

○ **A. PENNYCOOK, *LANGUAGE AS A LOCAL PRACTICE***

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In his book *Language as a Local Practice*, Alastair Pennycook continues the critical exploration into the ways in which linguistic and semiotic norms are established and appropriated in transcultural contexts that he began with *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (2007). Here he is interested in the relationship between language, locality and practice and how the three are mutually and performatively constituted: how the practice of language informs locality, how locality informs language practices and how local practices inform language.

At the heart of *Language as a Local Practice* are two important and related arguments, both of which Pennycook has to some extent made previously, but both of which are further developed and refined here. The first is a critique the ontology of language and the claim that that language is best understood as an emergent social act, rather than something external that we acquire and reproduce: “a material part of social and cultural life rather than...an abstract entity” (p.2). Pennycook is interested in how meaning emerges from social interactions involving language in different physical and symbolic spaces and equally, how language as a social act can interpret and transform locality. He develops the notion of locality, not in contrast to the notion of the centre, but rather in terms of situatedness. As he argues: “Everything happens locally. However global a practice may be, it still happens locally” (p.128).

The second argument develops Pennycook’s post-colonial critique of the normative and logocentric way in which applied and general linguistics frequently deals with language issues. Here he is interested in the potential for transcultural and purposefully transgressive language practices to transform the way we think about linguistic legitimacy, normativity and difference. What happens, Pennycook asks, “to our understanding of language as a local practice if we assume not so much the transparency and normalcy of sameness and the opacity of difference, but rather take difference to be the norm and sameness as that which needs to justify itself?” (p.37). This is a question not only of how social power is mediated through language, but also of how it is mediated through the ways in which language ideologies inform our epistemology of language. Such an argument has significant implications for applied linguistics because it brings into question the idea that at the heart of communication lies a stable, rule-governed language which is practiced normatively by a community.

To illustrate the dynamic relationship between practice, locality and language Pennycook uses examples from street culture and visual artists, as well as situations in which transcultural communicative practices engage with various discourses and sociocultural

norms in complex and sometimes transgressive ways. These examples include Yinka Shonibare MBE, whose striking image of a headless ice skater graces the cover of the book, and the way in which street artists like Banksy or the practitioners of Parkour, “the art of fluid, physical movement through the urban landscapes developed in the suburbs of Paris and other French cities” (p.60), play with notions of authenticity, repetition and the ownership of public space in order to disrupt and reframe the ways in which power is discursively and symbolically produced.

In doing so, Pennycook shows that language practices find their meaning as situated social acts – that is, they are meaningful in relation to the constantly changing social, spatial and symbolic environments in which they are enacted and interpreted. When Parkourists reappropriate what are often bleak urban and industrial settings and turn them into sites of somatic performance and pleasure, or when Banksy paints a wall or produces an unauthorized installation, for example, they are not only communicating a message, or making a statement by disobeying the authorized uses of the spaces they are appropriating, they are producing a new semiotic landscape and a new form of social interaction.

Pennycook’s discussions on the issues of authenticity and repetition are particularly interesting and enjoyable to read – the presumed strangeness of the transcultural and the realisation that, in urban contexts at least, this strangeness is all around us, informing our daily lives and is only partially rendered invisible by the memes of cultural normativity and linguistic fixity; or the way in which repetition is used in conscious and subversive ways by street artists as an appropriation and critique of what they consider to be banal, ugly or socially inequitable. Pennycook’s point here is not simply that mimicry, repetition, transgression and the like are used by a few artists and activists as a form of social disobedience, but rather that their public displays render visible the ways in which all language practices are performative social acts that, although often repetitive, are each time localized differently and each time “create the space in which they happen” (p.128).

In counterpoint to the diverse examples of transcultural locality that Pennycook offers us, several of the chapters in his book are more explicitly aimed at critically positioning his work in relation to sociolinguistics and applied linguistics from a more theoretical perspective. Pennycook dedicates chapters to working through the relatively complex notions of practice and locality and the extent to which a number of conceptual tools we have for talking about language practices, including the notions of genre, discourse and language ecologies, are suitable for articulating and informing a language epistemology based on difference, flow and practice rather than on fixity and an *a priori* structural coherence. If Pennycook labours the point that we need to rethink our ontology of language a little in this book, it is in part understandable given the power of the logocentric trope in many fields of research, and not just linguistics.

Readers with an interest in critical language studies will find this book richly rewarding and thought provoking for the way it works through many of these issues in a style that is both rigorous and convivial. Critics may accuse him of choosing case studies that are ephemeral and fashionably sexy (street art, scuba diving, etc.) but these diverse studies serve as entry

points into a thorough and deeply serious discussion about some of the most significant and intractable issues challenging not only the field of applied linguistics but society as a whole.

Having said this, many readers, whether familiar with Pennycook's work or not, may be left wanting more. In particular, there is a tension between Pennycook's sustained critique that we need to place notions such as practice, locality, flow and difference at the centre of debates about language, and his claim that this book "is not another attempt at alternative system building but rather an exercise ... of thinking otherwise" (p.136). By revealing the hidden ideologies inherent in the epistemologies informing many fields of linguistics through his critical approach he provides a convincing argument in favour of thinking otherwise. However, his reluctance to formalise a theory of practice will leave many in applied linguistics wondering how to proceed if they accept his critique. What, for example, are the implications of understanding language as a local practice for language policy and education issues? How, as researchers, linguists, teachers and language users do we deal with language from a local perspective?

Whether you find Pennycook's intellectual Parkour across the landscape of applied linguistics convincing or not really depends on whether you accept his thesis that language is better approached from the perspective of social practice. While some may accuse him of being glib in his critique of applied linguistics, and while it may be possible to argue that he offers little pragmatic help for teachers, researchers and language activists interested in applying his critique in educational or other settings, few would deny the contribution that Pennycook continues to make to language studies as a linguist and a philosopher of language.

REFERENCE

Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and transcultural flows*. London/New York: Routledge.