On hybridity, the politics of knowledge production and critical language studies

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Silvia Cusicanqui provides an incisive critique of the ironic appropriation of radical scholarly thinking grounded in local political concerns by 'first world' centers of theoretical production and their subsequent reification. Underlying her argument is a sense of deep disquiet and trenchant critique of theoretical sophistry that renders critique apolitical and irrelevant. In this brief response I begin by critiquing the notion of hybridity – because it resonates with a postmodernist wave in current language scholarship – which was once a key concern in postcolonial theory; the futility of trying to find an analytical position outside the legacies of modernity and the enlightenment; and a reflection on the implications of both these positions to critical language studies. By critical language studies I particularly mean those branches of socio-linguistics that engage with a range of socio-political concerns such as power, ideology and gender.

I first encountered and experienced a sense of disquiet about the theorization of hybridity in the 1990s as a young undergraduate. In the 1990s, the big name in postcolonial studies was Homi Bhabha and his framework of hybridity (Bhabha, 1990, 2004). As a young scholar attempting to come to terms with the complexities of ethno-nationalism in Sri Lanka, the paradigm of hybridity seemed to offer exciting theoretical and political possibilities. However, when I began to apply hybridity, even at the level of textual analysis, I found myself struggling. How could hybridity, for instance, critically respond to the politics of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka whose struggle for selfhood was built upon a notion of cultural and historical self-hood which could be conceptually undermined through an anti-essentialist argument informed by hybridity? Or how could the postmodern relativity that informed hybridity (Bhabha, 1990, 2004; Young, 1990, 2001) respond to the arguments marshalled by majoritarian Sinhala nationalists that if all frameworks of knowledge are relative, why could not there be a nativist or indigenous framework through which Sri Lanka could be understood – which by default means a Sinhala majoritarian worldview? Hybridity and the dominant discourse of postcolonial studies (Ashcroft, 2002; Bhabha, 1990, 2004; Young, 1990,

2001) of the time that positioned itself as a kind of a postmodern multicultural critique against the perceived normativity of nation and nationalism could not offer satisfactory answers to these questions.

As I moved away from Anglophone postcolonial studies to more comparative and historically-informed research for my postgraduate studies, I was increasingly convinced of the necessity to adopt what I would call an agonistic relationship to the intellectual and political legacies of modernity. To critique modernity was one thing, but to imagine that there is some kind of chimerical alterity – one untainted by modernity and that it was the goal of postcolonial criticism to work towards this alterity felt deeply problematic at a number of levels. At one level it felt a self-defeating exercise because most of the scholars engaged in discussing alterity are steeped in the conceptual vocabulary of the very modernity they critique and have very little understanding of the 'indigenous' frameworks of knowledge they claim to represent. Much of this scholarship also tends to be located in the first-world academe. At another, it is politically disabling because much of the on-ground struggles for human dignity and social equity are based on the language and legacies of modernity and theoretically savvy scholarship is either unaware of or disinterested in the messy and complex empirical realities of such struggles.

To turn to the issue of language, Cusicanqui's critique, has a particular resonance with what I will term the 'post-modern' and 'culturalist' turn in sociolinguistics. In literary studies, postcolonialism's heyday is past. With the publication of such collections like *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Loomba et al., 2005) there is an attempt to rediscover what one might call the radical spirit of postcolonialism. In the writings of pioneering scholars like Frantz Fanon this spirit represented a sense of political urgency infused with leftist radicalism. In what remains of postcolonial studies today there is an increasing recognition that the postmodernist moment in the history of postcolonial criticism was inadequate both conceptually and politically to respond to a range of new issues thrown up by globalization, late capitalism, the rise of neo-liberalism and the crisis of the nation-state (Ahmad, 2008; Loomba et al., 2005; Pappe, 2010; Shohat, 2010). In language studies, particularly in certain branches of sociolinguistics, what we see today is a sharp turn to the kind of theoretical vocabulary and discourse that dominated postcolonial literary studies from the 1980s to the 1990s. It is driven by a postmodernist urge to deconstruct but is not grounded in the political or ethical commitments of decolonizing thinking in the 1960s and 1970s (Pennycook, 2000, 2007, 2010; Canagarajah, 2002, 2011b, 2015). Nor does it acknowledge subsequent criticisms of postcolonial studies. This has led to conceptual reification in critical language studies where what appears radical actually shores up socially and politically conservative ideologies because there is no grounded politics informing it.

One area in which this is clearly manifest is in the emergence of translanguaging as a dominant paradigm in language studies (Canagarajah, 2011b; Blommaert, 2010). The concept and the term is fairly old – first appearing in the Welsh education context in the 1990s where the mixing of Welsh with English was encouraged in a critical bilingual model to foster Welsh language education alongside the acquisition of English. However, translanguaging today means something very different. Translanguaging has begun to emerge as a foundational critique of the structuralist fundamentals on which modern linguistics is built (Pennycook, 2000). Deriving from the foundational work of scholars such as Saussure and Bloomfield modern linguistics began to treat language as a structure which can be 'scientifically' analyzed and studied, leading to significant developments in structural linguistics, which in turn informed how language was seen, learned and taught. An important critique of this view of language which sociolinguistics has long held is how the structuralist approach isolates language from the social, political and cultural conditions of its everyday use and therefore leads to a depoliticized and ideologically-neutral view of language. However, translanguaging takes this critique to a different level by arguing that the idea of discrete languages itself is a legacy of the enlightenment and modernity and that languages have no existence as ontological realities (Pennycook, 2000; Canagarajah, 2011). It is a seemingly radical move which challenges a number of ways in which language has been naturalized: it allows us to see people as possessing linguistic repertoires rather than discrete and bounded languages; it challenges the normative link between language and identity that has at times fueled nationalism and other essentialist ways of looking at identity; and it allows us a potential intellectual space from which to challenge the institutionalized reproduction of language as a site of oppression and exclusion.

However, the conceptual radicalism translanguaging promises is not quite matched by its refusal or failure to engage with the messiness of language use – to argue that languages are not ontological realities is one thing but that has little or no impact on how language continues to be reproduced institutionally and societally as a site of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, many theorizations of translanguaging use examples of multilingual practices in first-world societies and particularly in domains such as music, where there is already creative license for violating the conventions of language – therefore, upholding a musical example as an instance of translanguaging says little about the use of language in other domains where institutional and societal discourses regulate language far more stringently. There are also many transactional examples of translanguaging where people freely code-mesh (to use a term preferred by Suresh Canagarajah over code-mixing – Canagarajah, 2011a) to conduct business in multilingual environments – which is underwritten by a neo-liberal view of globalization as a process

that breaks barriers and enables the free flow of goods, services and ideas and by extension breaks barriers of language and communication as well. (Canagarajah, 2011b; Pennycook, 2000) But there are a number of significant ironies in the reification of translanguaging as a conceptually and politically liberating framework. One glaring omission in much translanguaging critique is how much of this scholarship is silent on the political economy of language use in the academia – particularly in relation to the English language. In many of the universities from which translanguaging scholarship emerges standardized global English language testing such as IELTS and TOEFL are rigidly enforced, undermining the very basis of translanguaging.

Issues such as 'language rights', 'mother tongue education' or 'bilingual' education should not be seen as anachronistic throwbacks to essentialist understandings of language. While ontologically we may question the reality of these positions they engage directly with the political economy of language. The philosopher Ian Hacking makes a distinction between two types of phenomena in the world: indifferent kinds and interactive kinds (Hacking, 1991). An indifferent kind can be something like an inanimate object. You can name it or classify it but it will not have an impact on the object itself. An interactive kind is fundamentally different. To name somebody or a group as belonging to a particular nation, ethnicity or race or class has an impact. It can even potentially change the behaviour of the individual or the group. Languages are similar. Once we name them, label them and codify them, they take on a reality of their own. To deconstruct the idea of language is not as the same as deconstructing language as lived practice.

I believe that sociolinguistics and its all too ready embrace of the vocabulary of postmodernism is losing sight of the ideological and political uses of language even as it purports to speak in the name of these very categories. Cusicanqui argues that a process of knowledge-based recolonization is taking place when first world centers of theoretical production begin to speak on behalf of non-first world societies. I believe we can see this in language studies as well. Translanguaging, for instance, can be considered a radical conceptual move in the challenge it poses to essentialist notions of language but unless it is deployed with a rigorous understanding of the politics of how language is institutionalized and used in specific local contexts, it depoliticizes and emasculates on the ground struggles for equality and human dignity. As Cusicanqui reminds us the legacies of modernity are not things we can pick and choose. That privilege may be available to those who have already mastered modernity and can critique it while located securely within the privileges it bestows. For the vast majority struggling to enter modernity, the only option is to engage critically and dialogically with its legacies.

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