

Response 2

Transdisciplinary applied linguistics: Themes of perspectivity and transcendence

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In this response I will focus on themes in the special issue that resonate particularly with my experience of collaborative AL research with people involved in various professions, mainly in healthcare. The themes concern perspectivity and transcendence, and more specifically what it could mean to transcend perspectives.

In elaborating these thoughts, I first sketch the understanding of ‘perspective’ that I brought to the special issue, then trace the themes of perspectivity and transcendence through the papers while reflecting on connections to the particular perspective that I bring.

I am thinking by perspective of what, for example, Nagel (1986) associated with “the fundamental challenge that faces every creature with an impulse and capacity to transcend its particular point of view” (3), where “we know there’s something there, something perspectival, even if we don’t know what it is or even how to think about it” (21). According to Nagel, influential responses to this challenge to transcend particular perspectives have tended to reflect a “centreless conception of the world” (57) grounded in “views from nowhere”, ways of thinking which in seeking to escape the bounds of particular human experience risk losing the capacity to warrant claims about it. While Nagel’s own perspective on this challenge is framed in terms drawn from analytic philosophy, for Gadamer (2004) the challenge, interpreted from a hermeneutic perspective, points towards the potential for a “fusion of horizons” among people in which “understanding is to be thought of as less a subjective act than as participating in an event or tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated” (p. 291). And Sarangi and Candlin (2001, p. 379) identify the accomplishing of a “mutuality of perspectives” as

the main methodological problematic that pervades both social theoretical and sociolinguistic studies of social life [involving] questions of what is knowable from various positions and through various metalanguages, and who makes the assessment of 'good recognition' and 'sameness of judgement'.

The challenge of transcending perspectives is here three-fold: haunted by the risk of falling into a "centreless conception of the world", potentially secured through and grounded in mutually interpretive participation, and raising questions around knowledge, authority, positionality, language, value and judgement.

Turning to the special issue, the challenge of transcending perspectives is represented through these and related terms, such as lenses, frames and boundaries, and transgressing, superseding, bridging and overcoming. For example, in transdisciplinarity (TD) as the transgressing of disciplinary boundaries, "multiple disciplines can provide different lenses through which to understand the same phenomena and to build new understandings of the object of interest" (Liddicoat, this volume). TD here makes use of disciplinary perspectives while simultaneously interrogating their limits (Byrd Clark, 2016). The superseding of the perspectives provided by disciplines is captured by the canonical quote from Halliday in which "'inter-' or 'multidisciplinary'... imply that one still retains the disciplines as the locus of intellectual activity... the real alternative is to supersede them, creating new forms of activity which are thematic rather than disciplinary in their orientation" (2001, p. 176), a theme being "defined not by content but by aspect, perspective or point of view" (176). The working out of this agenda includes scrutinizing and overcoming the concept of academic disciplines, their historical, cultural, and political differences (Pennycook, this volume), and their "methodological monolingualism", their epistemes and epistemologies, theories, methodologies, and discourses (Gramling, 2016, p. 529; Warner, this volume). In focusing on themes, not disciplines, TD does not neglect the fact that there are disciplines in academia, but it aims at overcoming their power, their boundaries, and their hegemony of exclusionary predominant epistemes (Foucault, 1966) and paradigms (Kuhn, 1970) that bring "the possible benefits of fixity, assurity, annual conferences and manageable course reading lists' but 'constrain the possibilities of intellectual work'" (Pennycook, this volume).

In tracing this theme through the particular papers, I centre those by Perrin and Whitehouse as these are closest to my experience.

Perrin and Whitehouse each take as their starting points for accomplishing the transcendence of disciplinary perspectives a theme of practical relevance to their participants. Both draw on transdisciplinary action research (TDA) with an ethnographic orientation, involving the integration of multiple methodological perspectives, brought into focus through reflexive and iterative processes of ongoing dialogue with the participants. The aim here and methodological entry

point is for “researchers and practitioners to jointly develop sustainable solutions to complex practical problems” (Perrin, this volume). In the examples that Perrin provides from the domains of education, finance, translation, and journalism, and in Whitehouse’s example of working with financial analysts, it is through this ongoing, mutually reflective and collaborative involvement that warrants emerge for the integration of the different perspectives and at their intersections the drawing of findings. And this mutual interpretation in the generation of warrants points away from the spectre of Nagel’s “centreless world” towards Gadamer’s sense of understanding grounded in mutually interpretive participation involving the constant mediation of past and present. And in these collaborations, we see the connecting of language and epistemology, what Liddicoat (this volume) identifies – here pertinent within a language as well as between languages – as the “need to engage not only with epistemologies of own linguistic and epistemological tradition; transdisciplinarity must have room for other epistemological systems, developed and communicated through a range of languages”. The upshot is that, as the Perrin and Whitehouse studies highlight, to accomplish “sustainable solutions” research of this kind must involve researchers and researched in mutual reinterpretation of their own and each other’s practices, understandings and language, in effect this requires the ongoing re-creation of a bespoke ecology. As Candlin put it

For the participants... workplace discourse is a process; for the analyst it is inevitably a product, and, so achieving a reciprocity of perspectives is not only a matter of mutualising view and stance, it is also a matter of (re)vitalising what is necessarily an ecology. (Candlin, 2002, p. 5)

As Riazi and Candlin (2014, p. 138) explain, and again in line with the Perrin and Whitehouse studies, achieving this reciprocity of perspectives requires the “translation of ontological and epistemological perspectives into tangible conceptual frameworks, including both methods and techniques of data collection and analysis”. Accomplishing this translation is especially complex when a collaboration transcends disciplines and professional boundaries in which different ways of seeing and knowing generate “interpretive variability” (Sarangi, 2015, p. 9), where tensions and conflict may arise and commitment to a shared focus is essential. The challenge is highlighted by Whitehouse, observing that “including all the relevant stakeholders means raising the research questions and developing the solutions from complementary and often contradictory perspectives. Therefore, a central and re-iterated question in TDA processes is: Who’s question, who’s problem is dealt with by whom?”

To capture what is involved in and required of such a grouping, Sarangi (2015) has proposed the notion of “community of interest’ which acknowledges differences in ontologies and epistemologies across given communities of practice/

discourse/interpretation, but privileges the mutual interest in the phenomena under study” (pp. 5–6). The notion of privileging of course raises the question of who does the privileging, and the questions posed around achieving ‘mutuality of perspectives’ by Candlin and Sarangi above, and in doing so brings into sharp relief questions concerning the already established disciplinary relations involved. Taking up the positioning of the individual within such complex ecologies, Liddicoat (this volume) highlights that “working with and across epistemological traditions is ultimately a political act in that it is an engagement with power structures that exist within epistemologies, academic cultures and global flows of knowledge”.

And Warner (this volume), adjusting the focus from the epistemological to the lived, examines positioning as lived experience from the perspectives of people trying to navigate the positions available to them when TD is imposed in “an at times fraught relationship of institutional necessity and historical contention”. Here, in the context of “two-tiered configuration” language departments, dividing the study of language and the study of literature into two programmatically and hierarchically separate endeavours, the spectre of Nagel’s “centreless world” comes into view as the prospect of disciplinary eviction following the “institutional forced marriage of language and literature” (Warner, this volume). As with the Perrin and Whitehouse studies, and again bringing to mind Gadamer’s emphasis on understanding as emerging through mutually interpretive participation, there is here the securing of interpretive warrants through mutually reflective and iterative involvement with participants within a “community of interest” (Sarangi, 2015), in this case invoking “my own experiences as a peer and participant in this collective”.

Then, in Pennycook’s paper, the challenge of transcending perspectives is turned back on itself. Recalling the increasingly chimerical boundaries of the “nation state” in a world of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), Pennycook highlights the contingency, porosity and fluidity of AL, arguing that transcending perspectives here in effect requires letting go of an institutionalised conception of AL as defined by disciplinary boundaries, and “engaging in transdisciplinary collaboration [...] as a field of practices dynamically assembling epistemes to address language-related concerns and questions”. This involves reaching beyond the concept of academic disciplines, in this sense de-institutionalising AL, with the potential for “opening up to and learning to listen to a much wider domain or people who can not only act as ‘linguistic informants’ and ‘research subjects’ but who can also become part of knowledge building”. The implication is for researchers who are “culturally grounded, political engaged, continuously self-reflexive, and capable of adopting multiple perspectives on data”.

Reflecting on this final paper as a concluding, lingering, note, I find the vision of TD perplexing. It is true to my experience of the process of collaborating with

practitioners in healthcare, mainly in psychiatry and aged care, on “language-related concerns and questions” (Beckwith & Crichton, 2014; Crichton & O’Neill, 2016; Galletly & Crichton, 2011). The process has typically evolved less as a meeting of disciplinary representatives than a tentative, reflexive and unfinalisable experiment with meanings in a collective search for shared perspectives on the question at hand. This search exemplifies the impulse to find Nagel’s (1986) inchoate ‘something there’, in which capacities identified by Pennycook come to the fore. At the same time, the starting point and framing of such collaborations seems premised on assumptions among the participants about the potential for the mutual relevance of expertise associated with membership of different disciplines, their respective “professional visions” (Goodwin, 1994). Without these assumptions as reference points, or some such aggregated designation of the different capacities of those involved, I am unsure how collaborations of this kind would, or rather could, transpire, for example around the warrants for addressing questions of “good recognition” and “sameness of judgement”.

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