Critical applied linguistics in the 2020s

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Abstract

Critical applied linguistics remains deeply relevant today, arguably more than ever, but it needs constant renewal. This paper returns to these concerns to assess where this project has got to and where it may be headed. I review first both long-term and short-term political trends, from the rise of neoliberalism to the COVID pandemic. Next, I discuss responses to these conditions – questions of pessimism or hope – and their relevance for applied linguistics. This is followed by a discussion of epistemological changes (or turns) in applied linguistics, and an argument that we need to be both responsive and skeptical of such shifts. Above all, we need to be adept at looking at them in relation to each other – material and discursive, translingual and raciolinguistic, queer and practice, multilingual and decolonial, for example – to disrupt their apparent novelty and ensure there is always a critical dimension. Finally I conclude by looking again at a critical applied linguistic agenda for the future, suggesting ten key principles we need to keep in mind.

Key words

Critical applied linguistics, radical hope, raciolinguistics, decoloniality, neoliberalism, queer practice, materialism,

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Applied linguistics in an uneven world

Thirty years have passed since I first made a case for critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 1990). Twenty years have passed since I developed that initial work into a book-length introduction (Pennycook, 2001). The field changes over time: The political context is never the same, matters of concern can be different, ideas and concepts get stale and become watered down, new ideas spring up. Critical work has to be responsive to a changing world, and a great deal has happened in the last twenty to thirty years, from a more urgent need to deal with climate change to the rise of neoliberal political and economic forms of governance. Profound changes to communication and how knowledge is regarded have occurred alongside (and connected to) the growth of xenophobic populism. New social, cultural, political, economic and environmental conditions pose new questions for applied linguists. So while many of the same issues are still with us – we may be finally becoming more aware of the depths of institutional racism, but it sure isn't new – the political landscape is also always shifting. I started my first foray into critical applied linguistics with a brief overview of contemporary political concerns:

> We live in a world marked by fundamental inequalities: a world in which 40,000 children die every day in Third World countries; a world in which, in almost every society and culture, differences constructed around gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual preference and other distinctions lead to massive inequalities; a world increasingly threatened by pollution and ecological disaster. (Pennycook, 1990, p.8)

Two questions seem relevant: How have things changed since then? And What's this got to do with applied linguistics? With respect to the first question and infant mortality, there are some grounds for optimism: According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) the total number of under-5 deaths worldwide has declined by 59% since 1990: Only around 5.3 million children under 5, or 15,000 per day, died in 2018. In 1990, 1 in 11 children died before reaching age 5; today it is about 1 in 26. This is surely progress, a result of collaborative action from local and international organizations to improve the health of children and their mothers. Progress, yes, but it is still a shocking statistic – it is not easy to write "only around 5.3 million children under 5 … died in 2018" – and it is very unevenly distributed: Mortality among children under 5 in sub-Saharan Africa is 15 times higher than in high income countries, and half of all under 5 deaths occurred in just five countries: India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

On discrimination and inequalities around social difference, there again has been positive change. If we look at the global status of women, for example, there is space for optimism. In some areas – education and literacy for girls – there has been very real progress, and yet violence and widespread discrimination against women and girls in health and education, at home and in the labour market, continues (UNDP, 2020). No country in the world has achieved gender equality, and the world is not on track to achieve it: overall progress in gender inequality has been slowing. And when possibilities for change occur, as we saw recently in Afghanistan, they may equally and abruptly be withdrawn (a disgraceful betrayal by supposedly liberal democracies). Back in 2000, we didn't have #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter movements. We didn't even really have hashtags (they were an obscure option on your keyboard for things like #2). We did, however, have racism, misogyny and sexual misconduct. Dell Hymes' widely attested history of sexual harassment sheds light on

institutional culpability while also obscuring wider issues ((Educational Linguist, 2018; Ennser-Kananen, 2019): The discussion about whether we should cite Hymes or not still fails to engage with the question as to why we're not citing women of colour, Indigenous scholars, and many others. Hymes or not Hymes is not the question, nor should this be the endpoint of our discussion. The question is who do we cite and not cite and why and why not?

2020 also marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of the League of Nations, following the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. As Lake and Reynolds (2008, p.5) explain, it was the rejection of the proposal for racial equality in the founding of this body that drew the "global colour line" that has divided the world on racial lines for the last century. If this moment of historical commemoration – 100 years of the *global colour line* – passed with little notice (there are after all enough other dates that might be equally marked), the Black Lives Matter Movement brought racial inequalities to a new level of social consciousness and political activism. It shed light on many things, but above all the deep histories and structures of institutional racism. It made many people confront in deeper ways their complicity, so that in applied linguistics we have started to ask not just why there are so few people of colour but why White people feel so comfortable in this field. This is tied to the colonial roots of linguistics, and the separation of language from all that it is part of: bodies, lives, stories, histories, articulations of the past, the present and the future. It has been a White applied linguistics that makes it possible for people in the field to avoid their own complicity in maintaining White Power (Kubota, 2019; Motha, 2020). As the #TESOLsoWhite and #AAALsoWhite movements have made clear, the racial disparities within our field run deep (Bhattacharya, Jiang, & Canagarajah, 2020).

Epistemological racism – the dominance, normalizing and continued reference to White Eurocentric forms of knowledge – is deeply entwined in our applied linguistic knowledge practices, favouring certain people and worldviews and forms of knowledge over others (Kubota, 2019). As Motha (2020, p129) puts it, we need to uncover "the multitude of ways in which applied linguistics has functioned as an important and effective vehicle for White supremacy and relatedly empire, with the very roots of the discipline dependent on racial inequalities and racial hierarchies." One of the key challenges here is to address *White ignorance* (Martín 2021; Mills, 2017) not as a wilful refusal to understand but as a set of embedded ideas and practices of perception and categorization that sustain White normativity, form particular kinds of social memory, and deprecate the testimonies and epistemologies of the Global South. Overcoming White ignorance is not so much a process of increasing knowledge as of challenging ways of knowing.

The reference in 1990 to "pollution and ecological disaster" was just the starting point of what we now more broadly refer to as climate change, and this, as we all know, has been a calamitous downward path. *Climate change* wasn't so much part of our vocabulary 30 years ago, but it was already clear we were not treating our planet well. Indeed so far have we come that we now talk in terms of the Anthropocene, an acknowledgement of the destructive force that humans have become for the rest of the planet. The assumptions of modernity – that nature is external, a resource to be exploited, that humans are separate, self-governing, on an upward spiral of self-improvement to escape the limits of nature – have come under scrutiny as we have finally started to reject the "separation between Nature and Human that has paralysed science and politics since the dawn of modernism" (Latour, 2015, p.146). The world is scrambling to avoid further ecological devastation while access to water, food, and

basic resources comes under even greater threat through climate change and inequitable distribution.

While contemporary concerns – "the financial crisis is deepening, authoritarianism is thriving, and racism permeates society" (Gounari, 2020, p.17) – are not so different from those that bothered us 30 years ago, there are also new trends that need critical analysis. In 2020 there were over 70 million "displaced people": 41 million are "internally displaced", 26 million are classified as refugees and 3.5 million are seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2020). Walls and fences have meanwhile become the new response to these mobile populations with the rise of trenchant forms of xenophobic and isolationist populism in many parts of the world. The rise of neoliberalism has also brought us new challenges. We were already critiquing what was commonly called "economic rationalism" in the 1990s, and many of the sins now associated with neoliberalism were evident then: trickle-down economics, tax cuts for the wealthy, excessive privatisation, unrestricted deregulation, shrinking government, opposition to social welfare. The key elements of redistributive welfare – parties supporting social democracy, trade unions, fair tax systems – have been challenged by the austerity of neoliberalism, the growth of migration, and the re-emergence of nationalist and xenophobic politics, shifting political debate from a shared commons to an exclusionary discourse.

This redistribution of income away from labor and toward profit is bringing greater inequality as capital is concentrated in the hands of the very rich while huge economic disparities are ideologically normalized. We should be in no doubt that we are living in times of increased inequality (Piketty, 2014). This has led to a new emergent class of mobile, impoverished, and insecure workers – from cleaners and construction workers to aged care and domestic workers – that is supporting growing extravagances by the wealthy while the very idea of

welfare and the public good is increasingly on the retreat. These changing labour conditions have been described in terms of *precarity* – not a new idea by any means (Bourdieu, 1963) – and have led to the notion of the *precariat* Standing (2014) – a precariously employed and mobile proletariat that lacks security in relation to the labour market, training, income and representation. At the same time it is important to observe that in many parts of the world, precarious work has always been the norm (Munck, 2013), and that precarity may well be "the condition of our time" (Tsing, 2015, p.20).

While it may be problematic to conflate the precarity of mobile construction workers with the casualisation of academic staff, the changing university landscape is a concern for the continued quality and freedom of thought in academic life, and for the possibilities of continuing critical work: for people on casual contracts – insecure, overworked and open to institutional manipulation – taking an overt critical stance may become an option that is hard to maintain. The conditions under which I have been able to formulate critical applied linguistics are very different from those faced by many contemporary academics. In the current context of the massive casualisation of the workforce, growing distrust between staff and management, increased governance in teaching, the undermining of the knowledge common through commodification of research findings, and the manipulation of staff, data and marketing (Connell, 2019), the new enterprise university has become a very difficult place to work, and especially to do critical work[2].

Not much good has come out of the global COVID-19 pandemic, but it has shone a spotlight on underlying inequalities, showing the intersections among multilingualism (relations of class, race and language), frontline work (nurses, security guards, construction workers, bus drivers, cleaners), the need to work multiple shifts (underpaid work), urban organization

(closer living conditions), use of public transport (the need to move for work), lack of green space (poor infrastructure), family size (large, intergenerational families living together), and limited access to digital resources or health and educational services (linguistic, cultural and digital accessibility). The catchcry of the pandemic – "We're all in this together" – urging people to act together, obscured the deep inequalities the pandemic exposed. Many old people died, often alone, and many couldn't attend their funerals. People with disabilities died.

Women's work was hardest hit because of the deep-seated inequities of employment, especially casual work in service industries (and unpaid work at home). Working class, migrant, and communities of colour suffered much more than their wealthy White neighbours, who could stay at home to work, isolated in their affluent suburbs. Countries that liked to trumpet their multilingual and multicultural diversity were wholly unprepared to communicate meaningfully with those communities while attacks on Asians increased as shameful dog-whistling about the "China virus" stirred up already disillusioned and racist publics. It is never a good time to be ruled by authoritarian, xenophobic, misogynist leaders, but the pandemic was a particularly bad time. Communal action, social health care, wearing face masks (politicized in some countries), multilingual services were anathema to some regimes, and many thousands of people have paid for this with their lives. Meanwhile, as the wealthy countries hoarded their precious vaccines, and handed out 'boosters,' the Global South was once again left to struggle on its own.

Pessimism, radical hope and applied linguistics

How should we respond to these fairly bleak appraisals of the current conditions of the world? And what's it got to do with applied linguistics? For Pinker (2018) and other 'new

optimists' such negativity should be challenged: he makes a case against what he sees as the pessimism of critical analysis, even suggesting that "Intellectuals hate progress" (2018 p.39). Pinker believes we should be more optimistic, and in particular celebrate the threatened enlightenment ideals of reason, science, humanism and progress. Pinker is right to the extent that we need to avoid articulating only dystopian narratives about the world, but his analysis is deeply flawed (Hickel, 2018; Lent, 2018). While there are overall trends towards improvement – as with child mortality discussed above – a critical focus has to point towards its inequitable distribution. The claim that enlightenment values are under threat is misplaced: The current struggles over knowledge are not so much opposed to reason, science, humanism and progress but against their ethnocentric appropriation though declarations of universalism: It is to the claims to an enlightened vision of what these ideas mean that many object. This is not a form of moral or epistemological relativism but a form of intellectual activism that insists that ethnocentric declarations should be no more encouraged in philosophy, sociology or applied linguistics than in other fields. And while optimism may at times be preferable to pessimism, neither position presents a program for change: optimists don't need to; pessimists don't see the point.

The issue is better reframed in terms of intellectual pessimism coupled with political optimism, captured by the motto attributed to Antonio Gramsci: "Pessimismo dell'intelligenza, ottimismo della volontà": Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will[3]. This suggests we have to maintain a project of intellectual critique – pointing to injustices, calling out discriminations, illuminating inequalities – while also believing that things can be changed by concerted political action. The idea of "radical hope" derives from Lear's (2006) reading of Native American Crow leader Plenty Coups' articulation of hope in the face of devastating cultural loss and without any clear pathway for change: "Radical hope anticipates

a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it" (Lear, 2006, p.103). This in turn has inspired Australian Indigenous activist Noel Pearson (2011) to articulate a project of *radical hope* for Indigenous Australians in the face of racism and profound inequalities, a hope that rests on education[4]: "Our hope depends on how serious we become about the education of our people" (2011, p.16). Radical hope acknowledges the fundamental injustices that inform many aspects of daily life, yet it also insists that we have to find ways forward, even if the endpoints remain unclear. Neither utopian claims that everything is going well, nor dystopian visions that everything is getting worse can provide the core of a critical applied linguistic project (especially since the *applied* element needs to be able to articulate projects for change). Neither should a challenge that we don't have all the answers hold us back from articulating some form of radical hope for an alternative future.

A key question that recurs is why all this matters for applied linguistics. It is one thing to worry about climate change, gender inequality, racism and precarious employment, some might argue, but there's no particular reason to let these concerns impinge on our work as applied linguists concerned with language education, language policy, language in the workplace and so on. This has always seemed a very disingenuous argument. Some have suggested that we can't engage with these concerns because they are not part of our professional expertise, and we don't have the tools to make ethical choices between good and bad ways in which the world works. To bring an overt political stance to issues of inequality, racism, sexism or homophobia, from some perspectives, unacceptably "prejudges outcomes" (Davies, 2005, p32). It challenges the neutrality of 'normal' applied linguistics (Davies, 1999). This attempt to keep applied linguistics safe from matters of concern – stated most explicitly in Kaplan's (2002) rejection of critical approaches in his applied linguistic

handbook – hides behind the narratives of liberalism that obscure the particular racial and classed and gendered positions from which this is being articulated (Mills, 2017).

The concern about a 'normal' and 'neutral' applied linguistics avoids two significant points. First, applied linguistics itself has never been politically neutral: ideas about linguistic equality (all languages are equal, standard languages are no better than any others, bilingualism is a good thing, and so on) are articulated from a liberal egalitarian perspective. These may be quite estimable positions (if you adhere to liberal democratic principles), and have been proposed in opposition to discriminatory positions on primitive languages, language elitism and bilingualism as a disadvantage, but they are political before they are linguistic (Joseph & Newmeyer, 2012). It also overlooks the necessity for such a field of practice to take a stance. There is no point in working on minority language education, for example, without an element of advocacy. We cannot uncover linguistic inequalities before the law for Indigenous Australians (Eades, 2010) or African Americans (Baugh, 2018) and do nothing about it.

When we try to understand language in the context of domestic or blue-collar labour (Gonçalvez & Kelly-Holmes, 2021), we have to appreciate the entanglements of class, gender and migration, and the global forces that lead women from poorer countries such as the Philippines into domestic work elsewhere (Lorente, 2017), or the forces that unsettle labour relations in a metal works near the Dutch-German border (Hovens, 2021). Deaf studies cannot limit itself to the study of sign languages while ignoring questions of educational access, discrimination, signing rights, Deaf refugees or Deaf ways of being (Deaf ontologies) (Kusters, et al, 2017). Racial discrimination and White normativity are so embedded in practices and ideologies of English language teaching (Jenks 2017) that to try to understand

the global spread of English without taking into account race and Empire is simply to miss basic underlying factors (Motha, 2014), while the racialization of the notion of native speakerhood obliges us to engage with processes of *raciolinguistic enregisterment* (Rosa and Flores, 2017).

The fragmentation of older class structures and growth of a mobile, insecure, workforce, the deep-seated inequalities in the ways knowledge is produced, affirmed and distributed, the challenges posed by human destructiveness, environmental degradation, diminishing resources, our treatment of animals, or the Whiteness of our profession present a range of ethical and political concerns that are deeply interconnected with applied linguistics. Such matters of concern are bound up with questions of language and discourse – unless we operate with a vision of language separated from the world (Nakata, 2007) – and applied linguists cannot ethically avoid them. We cannot duck issues of class, race, gender, sexuality or disability, as if they were of no consequence to our field. It is now far less controversial to suggest that languages are social products rather than natural kinds, and thus that *language is politics* (van Splunder, 2020, p.9), indeed that it is *political from top to bottom* (Joseph, 2006). It is time for 'normal' applied linguistics to justify itself and explain on what grounds it can study language learning, multilingualism, language policy, language in the workplace and so forth without engaging with wider social concerns.

Reading the turns against each other

Critical applied linguistics can be understood as an approach to questions of language education, language policy, language learning, workplace communication and so on that refuses to avoid questions of inequality. The field is therefore constructed by a range of

influences: background work in critical theory, related domains of critical work and the ever-shifting field of applied linguistics itself. I have dealt with the first two sets of influences in depth elsewhere (Pennycook, 2021), and so shall pass over them quickly here. With respect to the critical background, it is important to grasp that this will be different according to different projects and agendas. Critical Theory, as developed by the Frankfurt School, remains important, but is now best seen as only one among many strands of critical work, from the decolonial imperative that stretches from Fanon (1961) to Mbembe (2017) and Mignolo and Walsh (2019) to the feminist, queer and antiracist work of Butler (1990) or bell hooks (1989; 1994). Critical applied linguistics can also be understood as the intersection among a range of related critical projects, from critical pedagogy (Norton and Toohey, 2004) to critical literacies (Luke, 2018), from critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007) to critical approaches to language policy (McCarty, 2013), from critical language testing (Shohamy, 2001) to critical language awareness (Alim, 2005).

Rather than dwelling on these background themes, I shall look in this section at ways in which contemporary shifts in applied linguistics need to be reworked from a critical perspective. Rearguard actions to insulate the discipline of 'normal' applied linguistics underestimate the ways in which critical work has been and remains at the forefront of innovation. The capacity for critical applied linguistics to reinvigorate the field emerges from its openness to new ways of thinking since critical applied linguistics has to be more dynamic than just adding a fixed political analysis to a fixed applied linguistic concern.. Applied linguistics can be usefully understood as an *epistemic assemblage*, where language-oriented projects, epistemic frameworks and matters of concern converge (Pennycook, 2018). It needs to be attuned to shifting applied linguistic currents – multilingual, translingual, social, spatial, sensory, affective, performative, decolonial, material, and other 'turns' – but with an eye

always on the larger politics at play. "We must change the world while constantly reinterpreting it," Sousa Santos (2018, p.viii) reminds us, suggesting that a changing world (which we are also trying to change) needs new ways of thinking.

Multilingual and decolonial

As May (2014) notes, a number of areas of applied linguistics have undergone a 'multilingual turn'; indeed multilingualism, he suggests, "is the topic du jour, at least in critical applied linguistics" (p.1). To the extent that an increased focus on multilingualism challenges the monolingual assumptions that have constrained our understandings of language learning and use, this turn suggests a significant development. Nonetheless, a multilingual turn – whether it derives from an increase in evident multilingualism in places that had not noticed it so much before (particularly urban spaces in the Global North) or whether it derives from changes to language ideologies whose impetus comes from elsewhere (the voices of scholars from the Global South finally being heard, for example) – does not in itself constitute an adequately critical orientation without a broader social agenda around the political economy, discursive representations and geopolitical understandings of multilingualism. The "critical perspective" on multilingualism developed by Blackledge and Creese (2010) takes a stance against "powerful repeated discourses" that "minority languages, and multilingualism, are the cause of problems in society" (p6), arguing instead for an understanding of the complexity of multilingual practices.

A broader, critical multilingual agenda does not just aim to make multilingualism visible within the blinkered field of second language acquisition but also to work with a goal of *equitable multilingualism* (Ortega, 2019). Recently, however, applied linguistics and other fields have been challenged by decolonial and southern theory, by the insistence on

rethinking the world through a southern lens. Mainstream (critical) applied linguistics has long been blind to contexts and ideas outside the Global North. Research on specific classed, raced and locality-based understandings – mainly European and North American – are generalised to the wider world under claims of commonality (humanity, language, disciplinarity, universality) (Grosfoguel, 2011). Applied linguistics needs to take seriously the "lingering inheritance of coloniality and its unequal distribution of knowledges, bodies, and languages" in order to "avoid, albeit unwittingly, continuing the legacy of coloniality." (Menezes de Souza, 2017, p.206).

There are many strands to southern and decolonial theory, from Sousa Santos' *southern epistemologies* (2014) to Mignolo and Walsh's (2018) *decolonial insurgency* "*against* the colonial matrix of power in all of its dimensions, and *for* the possibilities of an otherwise" (p17). "Epistemologies of the South and political ontology," Escobar (2016, 29) explains, are "efforts at thinking beyond the academy, with the *pueblos-territorio* (peoples-territory) and the intellectual-activists linked to them." Such perspectives insist on much greater consideration of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing (Todd, 2016; Yunkaporta, 2019), changing the ways we think about language, place, knowledge and community, shifting the kinds of political activism and research we are engaged with, and rethinking southern multilingualisms (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021; Pennycook and Makoni, 2020). A multilingual reading of the decolonial turn and a decolonial reading of the multilingual turn are crucial.

Translingualism and raciolinguistics
If there's one turn no one in applied linguistics can have missed, it is surely the translingual turn. It too needs to be weighed up for its critical orientation. The explosion of work that has invoked a translingual position – questioning the separability of languages and the separation

between languages and other communicative resources (Canagarajah, 2013) – ranges from studies of the mixing of supposedly separate languages (either sociolinguistic studies of language use or more applied work in pedagogical contexts) to studies that focus on the expansion of semiotic domains. While some critiques have taken aim at the ways this perspective unsettles previous assumptions about the ontological status of languages and the capacity to mobilise policy arguments based around separable languages (MacSwan, 2020), others have questioned its emancipatory potential, concluding that broader social forces of inequality, as well as assumptions about languages in educational systems, may render translanguaging "less transformative and critical than is often suggested" (Jaspers, 2018, p2).

Studies of translanguaging therefore are not necessarily critical in themselves but need to take into account wider decolonial and raciolinguistic concerns. We always need to remind ourselves that our linguistic technologies and terminologies alone cannot render a project critical. García has always insisted that translanguaging has "the potential to decolonize our conception of language and, especially, language education" (2019, p.162), which is why it is important to understand translanguaging in terms of an ideological movement that challenges how we think about language rather than merely a form of pedagogical inclusivity (using the first language in second language education contexts, for example). It is on these grounds that I have elsewhere emphasized the importance of *translingual activism* rather than just translanguaging itself (Pennycook, 2019).

The goal here is to connect a translingual focus with decolonial and activist agendas so that flexible language use in social and educational contexts does not become a goal in itself: The more important focus is on what fixed or fluid language practices enable. It is for similar reasons that García et al (2021) connect translingual and raciolinguistic arguments,

suggesting that "the abyssal thinking" (Sousa Santos, 2018) that divides languages up along bounded lines "co-articulates with raciolinguistic ideologies that perpetually stigmatize the language practices of racialized bilingual students" (p.7). From this perspective, translanguaging cannot be reduced to switching languages in the classroom: it is a political struggle to counter the racializing effects of normative language ideologies. Translanguaging needs to be understood in the context of raciolinguistic difference.

Identity and political economy

Drawing on Fraser (2000), Block (2018a) argues that a focus on *recognition* (the struggle to recognize forms of difference) should be subservient to the greater goal of *redistribution* (the reallocation of wealth within a more just political economy). This renewed focus on political economy and class as a proper, analytic concept – rather than the insipid understanding of class as a 'socioeconomic variable' (Williams. 1992) – has enabled a much sharper focus on the effects of neoliberalism on language and education ((Flubacher and Del Percio, 2017), or of the political economy of global English (O'Regan, 2021). Critical studies of language and political economy bring a much-needed dose of social reality to frameworks based on either identity or a consensual notion of society. They also take us usefully beyond critiques of *language commodification* that on the one hand point to ways in which certain forms of multilingualism (in elite languages), for example, accrue more value than others but, on the other, run the danger of reifying language, critiquing language learning for material gain, and separating language use from wider processes of political economy (Block, 2018b; McGill, 2013). Much of the language commodification literature fails to distinguish between commodification as discourse (how people talk about language value) and as a product of labour, ultimately thereby aligning with neoliberal accounts of value as defined in discursive rather than political economic terms (Simpson & O'Regan, 2018).

There is also a danger, however, of turning neoliberalism into the catch-all foe of critical work[5]. The argument, for example, that a focus on difference makes us complicit with neoliberalism, which has co-opted diversity for its own ends (Flores, 2013; Kubota, 2016), may draw connections too easily between an all-encompassing neoliberalism and an understanding of diversity[6]. Among other things, this critique fails to distinguish between neoliberalism more broadly, and authoritarian or libertarian capitalism (Benquet and Bourgeron, 2021), 'woke' capitalism (Rhodes, 2021), or neoliberalism from below (Gago, 2017). As Canagarajah (2017) makes clear, it is important to distinguish between the reductive agendas of neoliberal co-optations of diversity and the more expansive language ideologies of language users and translingual scholarship.

Despite nods towards *intersectionality* – an understanding that class, gender and race, as well as other categorisations around which social differences are formed, are always intertwined – class and political economy and the redistribution of material resources nonetheless remain the bedrock of political economic analysis. As Flores and Chaparro (2018) note, however, race is equally bound up with the unequal distribution of resources. By putting gender, race, sexuality and so on into an 'identity' box (assigning them to matters of discourse or recognition), studies centred around political economy run the danger of suggesting that the inequalities formed around difference – both lived forms of daily discrimination and larger patterns of material deprivation – are secondary to class. We are better served by "a materialist anti-racist approach to language activism" that combines an analysis of race and class with "a critique of White supremacy and capitalism" (Flores and Chaporro, 2018, p. 380). Countering the unfortunate swing in applied linguistics towards identity at the expense of equality, the issue is one of thinking through how recognition of difference can be thought

of in social terms (issues of social participation) rather than as an isolated question of cultural respect (Fraser, 2000). As critical applied linguists, furthermore, while our work across a broad front of social change will almost inevitably include efforts towards economic redistribution, the work we do as activist-academics will also unavoidably focus on social and cultural domains. We need to work more carefully on the intertwining of identity (recognition) concerns in conjunction with political economy (redistributive) objectives.

Queer practice

While it is clear that applied linguistics can no longer continue to ignore race, neither can it afford to overlook questions of sexuality. Since Judith Butler's (1990) critical reworking of gender, a range of work has opened up our understanding of gender, sexuality and sexual identity. Nelson (2009, p3) asks how language teaching practices should be changing in light of "the worldwide proliferation of increasingly visible lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities and communities and the widespread circulation of circulation of discourses, images, and information pertaining to sexual diversity". While discrimination against – and criminalization of – sexual identities and activities continues across the world, applied linguistics has opened up (partially, and not without struggle) to LGBTQI+ concerns and Queer Theory. In order for questions of sexual identity to be framed in terms other than identity and inclusivity, however, it is important that an understanding of language practices is made central.

Levon and Mendes (2016, p1) explain that a focus on "the linguistic behaviour of specific groups of speakers (lesbians, gay men, etc)" has been superseded by a focus on "how sexuality (in all its guises) emerges through linguistic practice." This has been part of a wider sociolinguistic shift from macro-sociolinguistic studies of correlations between groups and

linguistic features towards an understanding of practice as repeated and productive social activity (Pennycook, 2010). This allows for a shift from the assumption that people use linguistic resources because of who they are towards an understanding that we are who we are in part because of how we use linguistic resources, which enables us to see how subjectivities are not given *a priori* but are achieved in the micro-actions of the everyday (McNamara, 2019). A performative understanding of language practices (Pennycook, 2004) enables us to see beyond a notion that language reflects reality towards an appreciation of the productive forces of language.

Queer approaches to language, texts and the body have also enabled not just critical analysis of discourses about sexuality, but also more searching questions about what it would mean to queer the field more generally, to unsettle normative assumptions about language, affect and the body, to ask how gender, discourse and sexuality look different from a southern perspective (Milani and Lazar, 2017), and to consider in greater depth what an *embodied sociolinguistics* (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016) would look like. The point, as Thurlow (2016, p. 503) explains, "is not to deny language but to provincialize it: to recognize its limits, to acknowledge its constructedness, and to open ourselves up to a world of communicating and knowing beyond – or beside/s – words." Practices need to be queered.

Discourse and materialism

The changing roles of social media, the willingness of politicians not just to lie or to control the discourse, but rather, quite simply to 'bullshit' with no interest in distinctions between truth and lies, fact and fiction (Jacquemet, 2020), and the rise of anti-institutional thinking and so-called conspiracy theories (suggesting people should mistrust the news, universities, scientists, or just knowledge in general) raise new concerns for how we deal with discourse,

truth and reality. Critical work itself is often seen to be peddling its own conspiracy theories: this is what Davies (1996) accuses Phillipson's (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism* of doing, suggesting that the Applied Linguistics Department of Edinburgh University was the control centre of the capitalist English Language Teaching (ELT) conspiracy. Critical analysis will always be subject to this critique: the structural inequalities identified in critical work are seen by some as suggesting they are the intentional and hidden goals of a certain group.

This presents a particular challenge for contemporary critical social analysis since the bases on which claims to truth and reality are to be judged have shifted. At the same time, critical applied linguistics needs to sort out its own sometimes confused relations to discourse and materiality. Reconciling the two, as Luke (2013) insists, has to be a central task of critical work. The discursive turn shed light on the role that regimes of truth play in constructing the way the world was understood, but, as Latour (2004) warns, this has led to a potential retreat from questions of truth or reality, of *matters of concern.* It is ultimately unproductive to insist on discursive analysis or socioeconomic analysis at the expense of each other, or to insist that one is primary, or causative of the other. They are intertwined and complimentary, and we would be better served if historical materialist critique of the state and political economy and studies of discursive production worked together (Luke, 2013).

An insistence on taking materiality seriously, however, should not allow neo-Marxian views on the centrality of economic and material relations (which are indeed matters of concern) to make sole claims to what materiality matters: studies in "new materialism" have sought an alternative vision, not by denying the significance of political economy and economic deprivation but by suggesting that it should not constrain the meanings we can give to materiality (Bennett, 2010; Tsing, 2015). These arguments take us towards a rethinking of the

divisions between material and non-material worlds (Barad, 2007), while also urging us to understand the material effects of discourses. Discourse and materialism need to be in a constant discussion with each other. Reading these turns against each other is a continuous project[7].

Conclusion: Critical principles

Different writers draw on different lineages in the development of their critical standpoint: I still return for inspiration to Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Martin Nakata, Frantz Fanon, bell hooks, Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Allan Luke (an eclectic crowd) among others, while alternative critical approaches draw much more on, for example, Jacques Derrida, Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, Aníbal Quijano, Gloria Anzaldúa, Achille Mbembe, Paulo Freire, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Immanuel Wallerstein, Sylvia Wynter and many more. The reasons for such choices are a complex mix of political project, personal preference, academic background and geopolitical grounding. Some frame their work in terms of 'social justice' – though as I have argued (Pennycook, 2021), drawing on Mills (2017), such a position may offer an idealistic goal rather than a serious program for social change – while others pursue a more radical agenda.

There nonetheless remain some less negotiable lines along which critical applied linguistics must inevitably be framed. We cannot proceed with critical work without a focus on *power*. To be useful, however, it cannot be a reductive notion of power that sees it as the possession of some over others but rather a more diffused understanding of the operations of power in the social world (Kramsch, 2021) that includes *domination* (contingent and contextual effects of power), *disparity* (inequitable access to material and cultural goods), *discrimination*

(ideological and discursive frames of exclusion), *difference* (constructions and realities of social and cultural distinction), and *desire* (operations of ideology, agency, identity, and transformation) (Pennycook, 2021). This sense of power runs through the ten contemporary critical principles I would like to propose in conclusion.

A *raciolinguistic* perspective (Alim, 2016; Rosa and Flores, 2017) would seem non-negotiable if we are to focus in any serious way on language and race. The *decolonial* imperative also has to be high on this list as we seek to understand the connections between coloniality and language (Mufwene, 2020). There is a strong case for an *ecofeminist* approach – though obviously feminism and ecology might equally well be treated separately – since it connects concern about gendered disparities with a wider world of destruction (Appleby & Pennycook, 2017). We cannot proceed without a *queer* focus, not only shedding light on different forms of sexuality but also unsettling ideas about language, affect and the body (Thurlow, 2016). A focus on *material* relations has to be part of this picture, insisting not only that we need to stay focused on, rather than retreating from, the real, but also that we need to consider how we understand the material world and our role in it.

The final elements of any critical applied linguistics address ways in which the field operates. Central to the version of criticality argued by Kubota and Miller (2017), following Freire (1970), is *praxis,* transforming the world through reflection and action, a refusal to deal with theory and practice as separate. The field must be *situated*, local, based in homegrown matters of concern. It needs to operate with *collaborative* modes of inquiry, decolonial modes of convivial research (Ndhlovu, 2021) that take the discussion away from questions of implementation, and insist instead that critical applied linguistics has to be an emergent program from the contexts in which it works. Alongside its research and pedagogical wings

(doing research on matters of concern, teaching with a critical agenda), it needs an *activist* agenda that urges not just advocacy on behalf of others but works with others towards change. Finally it needs a sense of *ethics* as a way of making a case for its actions and preferences (Simon, 1992).

However we approach critical applied linguistics – and I have tried to show how it needs to be both open to a diversity of ideas yet also to work along certain lines – it seems evident that we need it now as much as we ever did. Many people, in many different ways, in many parts of the world, are engaged in critical applied linguistic projects. They may not call it that, or may not wish to affiliate with this kind of label: It is a means for describing similarly-oriented work rather than a prescription for action. Teachers, researchers, academics, linguists, activists, and many others are trying to intervene in inequitable linguistic relations, to change the ways language education can be disenfranchising, texts can be discriminatory, policies exclusionary, tests inequitable, and much more. We have to continue to do this work since these issues matter deeply. The project from my perspective is to help people build tools and alliances for such work, think through carefully what is at stake, read like-minded positions, and work towards change.

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[1] This paper is a revised version of my plenary address to the AILA Conference in 2021, and the introduction to the revised version of my book (Pennycook, 2021).

[2] Indeed, so difficult had it become to maintain an ethical and political stance within post-2020 universities, and to avoid the complicities imposed by my class, gender and racial positions, that I have decided to move aside and leave institutional academic life.

[3] Gramsci attributes this phrase to Romain Rolland. He explained his own position - "sono pessimista con l'intelligenza, ma ottimista per la volontà" (I'm a pessimist with my mind, but an optimist of the will) in a letter from prison in December 1929).

[4] I am not at all persuaded by the educational approaches (such as Direct Instruction) that Pearson has endorsed but such outcomes need to be separated from the politics of hope that inspire them.

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