rudimentary logic of capitalism: how to shop, how to drive, and most of all how to learn ever more English to keep your job. “Father must learn English,” one dialogue lesson in a Slovak-authored textbook proclaimed, in order to keep his job in the export division of his company. Quickly absorbing this and similar lessons, Slovaks began learning English en masse: They studied English while they were making breakfast, eating dinner, driving to work. Their children faced increasing English requirements in their schools. Teachers of Russian (communism’s first language), suddenly no longer in demand once the Soviet-backed requirement was abolished, were requalified to teach English in two-year courses at the state’s expense. Employers hired English teachers to instruct their entire staff, and people seeking better employment flocked to the new private language academies that had sprung up when the state monopoly on education expired. Albeit these new schools offered courses in many of the major languages of Western Europe, courses in English dominated and were sometimes more expensive. One school in 2003, for example, charged 8,200 Slovak crowns (then roughly 250 dollars) for forty-eight hours of business English, while charging only 3,000 crowns for fifty hours of business German; such price disparities were a quick lesson in English’s centrality to capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

These many lessons in English, however, did not teach deeper logics of capitalism, including the fact that the global knowledge economy’s reliance on information—finding it, peddling it, hiding it, distorting it—meant that English, fast becoming the ur-form of information, would always be manipulated and controlled by more powerful players in more powerful countries. English may have provided Slovaks a leg up; however, it also provided the terms through which they continued to be cast as “backward” in the development narrative, even as they joined the European Union and even as corporations of Western Europe, America, and Asia set up shop in Slovak towns where the labor force was educated and inexpensive. Slovaks were given a place in the global economy through English, but it was a sharply defined and decidedly second-class one.

Slovaks expressed their frustrations about their marginal place in the global economy in unofficial ways. A case in point: the 2004 article

“Tongue Surgery Is Necessary for Perfect English,” in the online version of Slovakia’s daily paper *Sme*, reported that some South Koreans have tongue surgery to improve their English pronunciation. The report sparked a lively discussion (in Slovak) on the daily’s message board, as Slovaks wondered what their own English would get them in the global economy. One reader wrote to another that he would do better to take up Chinese rather than continue to pursue English, arguing, “Your English pronunciation would require tongue surgery anyway, as you’re just a scum from the Eastern bloc. It’s just that they won’t tell you this openly because you’re a good henchman and workhorse for them.”<sup>7</sup>

This comment revealed capitalism’s unspoken (“they won’t tell you this”): entering the global economy was not about mastery of its putative terminology—English—but about negotiating the global order’s asymmetries on a daily basis. In May 2004, one month after this article about tongue surgery appeared, Slovakia joined a European Union still much divided as Slovaks faced labor restrictions in a majority of the more established member states; outside of Europe, they continued to be subject to visa restrictions when traveling to the United States, unlike their fellow European Union members, the French, the Germans, and the Swedes. Eastern European workers were to be courted by multinational corporations on their own soil because they could be employed at lower wages than Western workers yet scrutinized—if not completely rejected—for attempting to move beyond their borders. Although Slovaks had yearned for the freedom of movement that the end of communism would bring, it became increasingly clear that it would be much easier for them to walk down shopping mall corridors in Bratislava named “Fifth Avenue” and “Wall Street” than it would be to walk down the actual streets. No amount of English fluency would allow Slovaks to completely transcend the dual designation the global economy had assigned them (as the reader of the tongue surgery report bluntly put it), of “scum from the Eastern bloc” and “workhorse.” This most dispiriting of insights is one that did not hit Slovaks immediately with full force in 1989. Rather, it came to them as they acquired English and were thereby brought into the sweep of the world economy and its information networks. Even as the rise of the knowledge economy meant that opting out of English was not a possibility, the same economy dictated that English as *lingua franca* would

ever be out of their control; English would never “work” for them in the same way it “worked” for developed nations. The primary English lesson that Slovaks learned was that the language was as likely to reinforce their marginal status as it was to assure their success.

Although such is the big picture of English in Slovakia, not everyone inhabits that big picture in the same way. Slovakia’s attempt to demonstrate mass English proficiency inevitably breaks down into thousands of people learning English one by one. Each of these people is driven not only by global currents but also by local and even personal economies wherein intangibles like nostalgia, duty, and aesthetic preferences all express themselves. As I witnessed, English in Slovakia was refracted through people’s experiences and imaginings. For most I spoke with who grew up during the communist regime, English meant something to them before they even learned it, but depending on the associations that English conjured in their minds, they gravitated toward different forms of English, looked to English to accomplish different things in their lives. As their lives changed, so did the English that they sought. The stories of this book further show that personal experiences during the postcommunist period could alter the form of English people embraced or rejected.

Taken collectively, however, these stories do suggest a common denominator to people’s perceptions of English—that is, while English during the communist era was predominantly associated with freedom, afterward it was predominantly associated with money and influence. I want to be clear that English was associated with freedom during communism *not* because the language inherently carried that value or because England and America had succeeded in projecting that value. Slovaks associated English with freedom because under the communist regime the language was controlled and contained, rationed out to people in similar bondage. I believe that Slovaks felt a kinship with English during this period, one that led many of them to fight for English (though often unsuccessfully). After English became the lingua franca, the language that was unavoidable rather than the language that was limited, they would fight to mark a place for themselves in the world in English, often by appropriating it in artful ways. My interlocutors often repurposed different regional expressions and proverbs to describe their experience with English, but significantly they did not all reach for the same expression; various personal

desires and histories continued to animate English even at the moment of capitalist integration. Constantly under pressure to master more or different English to meet specific needs of the global information economy, Slovaks answered with their own language games. Puns, innuendo, black humor—such were the idioms and gestures giving life to English in the postcommunist era in Slovakia. These expressions signify that Slovaks understood very well that in the global economy it would matter more who was speaking English, not how well it was spoken.

#### THE ECONOMY OF ENGLISH

The Slovak experience has great implications for understanding both English as a lingua franca and the causes of persistent inequities in the post-Cold War global economy. English has frequently been likened to a form of currency, one that can help markets function best for all participants by serving as a neutral medium for exchange. Hence the 1998 call in *Business Communication Quarterly* for English teachers to develop “a kind of common currency for global knowledge production and exchange.” And hence the 2005 observation of a commentator in the *Financial Times* that “being a native speaker [of English] is like possessing a reserve currency.”<sup>8</sup> The currency analogy is given fullest breadth by linguist Robert Phillipson, who compares money and languages explicitly. Both, Phillipson argues, are systems of exchange and accounting as well as storehouses of values, whether those values are monetary or cultural.<sup>9</sup> However, such analogies fail to capture fully the complexities of English at work in the knowledge economy.

The global knowledge economy is driven not so much by cash moving things as by the generation and manipulation of information. Linguist David Crystal’s study of the rise of global English recognizes the centrality of English to this new economy. Crystal argues that American dominance of the growing banking sector after World War I raised English’s global profile because foreign investment was largely to be supported by American financial institutions. Making clear the link between the knowledge economy, credit, and the preeminence of English, Crystal explains: “‘Access to knowledge’ now became ‘access to knowledge about how to get financial backing.’ If the metaphor ‘money talks’ has any meaning at all,

those are the days in which it was shouting loudly—and the language in which it was shouting was English.”<sup>10</sup>

As Crystal suggests, knowledge has always been crucial to any kind of production. Economists tell us, however, that once an economy runs on investments and loans, equity and credit, knowledge becomes more centrally the object of production rather than a means to it. Economists Joseph E. Stiglitz and Bruce Greenwald explain that the granting of a loan, for example, entails the costly process of producing specific information about specific institutions or people. Likewise, to invest (with any hope of success) in a stock, one generally has to collect more specific information than the price of the share. As an industry emerges around knowledge production and circulation, only new information—or at least *seemingly* new information—sells, as old information is of little value to investors.<sup>11</sup>

All manufacturers attempt minor innovations (or at least the appearance of innovation) to their products to boost sales, of course, and all hide information critical to production to maintain their competitive edge. But the corporate scandals around the millennium—those that made Enron, MCI, and Martha Stewart front-page news—demonstrated the crucial place of information in the economy in that all were cases in which certain parties generated profit by ensuring they had the right information, while other people had erroneous or outdated information. All involved the hiding, distorting, or hoarding of information, resulting in what economists would call “information asymmetry.”<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the economy is also characterized by information asymmetry that does not cross the boundary of legality. Companies try not to disclose more than they must to investors or customers and are adept at manipulating language to manage the information in mandatory disclosures.<sup>13</sup> Information asymmetry is, as Stiglitz argues, business as usual in capitalism.

The concept of information asymmetry is, I offer, a more apt economic metaphor than currency to understand the significance of English to today’s global economy. Consider again the reports from *Barron’s* and the *Economist* about Slovakia. These press accounts collectively form a discourse in the global lingua franca of English that compares Slovakia to other emerging markets for an audience of investors. Buying *Barron’s*, the *Economist*, or the *New York Times*, the English speaking investor is hop-

ing to have purchased the good news: when will Slovakia *become* Ireland, and how can I find out before others? With this investor-reader in mind, the *Barron's* article ends with a list of funds that will allow one to take advantage of Slovakia's surge. The information in these press reports is in essence the commodity of the new economy, an economy in which English has become virtually unavoidable.<sup>14</sup>

Because English has become so central to participation in the global marketplace, people in newly capitalist countries have had little choice but to throw themselves into learning it; as a result, an industry emerged to accommodate their new "need." The boom in English instruction in Slovakia accordingly took on the particular contours of the rapidly shifting knowledge economy, generating courses in different forms of English to fit the newest economic trends. To stay marketable in the growing field of competitors, English continually had to be "remade." Niche versions of English proliferated: courses entitled "English for Mechanical Engineers" and "English for Au Pairs" took their place next to generic business English courses, promising a quick path to the jobs as auto engineers and domestics for which Slovaks had been pegged. It didn't matter that Slovak women had been successfully operating as au pairs in Western European countries for years before these courses appeared (indeed, the rationale au pair agencies historically used to attract young women was that the experience itself would improve their language skills). Suddenly, there was a special English to be learned, a credential that could be attained to give someone a boost in the market. People had to weigh what brand of English to learn (or teach) and had to pursue English as a shifting target. Learning English became, as one of my interlocutors put it, a "never-ending story." Much like buying the "right" stock, buying into English entailed risk and dependence, often on questionable forms of knowledge generated by interested parties.

If, as the Enrons of the world have shown us, money is to be made from keeping information as asymmetrical as possible, in a knowledge economy in which English is the lingua franca, money is to be made by making communication in English as asymmetrical—as fraught with distortions and complications—as possible. Misunderstandings are certainly an unavoidable feature of communication, but another feature of communication is that those with more money and influence have the lux-



ury of being misunderstood while those with less do not.<sup>15</sup> Here is where Slovaks occupied the downside of routine acts of communication in the global lingua franca. Each “misunderstanding” in English generally bore consequences for them in terms of lost jobs, lost contacts, lost dignity, or diminished political clout, particularly as it reinforced their position as second-class citizens of the global order and, simultaneously, the preeminent value of some elusive English. Despite ever more specialized English knowledge, ever more certification, Slovakia’s position as “developing” (with all the perpetuity of process that the suffix *-ing* suggests) continually put Slovaks in a disadvantaged position in their communications with any of the wealthier and more established countries of the West.

This position was one that the Slovaks I spoke with in 2003 were finding burdensome. I frequently heard variations of the question, “What does the West want from us?” Of course, the one thing that had remained clear throughout is that the countries of the West wanted to maintain their economic advantages in the global economy; they were eager for emerging markets in which to invest but less keen on having those markets turn into genuine competition. Slovaks in the international business realm were particularly aware that Slovakia’s growth threatened “old” EU member states (such as France and Germany) that were experiencing their own political and economic woes. Several of the Slovaks I met remarked on the sometimes lackluster economic performance of their Western neighbors and worried that the economic mandates issued from the offices of the EU for new member states were primarily designed to protect the West from losing investment and jobs to the East. Many Slovaks felt that the EU’s restrictions seemed incompatible with capitalism’s official orthodoxy of liberalism; the EU’s bureaucracy seemed contrary to the “common sense” of capitalism as they understood it and more in keeping with communism’s myriad and arbitrary restrictions. To them, success in capitalism should involve simply good ideas and the grit to make them work. They wondered if the East shouldn’t be teaching the West about capitalism instead of the other way around. They wondered if in the end the world they were joining would be greatly different from the world they thought they had left.

The economics of English revealed through the Slovak situation suggest that the lingua franca is language as battlefield; it is the terrain upon which players in the global information economy grapple for property, re-

spectability, and political voice. That English had become this terrain was a circumstance about which Slovaks repeatedly voiced ambivalence. Their acknowledgment that English had made it to the top of the linguistic pile was frequently followed by a qualification: “for better or worse,” “fortunately or unfortunately,” “unfortunately or thank God.”

Ethnography, it has been observed, allows us a view from the ground of the paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguities of change in postcommunist states.<sup>16</sup> It presents this “ground” through the filter of the ethnographer’s necessarily limited vision, of course—in this case, my perception as a foreigner to Slovakia, an American with a history of my own engagements with the English industry in the country, which I discuss below. To my mind, the greatest paradox I encountered is that when people invest in English, they do so with some hope but by no means complete faith in the development narrative. This mixture of hope and doubt is first introduced here through the conjunction of a few stories drawn from my observations, interviews, and personal experiences. These stories trouble the narrative of English’s uncomplicated role in global progress suggested by *Barron’s* and similar reports.

#### A TALE OF TWO THANK YOU’S

I first taught English in Slovakia in 1992. Looking for a summer break from graduate school, a friend and I sought a location where our services would be in demand but where we could also afford to live. Through letter correspondence, we were hired by the director of a new private summer program in Bratislava for high school students. The director asked us to bring all our teaching materials, because none existed for the new brand of English he was selling: colloquial and idiomatic American English language and culture. We set off with lesson plans designed around baseball, tongue twisters, American folk songs, and the Fourth of July.

Although the course had the flavor of a cultural exchange, a “thank you” letter I received at the course’s end outlined Slovakia’s great expectations for development and lay bare the stakes of our students’ labors. The letter of July 14, 1992, praised my “highly competitive teaching performance” and described my participation as a “meritful deed,” which had contributed to “breaking the recent artificial barrier” and also aided “our people’s gradual return to the free world where we hope to thrive not only

in economics, but in international human relations in the foreseeable future.” It closed, “Dear American friend, we do hope to meet you some day again.”

It would be difficult to imagine any American working today in Slovakia’s busy capital city so lauded. However, when I taught this summer course, I was the first American many of my students had met. I was employed specifically because I was considered a “native” speaker of American English, so the students could hear the “real thing.” Before 1989, students had had little opportunity to converse with English or American citizens and very little opportunity to be taught by them.<sup>17</sup> Yet in 1992, each of my students had taken the step of paying for extra English courses to learn distinctly American conversational English, even though their opportunities to use the idioms we proffered might be rare.

We returned to teach the summer course again in 1994. In the years since our first visit, Slovakia had achieved independent statehood, and we were no longer notable as arbiters of American culture or conversational English. By the 1994–95 school year, approximately 80 percent of pupils in secondary schools in Slovakia were learning English, often from British or American nationals sent by the Peace Corps, Education for Democracy, or another Western agency.<sup>18</sup> Our new students were approaching us with the lyrics of current American songs, asking us what they meant. In 1992, we had brought the script of a play for them to perform; in 1994, they chose to write an episode based on the American series *The Streets of San Francisco*, which was at that time in heavy rotation on one of the local television networks.

I returned again to Slovakia in 2003 to investigate the effects of the global English education boom, of which I had been just one small part. Slovakia, in the meantime, had become a classic case of “macroacquisition,” which defines a group’s effort to acquire a language.<sup>19</sup> The dictates of the global economy meant that the English learning environment I had stepped into in the early 1990s was gone. English was no longer a perk; it had become an imperative. No one was selling lessons in baseball, tongue twisters, and the Fourth of July. Instead, I was asked by the mechanical engineering faculty at a technical university to teach a class on the modern cover letter and CV—genres that had altered radically when the fall of the Soviet regime meant competition for jobs.

Students had changed a great deal as well in the near decade since I had last visited, having had in some cases firsthand experiences of living abroad. At the end of my lesson on CVs and cover letters (which included some discussion of what was meant by volunteer experience—a construct that the class puzzled over at some length, as the idea of work that was both unpaid and authorized didn't translate very well), a student who had spent a year of high school in California asked, "What about thank you letters?" I asked, "What about them?" He responded, "You should tell them about them." This student stood out from many of his peers, looking from his hairstyle to his manner of dress as if he should have been in my classroom in America.<sup>20</sup> Yet his speaking for his peers, and his belief that there was some knowledge about the workings of capitalism encoded in English that they desperately needed to have, suggested that a reading of this student as merely "Westernized" would be glib, unless being "Westernized" entails an acute sense of the deficits of being regarded in business settings as "Eastern European." His comment demonstrated the notion that "marketing oneself is marketing the nation," a point made by Jonathan Larson in his study of the CV in Slovakia. Larson found that the CV had become such a crucial genre for Slovaks to learn because it contributed to an image of Slovakia as "translatable, and ultimately worthy of trust in investment."<sup>21</sup> The student I encountered knew that Slovaks, represented through the CV, would not easily "translate" into the global economy, or into English, on the same terms as Western students. They would have to go the extra mile to earn trust. He hoped the CV, plus the postinterview thank you letter, might give his classmates an edge to confront the derision they were likely to face.

#### JOZEF AND THE "SO-CALLED REVOLUTION"

The above incidents reveal that in postcommunist Slovakia, the understanding of what English "counts" changed greatly in the space of about a decade. A final story of English and the market provides an even sharper view of how Slovaks invested in English to learn the tricks of the global trade, only to find out that one of those tricks was that English was never enough.

Jozef invested great amounts of time in English (he had virtually no money to invest) in his hope against hope that he could win a job as a

European Union administrator for Slovakia. Having heard about my research through a friend on the faculty of the technical university hosting me, he asked me to interview him so he could practice for the oral portion of the upcoming exam required of all applicants for EU administrator positions. To prepare for the written portion of the exam, Jozef sat daily for weeks at the library's Internet stations—from morning until four in the afternoon—reading English texts on the Web site of the EU's personnel selection office. Despite these efforts, he was nevertheless perplexed by the impending exam: what the EU might be looking for he had no idea, but he knew that knowledge of English would be instrumental to the process of getting a job, as the test had to be taken in one of the EU's official languages—there were eleven at that point—and English was the one that he knew best.

Jozef, who had rarely traveled outside of Slovakia, considered himself the longest of shots for an administrator position. A self-described “freelancer,” Jozef had some years back been let go—unjustly, he felt—from his lecturing post at an art university in Bratislava, an event that precipitated his bid for EU employment. Jozef's motivations for applying for the job were primarily political rather than economic (even though the position of EU administrator paid an astronomical salary—the lowest available positions paid more than 2,000 euro a month—in comparison to the less than 400 euro a month Slovak lecturers at universities earned).<sup>22</sup> His pursuit of English was driven by the desire to gain the political voice he felt he had been denied all his life, even into the present; his interview provided a catalog of pre- and postrevolution suppressions.

A child of the Cold War and Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia, Jozef was born in 1954 in historic Banská Štiavnica in the Slovak mountains, site of the first European technical college. In high school a few years after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Jozef remembers a day when he and his classmates were directed by the teacher to rip from their textbooks a story by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, by then a denounced dissident. He studied English in high school from 1970 until 1974, learning vocabulary and the fundamentals of grammar, as well as old English folk songs including “John Brown's Body” and “My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean.” He considered this training a mere “formality.” Echoing so many others I spoke with, he laid the blame for the paucity of “active English”

instruction available to him on the influence of the communist regime: “There was no motivation or need for an active and regular English because there was no possibility to travel abroad, especially to the West, especially for people who were not involved in any communist power structures.” Nonetheless, in college and following, Jozef discovered his own need for English as he became consumed with a question: “What is art?” A few books related to his specialty were available in the university library in English, and he sought them out. He described his relationship to English as “ad hoc . . . from 1974 until the so-called revolution. Only after the so-called revolution I tried to handle with English more regularly and more systematically.”

The phrase “so-called revolution” struck me from the very first time Jozef used it in the interview. Jozef had earlier referred to the “so-called grammar school” he had attended, so initially I thought he used the qualifier “so-called” to mark a foreign expression or to indicate a proper noun, as did many Slovaks.<sup>23</sup> However, “so-called revolution” came up with startling consistency. He continued: “After the so-called revolution, I worked as an assistant professor at the Academy of Arts at the department for film and television theory at film faculty.” I wanted to ask about his consistent use of the phrase “so-called revolution,” but I didn’t want to interrupt. When I broached the question of why he was taking the EU administrator test, however, it came back again: “Perhaps I could try to explain my way, how I could get from history and philosophy of art to European administration, because I think it might seem a little different, a little far from each other and a little inconsistent at the first view. But it’s a longer story. Of course the most intrinsic issue of my interest is and remains the theory and philosophy of art. . . . As I tried to explain to people what art is, similarly I desired to teach, but it wasn’t possible in the communist time because I had some problems with the communists and with the ideologies, but after *so-called revolution*, some revolutionary students invited me to teach at that academy of art.” At this point, Jozef believed he could really make some changes to pedagogy as usual in the art academy. Having experienced very little choice of subjects in his schooling, Jozef was determined that the “so-called revolution” called for a revision of the curriculum so that students could assemble their own course of study. He was blocked, however, in the full execution of his plans by what he

described as a “communist mafia and pack”: “I succeeded to put such a [curricular] system at our department of film and television theory, but after several years when the communists saw that they have no need to be afraid and nothing will happen with them, there were more and more conflicts between our department of film and television theory and the other departments . . . because every department was occupied by a communist mafia and pack.”

At this point in the interview, I was becoming more and more certain that the use of “so-called” as a qualifier for “revolution” was ironic. I interrupted what had been so far an uninterrupted narrative:

ME: You said a number of times the “so-called revolution.” Now when we say “so-called” we mean that we don’t think, for example, that there was a revolution. Is that what you meant?

JOZEF: Yes, yes, just so.

ME: That nothing has changed.

JOZEF: Nothing has changed, in fact.

As Jozef saw it, the same “pack” of communists that kept him from teaching before 1989 was still in power, laying roadblocks to any revision of the curriculum that would give students freedom of choice. After six years at the academy, his appointment was not renewed. Jozef looked for other ways to pursue educational reform, from the top rather than from the bottom. He worked for several years in a division of the Slovak Ministry of Education, where he tried to advance legislation for educational reform but found himself blocked once again: “No one has the interest to change. The other way around. They want only to keep the structures.” His experience led him to consider what legislation might be advanced on the European level; thus he submitted the application to become a European Union administrator. He was concerned, though, that even if he passed the written test, including the multiple choice portion, he would be faced with an interview for which he felt completely unprepared. Having had few opportunities for what he called “active” use of English, he was terrified at the prospect of an interview. Indeed, I later realized, looking back over his interview, that he had shifted every question of mine back to the narrative of his move toward the EU, practicing for the upcoming interview he imagined with EU officials.

I met with Jozef a few times after our initial interview. He admitted that speaking with me for nearly two hours in English had been difficult and exhausting; it had taken him a full day in bed to recover from it. “It was something like a brain fever,” he explained. We met again after the written portion of the EU administrator test itself, and he showed me a copy of the exam. The full-day written exam had apparently been even more torturous than his interview with me, requiring days of recovery. When it turned out that he had passed the multiple choice portion of the exam, he was jubilant. This meant that the test committee would read the essay he had written in English about his ideas for changing the European Union’s approach to education. He was excited that he was one step further along in the application process, leaving only the interview (interviews would be conducted with only fifty of the original one thousand-plus applicants).

Including Jozef, I had spoken with or extensively interviewed five people who had registered to take the administrator examination for the EU. Four of them (all university lecturers like Jozef) hadn’t studied and didn’t expect to get past the multiple choice portion; indeed, they did not. Of all five, only Jozef’s essay would be read. Some days before the exam, he sent me a draft of what he planned to write, a treatise on the failings of the circulation of knowledge in the global economy. His essay describes education in Slovakia as a monopoly, a “distortion of the open and free competition market” that “reminds of the conviction of the communists they are the extra wise ‘people of the extra stamp’ who can and must ‘scientifically manage’ and ‘plan’ all the production and decide about all the qualities, values, and prices and all the needs of the consumers and people.” In other words, he was equating communism’s centrally planned economy and its inherent hypocrisies with the EU’s treatment of education in the knowledge economy. He charged that the European Union, despite its embrace of open and free competition, and despite its embrace of the “knowledge-based economy,” seemed “unconcerned” with addressing the monopoly in the area of knowledge production—it only seemed concerned with the old commodities: “meat and grain, steel and coal.”

Jozef’s essay did not win him an interview for the position of EU administrator, perhaps unsurprisingly, as the essay boldly charges that the capitalism practiced by the EU is not free-market or liberal enough but is



startlingly rather like the communism he had left not far enough behind. He felt that if the EU really took a knowledge-based economy seriously, students should have a choice of subjects to learn, just as they had a choice of products to buy. Jozef here was taking the logic of capitalism—its emphasis on choice and on the market as the ideal instrument for guaranteeing that choice—on its face terms. He saw such logic operating selectively in the West's treatment of Slovakia, writing that the allure the East held for the West was simply based on the East's cheap labor that the West could use.

I got the impression after I read the essay that Jozef didn't so much care whether or not it would get him the job; when he gave me the draft, he told me that regardless of the question, he would write that particular essay, imagining that the topics given would be broad enough to allow for it. After I returned to the United States, my sense of Jozef's intent was verified in an email he wrote, one year after I asked him how the test had turned out—when (as he put it) he felt himself at last ready to talk about it without anger. He reflected on the essay that ended his prospects with the EU: "I could not do it in any other way. For me, it was not a matter of 'getting job,' but it was a matter of trying to put certain 'reformist' ideas about education through with the help of EU—the 'reformist' ideas I cannot put through in Slovakia. But, when I see the European clerks are not interested in these 'my' ideas, the job of the 'European administrator' is apparently not the good way to try it and apparently not the good job for me." Recall that Jozef's initial excitement about the prospect of getting the position had been tinged with fatalism. He didn't think himself likely to be selected ultimately, but further, he worried that even should he make it to the EU, his previous experiences with bureaucratic regimes would be repeated on the supranational governmental level. He said in one of our discussions prior to the exam: "I hope that Europe can help us [to liberalize education], but perhaps I am very naive. . . . Perhaps also the European administration is also only a big bureaucratic mill where I would be only a very little wheel, but what I can do except to hope and to look for any possibilities?" He didn't think he was alone in his pessimism, and my interviews with Slovaks suggested that in fact he was not; for many I spoke with, whose experiences follow in the pages of this book, capitalism in practice seemed to have triumphed over communism only by incorpo-

rating communism's failings of bureaucracy and cronyism. Rather than serving as a path out of this trap, English had become "the extra stamp," another bureaucratic hurdle to ensure that vital information would remain fully available only to a select well-placed few. Jozef remarked of the general ennui greeting the fourteenth anniversary of the "so-called revolution" in Slovakia, "When even I, an anti-communist, am disillusioned, imagine the normal person."

#### ENGLISH HAS NO "HUMAN FACE"

At base this book is about hope—mentioned twice in the letter written to me by my employer in 1992, several times in my interviews with Jozef, continually in my research with Slovaks learning and using English. Hope, while intangible, is not inconsequential. Hope is a necessary precondition (along with information and resources) that allows people to make investments that in turn affect economies.<sup>24</sup> The hope that Jozef and my employer described reflected the great expectations that accompanied the country's journey out from under the communist regime and how "buying into English" in ways both material and psychological was central in meeting and too often disappointing those expectations.

Perhaps in recognition of the hope displayed by people in economically disadvantaged countries, organizations such as the World Bank and the UN, corporations such as Novartis, and world leaders including former President Bill Clinton have called for "globalization with a human face."<sup>25</sup> This phrase has become the rallying cry for those seeking to ensure that the needs of individuals throughout the world are considered in a process that is too often dominated by discussions about profits. To the extent that efforts to reform global capitalism lead to greater transparency of corporate and government activities, they can only be applauded. But appeals to humanness alone are unlikely to persuade multinational corporations, as the main agents of global capitalism, to act more ethically. Banks are, after all, in the business of trying to get to know the "human" side of their borrowers so they can gain more information about them and thereby assess their risks with greater accuracy.<sup>26</sup> In other words, emphasizing the "human" side of economics does not necessarily elicit altruistic urges to curb predatory capitalism, because such "human" accounts pro-

vide far more information on which to potentially capitalize than do the numbers alone.

There is a further problem with the phrase “globalization with a human face” that is particular to Slovakia: the notion of having an economic system with a “human face” cannot help but invoke Alexander Dubček’s—the president of Czechoslovakia (and a Slovak)—coining of the phrase “socialism with a human face” to describe his attempt to ease political and cultural restrictions in the late 1960s. What followed was a disaster—the Soviet occupation of 1968—whose scope has touched every Slovak alive. The aim of this book is to appreciate the ambiguities that result from the collision of global economics, national history, and personal desires, *not* to put a human face on the ascendancy of English (one wonders which face would do) but to note that more than the equitable distribution of English is needed to address global inequities.

That the phrase “with a human face” attaches itself so easily to the notion of globalization, however, suggests the degree to which discussions of globalization (and I would include here discussions of global English) have emanated from a sensibility that does not take into account the histories of postcommunist nations. Much of the scholarly work on the spread of English has been concerned with defining the effects of linguistic imperialism related to British and American colonial and neocolonial activity.<sup>27</sup> What I offer here is a look at English from the other side of the Cold War, one that examines first the effects of Soviet imperialism on English and English language learners before considering the impact of the current forces of globalization.

#### SOME WORDS ON METHOD

This project developed over a considerable length of time, beginning with notes on my teaching from the early 1990s—written at that time without the certainty that they would ever be more than notes—and moving toward a more structured ethnographic study. At the center of this effort are twenty-five extensive semistructured interviews, one to two hours in length, that I conducted primarily with Slovaks who knew English but also with key figures in the English industry in Slovakia, including foreign teachers, journalists, and textbook authors.<sup>28</sup> These interviews were some-

times discrete encounters nested within longer-term relationships with former students, with colleagues with whom I worked in 2003, but also notably with friendship networks centered around two couples.

I stopped at twenty-five extensive interviews not because it was a goal I had originally set myself but because while details of individuals' experiences varied, the general contours of English in Slovakia had emerged and, as the interviews went on, did not alter greatly. I suspect, however, that had I interviewed ethnic Romany citizens of Slovakia, pensioners who didn't speak English, or ethnic Hungarians, I might have seen a different side of English's relationship to economic enfranchisement, one complicated by the social and economic marginalization of these groups.

In addition to the extensive interviews, the data that comprise this book emerged from daily observations, shorter conversations, and archival research. I consulted numerous Slovaks, both English speaking and not with specific questions—for example, about politics during the communist regime, the recent reform of the secondary school graduation exam, using English on the job, or why they had never learned English at all. I visited schools in different cities in Slovakia to observe English instruction in the classroom. I took field notes on the uses of English in public places, businesses, and the press.

A large part of the research for this book involved reviewing textbooks used in Slovakia for the teaching and learning of English. I wanted to get a sense of how these textual materials had changed over time, particularly from communism to postcommunism. Samples of newer textbooks were readily available: by 2003, most bookstores in Bratislava boasted a substantial inventory. Although I did not buy all of them (that would have entailed acquiring whole shelves of books), I took care to purchase those that my interlocutors mentioned using, those that I saw in use in schools or in homes, and those invoked at a meeting I attended of teachers and administrators engaged in rewriting the national secondary school graduation exam in English (the subject of chapter 4). Older textbooks, those that were published before 1989, were not available for sale, at least not in their original and unrevised editions. I asked those interlocutors who had learned English before 1989 to show me their textbooks, if they still had them (most did not); I found more textbooks at Slovakia's Pedagogical Library in Bratislava. Because the textbooks I reviewed attest to general

shifts in the way English was taught pre- and post-1989, I have included excerpts from them as illustrations in the following chapters. In chapter 1, which discusses the experience of those people who learned English during the communist regime, illustrations are given from the pre-1989 textbooks. In chapter 3, which looks at English language and use at the moment of capitalist integrations, illustrations from post-1989 textbooks are provided. The reader may note that these illustrations sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly comment on the profile under discussion in the section in which they appear. I invite readers to draw their own connections between the particularities of the oral reports of learning English and the peculiar expressions and preoccupations of textbooks of the time.

One limitation on the research for this book was that imposed by my limited knowledge of the Slovak language, which includes reading ability and the ability to participate in routine conversation but falls far short of fluency. Where I conducted my own translations of texts appearing here, I checked the meaning with at least one other bilingual Slovak and English speaker. For longer documents and those involving more colloquial Slovak expressions (e.g., those used in the posts to the message board recorded in the introduction), I employed a Slovak-English translation service.

All extensive interviews were conducted in English, though occasionally short observations were made in Slovak that I later translated. Since the goal of my research was to examine the impact of English on people's lives, I used the ability to participate in an interview in English as the qualification for the interview itself. Conducting interviews entirely in English on the one hand constrained the range of expression of my interviewees. On the other hand, my own language deficiencies allowed for a mobilization of their in-progress English speaking subjectivities, sometimes as dry runs for encounters that the new world would demand (as with Jozef, the EU administrator aspirant), sometimes as flights of nostalgia into encounters with English for which the new world no longer provided much space. As many indicated, the English required in the interview with a "native" speaker provided an occasion to try out expressions long left behind in their present—to them, cramped—uses of English.

Ethnography is partial, consisting of stories delivered with all the exaggerations and peculiarities of the individual account and all the ethnog-

rapher's perceptual limitations. Where the accounts I collected differ from those of another source, I have noted this. However, ethnography, particularly one focusing on language, is more about the fact that experiences of reality and the expressions of those experiences differ than it is about uncovering a universal truth. My interlocutors conveyed their stories of English in their own Englishes. The words they chose reflected the Englishes they had learned and that they, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and ambivalence, embraced. Beyond clarifying meaning where necessary, I did not attempt to ascertain the "correct" form of their English speech, nor did I presume what they "actually" might have meant in Slovak. Their expressions, in other words, have no fixed, historically transcendent translation either into an imagined standard English or into an imagined standard Slovak. Linguistic fixity is the promise the global economy makes but never fulfills, which is ultimately the point of this book.