

Language, culture and society

Editorial – issue 1, 2019

We write this editorial at a time when inequality has become a major concern for a variety of social actors and institutions in a range of social domains. Far from being new, contemporary public debates about what is often framed as “the widening of the gap between the poor and the rich” seem to us more like an instantiation of larger dynamics of differentiation and unequal distribution of wealth that are deeply rooted in historical processes. But the scale and intensity in which these are perceived today make it (even more) difficult to ignore, and scholarly work engaging with these issues in the social sciences and humanities via greater focus on political economy can attest to this.

Indeed, the intensification of this line of work in the language disciplines has shed important light on the daily situated (re)making of such dynamics and processes as well as on the lived experiences that come with them. Yet, heightened attention to these aspects has also paved the way for new theoretical, epistemological and teleological questions to emerge: How do we channel current anxieties to produce research that does not merely aim to document what we think we know is happening but instead to challenge our very assumptions of how language gets entrenched with regimes of power, difference and change? What set of conceptual frameworks and analytical perspectives are there for us to capture the reification of structures of inequality without preventing us from imagining radical forms of hope and alternative futures?

These are some of the preoccupations that drive our attention to the intersections of language, culture and society. As a team heavily committed to the idea of setting up a new journal, we have from the start worked with *boldness* as a key principle guiding our vision for the language disciplines. Fully aware of the controversies around the notion of ‘culture’, we propose to address it as a terrain of struggle, one in which disciplinary knowledge about social structure, practice and meaning is seen as highly contested. In so doing, we draw on anthropological traditions that have called for a closer examination of the very historical conditions under which such disciplinary knowledge has been produced, circulated and taken up across space and time. This sensitivity, we are reminded, requires tracing back the ways in which the kind of conceptual work underpinning our research may have enabled specific historical projects of colonization and thus provided the

conditions for the forms of dispossession and unequal distribution of resources upon which our activities still rely nowadays (including the epistemic ones).

Most importantly, approaching culture as a terrain of struggle pushes us to engage more decisively with those whose work has shown that cultural forms and modes of analysis have in many occasions been invoked to describe and generate difference, which in turn may have structured possibilities, as well as produced colonial subjects, histories, and politics. Writing about the implications that this type of analysis had (and still has) for Indigenous peoples, Simpson (2007) refers to her participants' refusal to engage with her research interviews during her project on Kahnawà:ke Mohawk in North America:

There was no place in the existing literature for these articulations, nor was there a neat placement for them within post-colonial studies or analysis – there was not a doubleness to their consciousness, a still-colonial but striving to be “post-colonial consciousness” that denied the modern self that Fanon, Bhabha and Giddens speak of and from. There seemed rather to be a tripleness, a quadrupleness, to consciousness and an endless play, and it went something like this: “I am me, I am what you think I am and I am who this person to the right of me thinks I am and you are all full of shit and then maybe I will tell you to your face.” There was a definite core that seemed to reveal itself at the point of refusal and that refusal was arrived at, of course, at the very limit of the discourse. (p. 74)

But culture as a terrain of struggle does not only let us examine historical processes of dispossession. Its interrogation and re-articulation also open up a space for discussions on the analysis of meaning-making and its potential to describe social logics of action emerging from daily life as well as the ways in which these emerging logics may disrupt established theoretical frameworks. This resonates with recent calls to return to thick description as a way to develop new forms of theorization and rethinking of the economy, in an attempt to contain analysis in which little room is left for description of emerging local logics that may not necessarily fit with often taken-for-granted grand economic narratives (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Gerson (2011) also takes this line of argument in her critique of current research on neoliberalism where the shift away from culture is seen as unexpectedly disabling “the analytical labor that might be one of the most effective ways to write against neoliberal practices” (p. 539). As she puts it:

Note that I am calling for a return to an anthropological imagination, not a return to the culture concept. I am suggesting that anthropologists need to find techniques for continuing the unsettling analytical work that culture used to accomplish for anthropologists by compelling us to pay attention to epistemological difference and social organization simultaneously. (ibid)

We envision *Language, Culture and Society* as a platform where these anthropological debates can be brought about in relation to the study of language and communication. More specifically, we take all these considerations as the starting point for us to engage in conversations about the social, cultural, racial, economic and historical conditions of language and communication as well as about solidarity, transformation and change. And these are also possible avenues against which to situate the contents of this the first issue, starting from the very forum section in it. Interested in current discussions on the coloniality of knowledge, we set out to initiate a transdisciplinary dialogue by asking language-based scholars to reflect about some of the most prominent arguments in decolonization studies.

We aimed this forum to be a space for us all to consider the relevance of these arguments in the analysis of the conditions of knowledge production and circulation in the language disciplines, as well as the ways in which such conditions may impact on the re-enactment of long-existing forms of inequality in our field. We also hoped that emerging discussions could set the ground for imagining alternative practices. But this is always fraught with tensions, dilemmas and exclusionary regimes, and the need for us to select one featured text was good proof of it. Initially, we considered authors who have reacted against European and North American-centred postcolonial critiques by positioning themselves as writing from the “Global South” (see, for instance, Smith, 1999; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012; Amimoto Ingersoll, 2016). In their work, these authors have attempted to generate alternative indigenous understandings of geography, time, politics, and ethics, which disrupt the normalized ontologies and epistemologies of Western modernity – and the political, economic and military *dispositifs* that such ontologies and epistemologies help to establish and sustain.

Among such works, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s aligns very closely with the type of boldness that we want to put forward: her critique of the dynamics of re-voicing and appropriation of knowledge within the Academia (and the hierarchies that come with these dynamics) is bold, direct, and disruptive of intellectual traditions that she sees as acknowledging coloniality but not transcending it. With that in mind, we contacted her and proceeded to gather the necessary permissions to reprint a text that was originally published in Spanish (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón Ediciones, 2010) and later translated into English (*The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111:1, Winter 2012, Duke University Press). The questions posed to our forum contributors were then formulated as follows:

- How does Rivera Cusicanqui’s text appeal to you?
- What’s your stance with regard to the critique put forward by her? How does it relate to your specific (past and present) conditions of academic knowledge production?

- What possible issues / contradictions / dilemmas you see emerging from such a critique? To what extent is this critique relevant / pertinent / useful within your areas of research?
- What would be an appropriate direction for a conversation like this in the language disciplines, in your view?

The responses by Mary Louise Pratt, Harshana Rambukwella, Bonnie McElhinny, Clara Keating, Sinfree Makoni, and Beatriz P. Lorente, in this issue, are therefore prompted and guided by such questions. These contributions tease out Rivera Cusicanqui's arguments in different directions, all of them of interest to the language disciplines. These include: the role of translingual research across languages as key instrument of decolonization (Pratt); the influence of postcolonial critique in sociolinguistics through its 'post-modern' and 'culturalist' turns, and its contradictions (Rambukwella); citation and acknowledgement practices (McElhinny); intercultural translation (Keating); examination of African Global Southern sociolinguistics and the global rise of applied linguistics (Makoni); and collective spaces of unfreedom and action (Lorente).

In addition to the forum, the four full-length articles that follow this editorial also present us with more opportunities to reflect on these issues. They unsettle long-standing forms of knowledge anchored in historical processes of colonialism that continue shaping our investigation of sociolinguistic phenomena and the ways in which we produce and mobilize academic expertise. In the first article, Christopher Hutton interrogates claims about the ancient Indian past based on modern linguistic analysis. He analyses the category *Aryan* and the competing versions of Indian history associated with it, with an interest in revealing how the existing controversies index a complex relationship between the academic discipline of linguistics and 'insider' epistemological frameworks, both academic and non-academic.

By doing this, Hutton complexifies totalizing arguments that draw on post-colonial critique and grant to the colonial state a kind of categorical omniscience. He sheds light on the interactions between colonial scholarship and colonial administration during British colonial rule, pre-existing modes of textual knowledge and interpretation, and evolving Indian self-understandings as expressed in scholarly and other writings. Most importantly, he shows how these dialogic conditions involving the adoption, adaption and rejection of colonial scholarship, and the broader epistemological framework for which it stands, continues to this day. Such conditions have indeed provided a conceptual architecture of modern understandings of diversity that, in Hutton's words, has had "more damaging and long-lasting consequences for post-colonial India than the colonial-era introduction of racial anthropology" (p. 25).

The second article takes us to South Africa. In this case, Cécile Vigouroux draws a contrast with occidentalism and its impact on knowledge production about worldwide migrations whereby the migrant is often constructed as predominantly classed, racialized, and geographically situated. She calls for a shift in our analytical gaze to the study of issues concerned with migration (including language), away from a scholarship that is overwhelmingly dominated by a South-to-North perspective on population movements and contacts. To unsettle these understandings, Vigouroux drives our attention to dynamics between migrants and locals in South Africa where the majority of the host population, Blacks who live in socioeconomic precarity, has to function in a non-indigenous language (English) in which many have limited or no competence.

This, Vigouroux reminds us, removes from the public discourse the pressure for migrants to learn the local language(s) in order to be “integrated”. Most significantly, the dynamics under the spotlight in her article reveal the inadequacy of the “the colonial-postcolonial relationships between ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries, the often binary racial approach to account for the socio-political tensions between migrants and host populations, and the ways alloglots dispute the Nation-States’ ideologies of monolingualism” (p.33). Against this background, Vigouroux’s analytical attention to the micropolitics of hosting and guesting deconstruct the dichotomy between *migrant* and *local*, categories defined solely according to a Nation-State frame of reference. As an alternative scale of analysis, she proposes “hospitality framework” to account for shifting positions of the host and the guest that are shaped by the context.

Two key issues examined by Hutton and Vigouroux, the nation-state frame of reference and the historical role of modernist linguistics, are also taken up in the third full-length article by Virginia Zavala. But the focus in this text is placed on the discourses and policies of Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) set up in rural primary schools in Peru, in connection with discourses of language rights and endangerment. Seen as a type of mother-tongue education based on colonial strategies of governance and ways of constructing the other, and later recontextualized in neoliberalizing reforms since the 1990’s, Zavala discusses how IBE has turned into a depoliticized endeavor, one that celebrates liberal multiculturalism in ways that neutralize attempts for socio-economic transformation. She shows how IBE is driven by notions of community, identity, and language as natural and fixed phenomena, which in turn privilege a remedial and compensatory frame where “Quechua-Spanish bilinguals – and IBE beneficiaries- are only those who learned the indigenous language as his/her mother tongue and were raised in a rural area; those who do not mix the languages, incarnate the Andean cosmovision, and a type of ancestral identity” (p. 62).

With this as a point of reference, Zavala zooms into Quechua-speaking urban youth activists who question the depoliticized fictitious views of Quechua and Quechuaness that have been historically entrenched in the discourse of IBE and language diversity in general. These youth activists challenge taken for granted assumptions about language and culture, deconstructing colonial dichotomies through carnivalesque modes of critique and transgression practices that disturb and dislocate fixed categories and boundaries within creative, provocative, and ludic frames. Zavala documents how they both disinvent Quechua as IBE conceives it and reinvent it within a much more inclusive and politicized project.

In the fourth and final full manuscript of this inaugural issue, Jürgen Jaspers invites us to consider whether the academic scholarship we produce is expansive enough and empirically sustainable to broker the multiple demands and needs of educational and language policy stakeholders. He engages critically with forms of expertise produced from within the University, an institution in which knowledge production and circulation has historically been aligned with certain ideologies about “science” that legitimize specific forms of expert discourse. This has always been contested, as Jaspers notes in his article, specifically within critical and interpretivist traditions which his critique speaks to. But he raises a cautionary note when linguistic diversity is presented by language experts as the only (and therefore, restrictive) pedagogical option in language policy. This is, from Jaspers’ point of view, particularly problematic when minoritized (and we add, racialized) languages and their speakers continue to be expected to enter, negotiate, and exit educational systems and bureaucracies that measure competencies according to monolingual academic standards and expectations.

There are multiple readings to Jaspers’ arguments and the debate is open on the limits and uses of evidence-based science and political advocacy to address the racialized linguistic and educational spaces of both multilingual and monolingual speakers. It could also be the case that the language scholars who both do research and advocate for the integration of linguistic diversity (through discussions and applications of translanguaging, repertoires, and linguistic citizenship) are enacting a “refusal”, in Simpson’s terms, to the epistemic violence behind notions of “true science”.

We hope the contents in this issue spark the intellectual excitement needed for future conversations along these lines to continue, or perhaps for new unexpected ones to emerge.

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